



# ENTERTAINING ANGELS

*SERIES: JUDGES CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEARTS*

Judges 13:1–25

9th Message

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A few years back, in 2013, Josh Gordon had an incredible season. The athletic and very talented wide receiver for the Cleveland Browns accumulated the most receiving yards in the league that season (and for those of us who care about these things, the most fantasy points!). What made this feat so impressive was that Josh Gordon didn't compile these stats playing with an elite quarterback. Instead, over the course of the season, he was thrown to by a combination of Jason Campbell, Brian Hoyer and Brandon Weeden! If you know Football and you recognize the names, you know that's not a good combo. And if you don't recognize the names, let's just say there's a reason for that. I think it would be fair to say that not many teams in the entire league had worse quarterback play. And yet, Josh Gordon finished the season with the most receiving yards, despite ranking only 12th in receptions, due to averaging almost 20yds per reception. It was an incredible season, made even better by the fact that he was on my fantasy team.

Unfortunately, Josh Gordon missed most of the next season through suspension for violating the league's drug policy during the offseason. The following off season, he violated that policy again—this time getting himself kicked out of the league. He was eligible to apply for reinstatement this season, and just got conditionally reinstated, so we'll have to see if he can make better choices this time.

Such incredible talent—I mean can you imagine what he could do with a good quarterback??

The reality is though, Potential is not enough! Potential needs to be taken and turned into results. And the failure to do that is the essence of the Samson story. We all know the potential was there! And while you're all probably thinking about his super-human strength, the truth is that the potential is actually most clearly seen in the preparation, in the *birth* narrative. We're kicking off Samson this week, and he doesn't even feature in today's story, apart from one verse at the very end of the chapter!

Samson is special! Samson gets the best preparation of any of the Judges. In fact, Samson's preparation ranks up there among the best of scripture. Not many people get a birth narrative—I mean it's pretty good just making it into the bible, never mind everyone looking forward to your birth!

**Moses** gets a bit of a birth narrative, although there's no angel visit and most of the story is about him surviving after he's born.

**Isaac** gets a significant and similar birth narrative, when the 3 angels visit Abraham and Sarah and promise them a son.

**Samuel** gets a bit of a birth narrative, although again no angels visit Hannah. However she does pray earnestly for a son, which is a very positive thing and something to keep in the back of your minds as we get into the story.

And **Jesus** who, obviously gets a pretty good birth narrative, complete with angelic visitation and the promise of deliverance.

In fact, Samson' birth narrative contains many similarities to Jesus' own: the angelic visitation, the announcement of a miracle child and the promise that he will be a Savior, a deliverer.

I know we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves, since we haven't even got into the text yet, but think of this as your preparation (just like Samson's), giving you greater potential as we unpack this first part of his story. These are key themes and ideas to keep in mind as events start to unfold. By the time the birth narrative is over, expectations are high!

If you're into Star Wars, think about Anakin Skywalker (the boy). When they first find Anakin, they are so excited; the Force is practically oozing out of this kid (sorry Star Wars people—probably not the right way to describe it!) and their expectations for who he is and what he could become are through the roof. Samson is the same.

So lets jump into the story before I get too carried away!

**Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.**

**A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines." (Judges 13:1-6 NIV)**

I'm sure by now you've all got the cycle of sin memorized, if not burned into your brains. But I'm going to throw it out there anyway. And if you feel like it's repetitive and boring, just imagine how God feels!

No surprise, of course, that the people of Israel again do evil and, likewise, no surprise that God responds by giving into the hands of enemies.

As we saw at the beginning of the Jephthah narrative last week, the Israelites had, in fact, expanded their idolatry to include not just the gods of the Canaanites (the people the Israelites should have dispossessed from the Promised Land) but also the gods of the nations surrounding the Promised Land.

And just as in the Jephthah narrative, God, in an ironic twist, simply hands them over to the very nations whose gods they are worshipping. As if to say, "Enjoy serving the creators of those gods you love so much!"

As middle school pastor, I'm always telling our middle-schoolers to read the Bible with their brains engaged and in gear, so it'll be familiar to them when I say that if you're reading this passage with your brains in gear, you'll notice a conspicuous absence—for the

very first time in the entire book, the people of Israel don't cry out to the Lord. Not that it's been great up until this point, since they haven't exactly been crying out in repentance, more a dislike of the consequences.

But half-hearted though it is, it at least shows that there's some life left in the people of God, at least they still know where true help comes from.

Those of you in the medical profession will be very familiar with this concept! When it comes to Triage (deciding who to treat first), it's not the screaming or complaining ones you need to worry about most, it's the ones who are no longer making any noise.

God's people are no longer making any noise! There are no more cries of pain, desperate pleas for mercy or anguished entreaties for help.

God's people have resigned themselves to their fate.

And they endure that fate for forty long years—twice as long as any of the other periods of oppression. Probably because they didn't cry out to God.

And so we come to our first question. There's a lot in this chapter and much that could be said, but I want to draw out three main things.

## I. God's Response

*What is the response of a Faithful God to an Unfaithful People who are so lost and confused they can't even cry out to Him?*

After forty years it seems pretty clear: Israel's not going to cry out. It's the same amount of time that Israel wandered in the wilderness, the time it takes to lose a generation. And so this is perhaps a crucial moment when Israel is at risk of losing any link with a generation that knows what it looks like to serve God or even to be God's people.

God's response: He steps in anyway! This in itself is profound, though most of us are probably thinking, well of course God steps in and helps His people. Might I suggest, if that's the case, that you've been spoiled by a good God and desensitized to the amazing nature of God's response to His people.

We preach repentance—that we must repent in order to experience forgiveness. And while that is true, this story is an important reminder that God cannot be contained in a box, that God is not limited by our actions, that if He so chooses, He can still step in and save His unrepentant people. It's completely paradoxical, and the theological implications, quite frankly, make my head hurt. But when it comes to God, I'm okay with a bit of mystery, and I hope you are too. It allows us to sit back and marvel at the grace and mercy of our God, that after forty years of watching His people—his people—serve and worship every god imaginable except him, He would still deign to send a Judge, and not just any old Judge, the best Judge!!

Now just forget for a minute all of Samson's failures and bad decisions. Look instead at God's preparation of the Judge that He has hand-selected for His people

This Judge will be a Nazirite from birth, the first and only Nazirite from birth.

The Nazirite vow comes from Israel's Levitical law, where, among all the other sacrifices and offerings you could bring to the Lord, you could set yourself aside to the Lord by taking the Nazirite vow. Usually taken for the period of one year, this was a completely

voluntary thing, simply something extra you could do to honor the Lord by giving of yourself. The guidelines were simple: don't cut your hair, don't drink wine or strong drink, and don't touch a dead body. You can think of it as a way to be extra holy and set apart for the Lord for a certain period of time. At the end of the allotted time, you brought a bunch of offerings to the Lord (a burnt offering, a sin offering, a fellowship offering, and grain and drink offerings) and then you shaved your head and actually burnt the hair on the altar before the Lord. This signified the end of your vow.

Samson has this chosen for him, this setting-aside, this setting-apart. And it's not just Samson; his mother is going to follow these guidelines for herself while she's carrying him. Talk about "set apart" and special. God is going all out!

As the plight and response of God's people gets worse, God's grace actually increases. That's the good stuff!

But, as with any good story, there are shades and hints of what is to come, clues for the alert reader to pick up on—that's why we read with our Brains in Gear! Just as we see the darkness coming with Anakin, so too, despite the amazing preparation, is it clear that all is not well for Samson. The joy of the hope and expectation is overshadowed.

**Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'"**

**Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." (Judges 13:6-8)**

The clues are in the details!

Mrs. Manoah goes to her husband and says that a man of God came who he was "very awesome" (i.e. scary) and looked like an angel. Manoah prays that the man of God might come back and clarify a few things—things that the angel already told his wife! Manoah is clueless and definitely not the man of faith we're hoping for as the father of this special child.

Mrs. Manoah is not much better! Resigned to her fate (she doesn't pray for a child), she is also quite cynical. She reports to her husband that she will become pregnant, making no mention of her barrenness (which both the angel and the narrator emphasize), thus downplaying, if not ignoring, the miraculous nature of this birth. Unlike Mary, there's no "let it be to me as you say" response of faith to the angel's message, only silence. And rather ominously, she doesn't mention that the child will begin to deliver his people from their oppressors, instead, where the angel emphasized life (that he will be dedicated to the Lord from the womb), she emphasizes death (that he will be dedicated to the Lord til the day of his death), casting a shadow over the whole announcement. And as we'll see, Samson's death is indeed far more effective than the entirety of his life, which is a pretty sad reflection on his life, set in motion perhaps even as early as this moment.

A clueless and doubting father, and a resigned and cynical mother! Their lack of godly instruction and willingness to do everything Samson wishes are huge factors in Samson's failures.

What would *you* do if an angel showed up?

Entertain them?

Hopefully not like poor Harold on the cover of your worship guide.

But entertain in the sense of hospitality!

We know what to do from the story of the three angels who came to visit Abraham. He invited them in, he offered them shade and rest, he made a wonderful meal for them and he responded in faith to the message they brought.

So there you go; now you know for the next time an angel shows up at your door!

Manoah and his wife did NONE of these things. If you want to do some further study, a comparison between Manoah and his wife's responses to the angel and Mary and Joseph's responses to the angel is quite interesting. But even so, God is gracious, and even though Manoah's request is a ridiculous one (since he's already been told what to do with the child), they get a second chance at the whole angel visit thing.

**God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"**

**Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the man who talked to my wife?"**

**"I am," he said.**

**So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy's life and work?"**

**The angel of the LORD answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her."**

**Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you."**

**The angel of the LORD replied, "Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD." (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.) (Judges 13:9-16)**

God grants his request, but with a sense of humor; yet again the angel appears not to Manoah but to his wife. Mrs. Manoah freaks out again, doesn't bother to greet the angel, and goes dashing off to find her husband. They both come sprinting back, and Manoah, between trying to catch his breath, asks, are you the *man* (notice he's still on the man theme) and what are the instructions? To which the angel quite bluntly replies, I've already told your wife what you need to know—she can tell you.

And now, finally, they think to offer the angel something to eat, to extend some form of hospitality. And if you think I'm overstating the whole hospitality thing, it's important to note that in their culture, hospitality was everything!

But the angel says, you can prepare a meal if you want, but I'm not going to eat with you (if angel's have feelings, this one is ticked off). Oh, and by the way, if you're going to prepare an offering, let's be clear who you're offering it to: the Lord. And we get a helpful little side note from the narrator, in case we hadn't already picked up on the fact that Manoah still hasn't figured out it's an angel.

Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?"

He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."

Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD. And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.

"We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"

But his wife answered, "If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this." (Judges 13:17-23)

Despite the angel's instruction to offer an offering to the Lord, Manoah still doesn't get it and wants to know the angel's name (or in his mind—the man of God's name) so that he can honor the angel when the words come true.

The angel says his name is a Wonder. This is the Hebrew word *Peliy*, meaning "wonder, amazing thing, something that is difficult to comprehend" (which obviously puts it beyond Manoah's reach). Most often it is used to describe God's acts of salvation. In the psalms, God is even described as "the One who alone does wonders".

But perhaps almost as important as the Wonder is the response. A Wonder is supposed to evoke a response of praise or astonishment, even thanksgiving!

The Angel doesn't see any point to giving his name; Manoah's not going to get it! There's already been one Wonder announced (the miraculous birth of their child), for which there's been no response of praise or amazement, just doubt and silence.

Again, notice that when the angel shows up to Gideon, he whines and says, where are all these Wonders that this God supposedly does for His people? I haven't seen any of them! Not a great response, but better than this! This is hammering home just how lost Israel is. Manoah and his wife represent the state of Israel—barren, without hope, resigned to their fate, and absolutely clueless. These people wouldn't know a Wonder if it walked up and slapped them in face! Which it's about to!

Because the Lord does an amazing thing. This is the same word for a Wonder. As the fire consumes the offering and the flames flare up, the smoke rising to the heavens, the angel goes up in flames, ascending.

Are we going to get a response from Manoah and his wife to this Wonder?

Wait for it... where did he go? Hmmm is he coming back?

Wait for it... hold on what the heck just happened? I don't think he's actually coming back

Wait for it... He's NOT coming back!!

Ahhhhhhh we're all gonna die!!!! We've seen God. We're doomed!! Oh no, I don't wanna die, I had so many dreams and plans and I haven't even finished my bucket list!!

And so the penny drops!

Fortunately, Manoah wife's is much more sensible than he is! She manages to shake some sense into him—look if God was gonna kill us, why would He have accepted our offering *and* told us we're gonna have a child. It's pretty hard to have a child after you're dead. Pull yourself together!

But there is no praise!

God has now done two wonders before these people. The first was met with doubt and stoic acceptance. The second was twisted into a nightmare.

## 2. Our Response

*We must truly know God or He will do Wonders in our lives, working for our good and we will see them as the exact opposite.*

Manoah's fact was true. After all, it's well known in the OT that you can't see the face of God and live. But firstly, they saw an angel, not God face-to-face, and perhaps more importantly, Manoah doesn't take anything of the character of God into account. This is fact without relationship.

God's not going to sneak up and show His face to someone just so He can kill them! This is basically what Manoah is implying has occurred.

It is a sobering thought, for us, to examine how we respond when God does something completely unexpected and outside the box (which, by the way, is basically the definition of a Wonder). It is not enough to know about God, to know facts and theology. Without building on a strong foundation of relational knowledge and experience of God, it can all go horribly wrong, very fast!

If I were to push the point, I would perhaps talk about the times when we say, "how could God do this or that? Isn't He a good God? Why isn't God answering me the way I want Him to?" But I'm not going to push that point. I'll the Spirit of the Living God inside each one of you do that pushing! Then you can get mad at Him and not me!

**The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol. (Judges 13:24-25)**

The child arrives and they name him Little Sun, after the sun god perhaps? Israel is worshipping the gods of the people around them, after all, and some of them worship the sun. One thing's for sure, it's got nothing to do with God. Often children, especially miracle children, are given names that either praise God or speak to their response to God's wonder in giving them a children (for example, Isaac, for Sarah's laughter).

But nonetheless Samson grows up and the Lord blesses him and, here's the key, the Spirit of the Lord begins to stir Samson.

And so ends Samson, episode one. A bit of a cliffhanger, waiting to see what the Spirit will do through him.

So where does that leave us?

Over the summer, at our middle school TNTs, we've had various staffers share their stories. It's a great opportunity for the middle schoolers, especially the new 6th graders, to get to know some of the staff. But more than that, it's a opportunity to share what it looks like

to follow God, to be on a journey of faith and to trust Him through the trials we face along the way.

Some staffers grew up in Christian homes and had great beginnings, great preparation to follow God. For some the journey begins in dark places with struggles and difficulties that continue despite following God. We all come from different places, but we have one thing in common, the light of Christ and the Spirit of God at work inside each one of us.

You may not feel that you are special, that your life was prepared for and anticipated like Samson's. Well let me tell you the truth: you were born to a destiny. Your life was planned and prepared for and anticipated by God, and if you have believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, you have a full measure of the Spirit at work inside of you, stirring you, preparing you.

And that cliffhanger we've reached in Samson's life: What will the Spirit do in Him and through Him? Will he step into his destiny?

That same cliffhanger faces each one of you, each one of us, today and every single day. Young or old, whether you feel like you've lived most of your life and made your choices, or whether you feel too young to even be making big decisions and unprepared.

The Spirit is stirring!

Will you step into that destiny? Will you work with the Spirit? What will you allow the Spirit to do in and through you? Will you Live a Life Worthy of the Calling that You have received?

These are the questions that face us, the decisions we must make each and every day.

If you've been stepping into that destiny and allowing the Spirit full access to your heart, keep at it! Don't let up. This isn't a one-time thing. We have to keep making those decisions.

If you haven't, and you're sitting here saying, "I've failed. I've just messed it all up too badly," make those decisions anew today. It's not too late. That's what forgiveness is there for, after all!

Jesus died, not because we made a few little mistakes, but because we completely and irreparably screwed everything up.

In fact, He's the *only* one who's actually *lived a life* worthy of the calling He received.

You are not alone. Jesus has gone before us, living the life we should have lived. and dying the death that made a way for us, supplying unlimited grace and forgiveness for all our many mistakes and failures.

*God calls each one of us higher and deeper into Him.*

*GO therefore in the strength and power and presence of the Spirit, who you have! Go into your workplaces, your schools, your families, your teams and your social circles to begin to bring freedom from oppression, the oppression of sin.*

*And now may the Father of peace guard you as you go, With His Son on your right and on your left, behind you and before you. And may His Spirit keep you from all discouragement, distractions and deterrents!*

*Amen*

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