

Two Year Bible Trek
Week 19
Judges 13-21

Key Concepts: The key concept in this portion of Judges is that God often accomplishes God's plans through, as well as in spite of, very flawed individuals and communities.

Stories: The stories in this section of Judges include the Samson tales (13-16), the establishment of shrine by a man named Micah (17), the migration of the Danites (18), the crimes of the people of Benjamin (19-20), and the plan by which wives would be given to the remaining men of Benjamin (21).

Brief Summary: There are several things of which we should take note in this section of Judges.

The first is that the Israelites are on a downward trend in terms of faithfulness which will ultimately lead to chaos. As we have noted before, the liturgy of Judges is that the people do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, God turns them over to their enemies, the people are oppressed, they cry out to God and God sends a judge to deliver them. The result of these deliverances was not, as we might expect, gratitude and hearts reoriented toward God, but less and less faithfulness. In chapter 13 we arrive at a place where the people, even though oppressed, do not cry out to God. In other words they have become so comfortable with their condition as "the oppressed" that they are willing to live with it. They have willingly returned to "Egypt" just like the Israelites in the wilderness wanted to do. We see this both in the moments when the people acknowledge that the Canaanites rule over them and when they turn Samson over to his enemies. What this means as well is that the Israelites have accepted the foreign gods as well as foreign rule.

The second is that God is still going to be faithful even when Israel is not. God has a plan to bless the world through Israel and their willing acceptance of bondage will not change God's determination. We see this in the story of Samson. Once again God sends an angel with a message to a barren woman about a special child who is coming (think Sarah). The woman (who remains unnamed) is told to be careful in her pregnancy because her son will be a Nazarite, who will abstain from all manner of loose living. This child is intended to be the deliverer of God's people even though the people do not want to be delivered. Unfortunately as we will discover, things have deteriorated to the point where even the liberator sent from God will do more harm than good. This child is Samson.

The third piece of this story which needs our attention is that Samson is really not much of a hero or a liberator. He is in fact a dilettante with anger management issues. As many commentators point out, there is little wonder that Samson has proven to be a cinematic favorite. After all, in his story you have sex, violence, intrigue and betrayal. When we encounter Samson we meet someone who is supposed to be a Nazarite (Numbers 6:1-21), meaning he is to abstain from alcohol, from cutting his hair or from contact with the dead. Samson, therefore, is supposed to be a paragon of virtue. Instead Samson becomes the poster-child for illicit behavior. He takes up with foreign women, including prostitutes, parties to the extreme, kills and destroys without cause, brings pain upon his people and ultimately betrays the secret of his hair. As the last of the judges we might expect better, but Samson simply mirrors the fall of the people.

The final piece of this story we should note is that the people have fallen not merely into slavery again (meaning Exodus) but they have fallen to the level of the people of Sodom (early Genesis) in which hospitality is abandoned and replaced with violence and abuse (Genesis 19/Judges 19:16ff).

1. How would you explain the people's continual falling away from God?
2. What disturbs you most about the stories in this section of Judges? Why?
3. Where can you find some hope in these stories?