

WATCH AND WORSHIP

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 13
17th Message
Scott Grant
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One of the things I enjoy about fly-fishing is the comprehensive awareness it inspires in me. I use my eyes to survey the water for the pockets, runs, pools, currents, and—above all—signs of fish. I also use my ears to listen for the flow of water from around the bend and—above all—the splashing, sucking, or sipping sounds of rising trout. I don't really have to work at being aware; the stream inspires me to be aware. If only I would be as attentive for signs of God as I am for signs of fish!

In Judges 13, God reveals himself in a wondrous way to two people, a woman and her husband, but they don't think it's him. Eventually, they catch on—or mostly catch on, anyway. Perhaps, as we pay attention to their story, we can catch on as well and become more attentive to the signs of God.

In response to Israel's idolatry, the Lord handed his people over to oppressors, the Ammonites and the Philistines (Judges 10:7). In Judges 11-12, the narrator featured the Ammonites and Jephthah, the Israelite deliverer. In Judges 13-16, he features the Philistines and Samson, the Israelite deliverer.

The angel of the Lord appears

Judges 13:1-7:

¹Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

²A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. ³The 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. ⁴Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. ⁵You 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."

"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. ⁷But 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.'"

The Israelites, as usual in the book of Judges, do evil in the eyes of the Lord: they worship other gods. The Lord responds, as usual, by raising up a pagan nation to oppress them in hopes that they will return to him. The duration of the Philistines' dominance, forty years, is twice as long as any other period of pagan domination reported in Judges—a sign of spiritual decline in Israel. Furthermore, the Israelites don't cry out to the Lord for deliverance, another sign of spiritual decline.

The Israelites have settled into coexistence and enslavement, but the Lord takes action in their behalf nevertheless. Israel was spiritually barren when, not coincidentally, the angel of the Lord—the Lord himself—appears to a barren woman and promises that she will give birth to a deliverer. If the previous sequence featured the demise of a deliverer's line through the death of his virgin daughter, then the Lord provides for deliverance in this sequence by giving life to a previously dead womb (Judges 11:34-40).

The angel tells the woman that her son will be a Nazirite, dedicated to God in a special way. A Nazirite vow could be undertaken voluntarily to set oneself apart for the Lord for a specific period of time, but in this case the angel imposes the vow upon the future child from birth (Numbers 6:1-8). The angel also goes beyond the requirements of the law by imposing certain requirements upon the mother of the Nazirite. Unlike previous leaders in the book of Judges, the son born to the barren woman will literally only "begin" to deliver the Israelites from pagan domination.

The woman, in her report to her husband, recognizes that she has encountered at the very least a man of God and quite possibly an angel of God, even if she doesn't recognize him as the angel of the Lord, the Lord himself.

The woman gathers that her son will be a Nazirite not only from his birth but also until his death. Evidently, she has taken the angel's observation that the son will only begin to deliver Israel to mean that he will be a Nazirite for life.

Breaking into barrenness

God has a penchant for breaking into barrenness and creating life. God isn't sitting on his hands; he is present and active—unseen, yes, but all around us and even in us. The woman in Judges 13 at least entertained the possibility that she was in the presence of an angel. One might say that her spiritual eyes were partially open.

Some years ago, I approached a section of a trout stream that I had never fished before. I walked out onto a log to cast into the middle of the stream, where I assumed the fish were holding. Just then, I heard a subtle, rhythmic sucking sound behind me. Remember, when you're fly-fishing, you use not just your eyes but also your ears. I slowly turned my head and noticed a large rainbow trout, about five feet away from me, feeding on mayflies as they floated up to the log. The fish was holding, even feeding, in a place I didn't think to look, a place I walked right past—a place I walked right over, as a matter of fact.

Without moving my feet, so as not to disturb the log and scare the fish, I swiveled my torso and dropped my fly in the current a foot upstream of the log. I didn't even have to cast. As my fly drifted to the log, the fish, a nice eighteen-inch rainbow, sucked it down. I set the hook, the fish tore off across stream, and the fight was on. The middle of the stream, where I thought the fish might be, was barren. The edge of the stream, right next to me, showed signs of life.

God breaks through in the most surprising places—the barrenness of a womb, the barrenness of a world, the barrenness of your life. Therefore, be aware. Look and listen for signs of God.

Though his wife heard and saw signs of God, Manoah wants some more information.

Manoah wants more information

Judges 13:8-14:

⁸Then 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.”

⁹God 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. ¹⁰The woman hurried to tell her husband, “He’s here! The man who appeared to me the other day!”

¹¹Manoah 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.

¹²So Manoah asked him, “When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy’s life and work?”

¹³The angel of the LORD answered, “Your wife must do all that I have told her. ¹⁴She 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.”

Upon hearing of his wife's encounter, Manoah craves more information, so he prays that the visitor would return not simply to his wife but to “us.” The Lord answers his prayer—sort of. Yes, the angel returns, but only to the woman, not to the both of them. Nevertheless, the angel sticks around long enough for the woman to fetch her husband, who first makes sure he's talking to the right guy.

Manoah wants details about the boy's vocation so that he can prepare him for it. The angel of the Lord, though coming in response to Manoah's prayer, declines to cooperate with the reason for his prayer. Manoah extracts nothing more from the angel than what has already been revealed to his wife, and all he gets is something he didn't ask for: instruction concerning his wife, not his son. The answer to Manoah's prayer is a non-answer.

Knowledge we don't need

Like Manoah, we might like God to be a little more forthcoming, especially concerning the future. If we're parents, or parents-to-be, like Manoah, perhaps we'd like to know about the future of our children. Perhaps we'd like to know who we're going to marry or if we're going to marry. Perhaps we'd like a few more details about our career, the length of our life, or the circumstances of our

death. Perhaps we'd like God to be more forthcoming about the future so that we can prepare for it.

If we knew more about the future, however, we'd probably wreck it. We'd prepare for the future in the wrong way. There would be little either to drive us to our knees or to prompt us to break forth in praise, no reason to marvel at the ways of God and his unfolding plan. There would be no journey of discovery, no reason to wait on God, and no reason for faith. If I had known that one day I would become a pastor, I never would have become a journalist. But now I can see that I needed to be a journalist to become the kind of pastor God intended me to be. If I had known I would be a pastor one day, I would have prepared in the wrong way. I would have wrecked it.

Manoah, still not satisfied with the answers he's been getting, asks the visitor to stick around.

His name is wonderful

Judges 13:14-20:

¹⁵Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you."

¹⁶The 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.)

¹⁷Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?"

¹⁸He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." ¹⁹Then 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: ²⁰As 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.

Manoah asks the visitor to sit down for a meal, which would allow for the emergence of more information. The angel, though, rebuffs Manoah again and suggests that a better approach would be to sacrifice an animal as a burnt

offering, symbolizing devotion to the Lord. Although his wife entertained the possibility that the visitor was at least an angel, Manoah understands him to be just a man, perhaps a prophet of some sort (verse 11). Manoah doesn't need to dine with the visitor, nor does he need to extract any more information about the future of his son from him. He doesn't need more information; he needs more faith—more faith so that he can at least recognize the visitor as an angel.

Manoah is on the right track when he asks for the name of the visitor, for the angel of the Lord, though questioning his reason for asking the question, at least deigns it with an answer of sorts. If the angel's name is "beyond understanding," or "wonderful," then he's most likely more than a man. The visitor's response is enough to get Manoah to stop pumping him for answers and start following his advice. Manoah changes his plans for a goat and sacrifices it, along with some grain, to the Lord instead of serving it to the visitor.

Just as significant as making the sacrifice is what Manoah and his wife do when he makes the sacrifice: they watch. Maybe it's the best thing they do. Instead of trying to figure things out, they watch. As they watch, they see the angel of the Lord ascend in the flame of the burnt offering. Men don't ascend in flames. The visitor: he's more than a man. Therefore, both Manoah and his wife fall to the ground.

Losing ourselves in God's wonders

God's name is wonderful, beyond understanding. Therefore, we don't need more information about the future; we need to lose ourselves in God's wonders. The fact that his name is beyond understanding means that we cannot know everything about him and that we cannot answer some of our deepest questions about him. However, our ignorance should lead us not into despair but into worship, for if we knew everything about him, that would place him on our level, and he wouldn't be worth worshiping. Consider the wonders of God featured in this story: he breaks into the barrenness of this world and creates life. Watch for when he does so, and when he does so, fall to the ground in worship, like Manoah and his wife.

I enjoy fly-fishing not only because of the awareness it inspires in me, but also because I lose track of time when the trout are feeding on the surface. One trout, if it's both large and wily, can call forth multiple flies and approaches and keep me occupied for quite some time. Sometimes, when I leave a stretch of stream and look down at my

watch, I realize, quite to my surprise, that something like three hours have passed. When the trout are feeding, I lose myself in the wonders of the stream. Lose yourself in the wonders of God.

Finally, Manoah recognizes the identity of the visitor.

Manoah catches on—sort of

Judges 13:21-25:

²¹When 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.

²²“We are doomed to die!” he said to his wife. “We have seen God!”

²³But 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.”

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

The angel of the Lord departs, never to appear to either Manoah or his wife again. But he told both of them—and in the end showed them, by ascending in the flame—what they needed to know. Finally, Manoah recognizes the visitor for who he is: the angel of the Lord, the Lord himself.

Manoah, evidently remembering the Lord’s words to Moses, that no one can see the Lord and live, assumes that both he and his wife are goners. On the one hand, Manoah has a point. On the other hand, his wife knows the moment. To Manoah’s wife, it makes no sense that the Lord would suggest—and accept—an offering and make promises concerning the birth of a son if he’s going to kill the woman who has yet to give birth to the son.

Manoah’s wife has the correct read, for she lives to give birth to the promised son, in whom the Lord takes an active interest by blessing him and stirring him. Manoah, too, will be around in the next chapter of Judges.

The wonders of the story

Lose yourself in the wonders of God, who breaks into the barrenness of this world. Look for signs of God, and worship him when you see him creating life out of barrenness, especially when you see him doing so in your own life. If you can’t see any signs now, then look for signs in this story, which neither begins nor ends in the book of Judges.

In Genesis 17, the Lord visits Abraham and his wife, Sarah, who was both barren and past the age of childbearing, and promises that they would have a son, and later she gives birth to Isaac. Thus the family of God is born. In Genesis 30, Isaac’s son, Jacob, has a wife, Rachel, who is also barren, but God opens her womb and she gives birth to Joseph. In Judges 13, an angel visits a barren woman, who then gives birth to a son, Samson. In 1 Samuel 1, a barren woman, Hannah, conceives; gives birth to a son, Samuel; and, like the woman in Judges 13, dedicates him to the Lord, promising that no razor will touch his head. As a prophet, Samuel anoints David, the king, on whom the Holy Spirit descends, and David finishes what Samson started, defeating the Philistines, beginning with the tyrant Goliath.

A millennium later, in Luke 1, an angel visits a man, Zacharias, and tells him that his barren wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son, John, who, like Samson, is to abstain from wine and strong drink. Later in Luke 1, an angel visits not a barren woman but a virgin named Mary and tells her that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son, Jesus. Does the girl’s father offer up his virgin daughter as a burnt offering to the Lord, in the manner of Jephthah? May it never be! As Samuel anointed David, John the prophet baptizes Jesus, the Son of God, on whom the Holy Spirit descends, bringing the two-thousand-year-old story, which began with Abraham and Sarah, to a climax.

Samson was a seriously flawed deliverer. The best he could do, by the power of the Spirit, was partially deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. David, though a significant improvement on Samson, nevertheless had his flaws. The best he could do, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was complete what Samson started. Or, one might say, the best Samson and David could do was keep the story moving toward its stunning climax. Jesus delivers not simply Israel but also the whole world—and not from the Philistines or the Romans or any other nation. He delivers all who believe in him from the wickedest tyrants of all: Satan, sin, and death.

Indeed, as the angel of the Lord observes in Judges 13,

God's name is "wonderful." Some seven hundred years before the birth of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah, using the same word, predicted that a child would be born whose name would be called "Wonderful Counselor" (Isaiah 9:6). What does Mary do when the angel tells her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the child? She loses herself in the wonders of God, who breaks into the barrenness of this world to create life: "My soul glorifies the Lord / and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary gathers up chapters from the two-thousand year story, especially Hannah's chapter, to compose the magnificent Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).¹

If you can't see God breaking into the barrenness of the world, or the barrenness of your life, then lose yourself in the wonders of the two-thousand-year-old biblical story, from Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac to Mary, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus. Surely, if you can't see God breaking into barrenness right now, you will in due time. Based on what God has done, based on what he is doing, and based on what he will do, lose yourself in his wonders.

NOTES

¹THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. (Luke 1:46-55)

⁴⁶And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

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