

## **Set Aside By God** **Judges 13:1-7**

A few years ago I was trying to catch an international flight. My first flight was delayed because of weather. When I landed, I ran through the airport, caught the train to the next terminal, cut to the head of the security line, ran again through the terminal and when I rounded the corner, I watched them close the door to my plane.

I was 15 seconds too late. All my plans were blown up. I begged and pleaded with the people at the gate. I told them I was going on a mission trip—which was true, by the way. The plane continued to sit on the runway for 10 minutes while I stood there watching and making pleas to get on. Only when left the runway and leapt into the sky did I give up.

My plans were blown up. Months of planning went down the drain. And they were good plans. I believed they were God's plans.

Have you ever been there? I don't mean missing a plane. I am talking about something much bigger. Like you, I suspect, I have had much bigger plans blown up in life because of my own mistakes, malfeasance, misjudgments, and sin. Maybe you believed there was a plan for your family, your marriage, your business, your career, your life. And you probably even believed it was God's good plan. And then, maybe suddenly, maybe over a few years or decades, it appeared for all the world that your good plans were blown up.

You're not alone.

But it's not true—if it was God's plan.

God's plans and purposes cannot be denied. His Word succeeds when it goes out.

We are shown this in a story of a morally-challenged, wrathful, lustful, arrogant man—who from before the time he was conceived was given a world-changing purpose by God. He was imperfect man with a perfect purpose.

His name was Samson. And we're going to spend the next five weeks telling his story as we talk about God's faithfulness to His purposes.

Samson's story begins before his conception.

Before Samson was born, God's people were, once again, in trouble. God's people are always in trouble—by the way. Don't let anyone tell you differently. There is always a crisis facing the people of God.

This time their crisis was their sin. They sinned so often and so continually that the Lord allowed them to fall into the hands of their dreaded enemies, the Philistines, to become their slaves. Because God loves His people, He does not allow us to keep on sinning. He will discipline us. But He never disciplines without a plan to restore us. Jesus never wounds us without seeking to heal us. He never brings us low without a plan to raise us up.

And Samson was His instrument for that very purpose.

As soon God allowed His people to fall into the hands of the Philistines, to become their slaves, He set in motion His plan to free His people:

**There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”**

### **Judges 13:1-5**

Samson lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Over a period of about 350 years, Israel was ruled by people called “Judges” and their primary purpose was to lead the defense of God’s people against their enemies—“to save them out of the hands of those who plundered them” it says in Judges Chapter Two. There were people like Gideon and Deborah, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan of Bethlehem and then there was Samson. Samson was the 12<sup>th</sup> and final Judge of Israel.

None of the other Judges had an origin like Samson.

In a city called, Zorah there a member of the tribe of Dan. Manoah was his name.

Manoah had no children, the Bible tells us, because his wife was barren. We don’t know her name.

But despite her anonymity one day the Angel of the Lord appeared to her bearing good news: She was going to have a son.

But this child was not going to be just any old kid. He was different in two ways.

First, he was to be a Nazirite.

What was a Nazirite?

A Nazirite was someone set apart by God for a specific purpose. The word Nazirite comes from a Hebrew word that means separated or dedicated. People could be a Nazirite for a certain amount of time or they could be a Nazirite for life—like Samson. Nazirites, in addition to living by the Jewish legal code, also held to a threefold vow. Being a Nazirite was a significant, life-altering, commitment.

A Nazirite couldn’t drink any wine or strong drink or even eat any fruit of the vine—not even a grape salad. This was because grapes—and everything that came from them--were a sign of a settled, comfortable life. And that was not the life of a Nazirite.

Second, they couldn’t cut their hair or shave their head because their hair was an outward symbol of the vow they had taken before the Lord. It was a way that people identified them as Nazirites.

And third, they couldn't allow themselves to become ceremonially unclean by coming in contact with any dead body—be it a dead animal or dead relative, even going near a grave long after someone had died.

Samson was a Nazirite began before he was even born. We know we was set apart in the womb because the Angel of the Lord told his mother that while she was pregnant, she must not drink any alcohol and she must not eat anything unclean. She had to keep her son's Nazirite vows for him.

Before Samson's eyes had seen the light of day or his nostrils had breathed in oxygen, God's purpose was being carried out. Samson had no choice in the matter. He didn't sign up for God's plan. He didn't say "You know, I think I would like to be a Nazirite." The greatest decision in Samson's life, a practice, a habit, a calling that bent the course of his life was God's choice for Samson—not his.

We value our choice. We put a premium on our freedom to choose. But do we really make the biggest decisions in our life? Jesus makes them for us. I didn't decide to be a man. I didn't decide to be taller than average or have blue eyes. I didn't choose my level of intelligence or athletic ability. I didn't choose my ethnicity or my parents or siblings. I didn't choose where or when I was born. I didn't choose to love theology or to preach. I discovered those things. I didn't choose my kids. I didn't even choose God first. He chose me. And then I chose to follow Him.

Jesus' hand is all over your life...but it sometimes hard to see until we let Him draw close.

The second thing the Angel of the Lord told Manoah's wife was that her son would be God's instrument to set His people free from their slavery and captivity to the Philistines.

The Lord did not even allow Samson to choose the purpose for his life. God gave him his purpose. And the same is true for you and me. The purpose of our life is too important a thing for us to create, for us to choose, for us to craft from some abstract principles or even our wants and needs and the desires of our heart. We don't create our purpose. We discover it. We discern it. And the better we are at listening to the Lord, the easier it is to discern His will.

The form and structure and purpose of our life is too important to let sinful, fallible, broken human beings choose. God knows us with absolute precision and perfect clarity and He knows this world that He made, what it needs and what we have been made to bring to it.

And when life goes adrift, or becomes aimless, hopeless, meaningless and bitter—it is because we have separated ourselves from Jesus and His purpose and charted our own calling and made ourselves responsible for life's great hopes and great dreams.

Don't you know that Jesus called you into existence and knew you intimately before your name was on anyone's tongue?

And he not only called into existence. He minted you with a plan.

In the case of Samson, that plan was to His instrument to set God's people free.

Now, I don't know exactly what God's plan for you may be. But I can tell you this, its about freedom. It's about freedom in Christ—not only for you, but for others. Just as Jesus said His mission was set the captives free, as part of the Body of Christ, we have been given the same mission.

No doubt about it.

In Samson's case we see that the Angel of the Lord told Manoah's wife about her coming child. And she told her husband right away about this mysterious figure who had come to see her and the amazing news He brought. Not being able to have children is a source of terrible pain for people today. But in that day and in that time, it was an absolute disaster because the perception was the family was cursed by God. And without children there was no one to care for the parents in their old age and their family name perished.

So when the Angel of the Lord appeared saying He was going to open Manoah's wife's womb with a son, He was literally giving them life.

This news filled Manoah's with questions. And he did what we are supposed to do when we have questions. He took them to the Lord:

**Then Manoah prayed to the LORD and said, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom you sent come again to us and teach us what we are to do with the child who will be born." And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me." And Manoah arose and went after his wife and came to the man...**

**Judges 13:9-11**

The Angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife. And Manoah asked if He was on the one who appeared to His wife and the Angel of the Lord confirmed he was. And Manoah asked about the two things we talked about "What is the child's manner of life and what is his mission?" And the Angel of the Lord merely repeated His instructions to Manoah's wife about how she was to live:

**And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. All that I commanded her let her observe.**

**Judges 13:13-14**

So, who is this mystery Man? It's important we understand this stranger's identity. What does it mean when the Old Testament calls someone the Angel of the Lord?

We get a big clue in the very next line of the text.

**And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were**

**watching. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground.**

**Judges 13:17-20**

As the Angel of the Lord departed, Manoah and his wife worshipped by putting their faces to the ground.

Who is the only one we are supposed to worship? Who is the only person whom Scripture teaches us we are allowed to reverence, who we are supposed to regard as God?

If you know the First Commandment or literally almost anything else in Scripture, you may know that we are supposed to worship God and God alone. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness that if He only bowed down and worshipped Him, that Satan would give Him all the Kingdoms of the World, Jesus responded:

**You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.**

**Luke 4:8**

Manoah and his wife were visited by God and Samson was called into being and given His purpose by God. And many theologians believe that it was the second person of the Trinity who visited them—the Word of God, the pre-incarnate Christ, the Word of God before He became Jesus of Nazareth.

We see the pre-incarnate Christ, appearing as a man, close to a dozen times in the Old Testament. He appeared to people in distress like the woman Hagar when she and her son were going die in the wilderness. He appeared to Joshua before he marched on Jericho. He appeared to Moses, Abraham and Gideon.

And He appeared to Samson's parents, calling him to into being.

But Samson was a terrific sinner! Over the next few weeks, we'll see that Samson was lustful, wrathful, vengeful, short-sighted, cruel, impetuous, childish, unrestrained, shameless, self-centered and foolish to name just a few of his qualities.

He doesn't look much like someone who might expect the Word of God called into being.

But God still worked through Him. God still used Samson to set His people free.

Even Samson's sin could not thwart God's plan.

That's not to say Samson's sin was not costly. You will never hear me say sin is not costly or painful or damaging. It certainly is.

Samson's cost him and others dearly. In the end Samson's sin cost him everything—except the plan God had for his life.

Jesus works through flawed instruments. He uses broken pieces. He puts treasure in jars of clay. He has set you aside. He has given you a purpose.

Do you believe there is anything you or I can do to thwart God's plans and purposes?

There was another time I was trying to catch a plane, flying out of Philadelphia. I had been in town for a meeting. I had a rental car and I decided to have a nice lunch and see a few of the sites I used to enjoy when I lived out in the East Coast. I was in no hurry at all.

When I got to the airport and checked in. I discovered that I had the time wrong for my departure. I was 90 minutes late. And I prepared for the worst, to not be able to get home that night, buy another ticket at top dollar and pay for a hotel. I planned for all my plans to be blown up.

The man at check-in counter, did I mention it was in Philadelphia, as he was looking down at his screen said, "I guess traffic must have been pretty bad."

And I replied in despair, "No. It was fine. I was just out joy-riding. I had a long lunch."

And he looked at me a little irritated and replied, "So, you had no traffic problems at all, in getting here today. Everything went absolutely perfectly? You were not delayed by anyone at all—even just a little bit."

And I said, "Yes. It was fine. This is all my fault."

And he sighed and looked me squarely in the eye and said, "OK...have you ever been caught in traffic, anywhere, at all?"

"Of course!" I said, increasingly bewildered.

And he said "Good. Here's your ticket for the next flight since you had traffic issues."

Only then did I realize that this ticket agent, did I mention I was in Philadelphia, was looking for any excuse, anything at all, to get me home. And I looked at him and said, "Thank you. I was in real mess."

And he replied with a smile: "Hey, I'm on your side."

In the end, this is what we will see, the God of the cosmos, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, Jesus is on our side. And for that reason, He has set us aside, given us a purpose and He works it all out in spite of ourselves. He overcomes our faults and failures. God's grace is more powerful than our sin. God's mercy is more powerful than any darkness. God's love is more powerful than the worst thing we have ever done.

And He has set you aside and given you a purpose—in spite of ourselves.

Next week, we'll talk about how He equips us for that purpose.

