

Meeting a Mother's Lord

a study of **Judges 13** by David Shelley

The Big Idea: **We need to know the Lord as sovereign, personal and purposeful.**

We can miss the Lord in many different ways.

God reveals in the Bible that He is unique and specific. The less you know the specifics, the more likely you are to be ignorant of what He is doing in your life. The more ignorant we are of the Creator, the less we are in touch with what is really important, and the more meaningless our lives are.

For example, when we fail to grasp God's sovereignty, we wrongly assume that He is distant and uninvolved. The more distant and uninvolved we imagine God to be, the more aspects of our lives are either joyless and frustrating.

When we fail to realize that God is involved, interested and purposeful in what He bring into our lives, we trust Him with less and less. We intentionally distance ourselves from Him because we assume He is either incompetent or evil in His actions.

When we fail to realize how personal He is, we assume He is uninterested, and we live more of our lives without reference to Him at all. That is a form of rebellion we probably don't recognize (Romans 14:23).

How do we get there? Usually, we absorb the foggy values of the culture around us, and we don't realize how uninformed and unaware we really are.

This story is set in a culture like that, during the days of the judges, when a woman probably wondered why the Lord had been so cruel as to leave her childless for so long. She and her husband were about to learn very personally and specifically that God is up to far more than first meets the eyes.

Judges 13

Verse 24 tells us this is about the parents of Samson, but the story tells us this is about something far bigger than that. It tells us the Lord is **sovereign, personal and purposeful**.

1. In adversity God's people find Him sovereign, personal and purposeful (verses 1-5).

1a. The Lord gives adversity as a teacher (verse 1).

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.

Isaiah 30 says that the Lord gives the bread of adversity and the water of affliction not merely to punish His people, but to teach them. In the book of Judges, this happens over and over again as the nation rebels. Whenever the people ignore God, He withdraws His protection and teaches their need for Him.

This is one of those parts of the Old Testament that people read and conclude, at first glance, that God is ill-tempered and mean. But when you pay careful attention, you see that this is a work of God's grace.

Since God is the Source of all good, then the cruelest thing He could do would be to mislead His people into thinking they were fine without Him. Nowhere does He teach this more consistently than in the book of Judges. Whenever His people ignore Him and begin worshiping false gods that can only drag them down, the Lord shows His people the vivid consequences of forgetting their Source.

Two illustrations of this kind of teaching come readily to mind: The first is the struggle of wills between a mother, who knows what is harmful to her child, and the child, who wants harmful things because he doesn't know better. The child has a selfish nature that assumes he knows what is best. He wants to grasp dangerous things and put them in his mouth.

Mother, knowing better, takes them away and clearly tells the child, "Don't put that in your mouth; it's very bad for you." The willful child disobeys and tries to do it anyway, and the loving mother punishes him for it. Why? To teach the child what is good for him and what is not.

The child interprets this as evidence that the mother is mean. One day, when my children were young, I thanked my mother for all the energy she put into raising me. She said, "My mother told me you get paid back when your children have children." It's no easy task teaching rebellious children.

The second illustration is an allergy I have to chocolate. If I eat even a small amount of chocolate, within an hour I have a splitting headache. The consequences are so immediate and so predictable, that I have no temptation to eat chocolate.

I consider this a great kindness. If all my temptations brought such swift consequences, I would be better conditioned to avoid them. Chocolate holds little appeal to me because it brings immediate pain.

That's how I view the book of Judges. The Lord, like a loving mother, consistently teaches his wandering children with adversity.

1b. The Lord teaches through adversity on a personal level (verse 2).

A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless.

The focus moves from what the Lord is teaching the nation to what the Lord is teaching an individual. The affliction of this woman is childlessness. We know it is not unusual for the Lord to use this, because we see it in the lives of others such as Sarah in Genesis, Hannah in 1 Samuel, and Elizabeth in Luke 1.

I want you to notice, then, that the Lord uses adversity not only to teach a nation, but also to teach an individual. Notice also that in this case the adversity is not punishment for rebellion; it is preparation for blessing.

Not all adversity need be corrective. Sometimes discipline is not punishment but training. Athletes undergo the discipline of stress and pain to make them stronger, better prepared for the challenge ahead. When the Lord disciplines us personally, it may not be because of past sin, but rather because of future blessing.

1c. The Lord sovereignly gives adversity that is personal and purposeful (verses 3-5).

3 The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. 4 Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, 5 because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No

razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

We know that this adversity has been personal and purposeful, because God speaks to her through an angel to tell her that she is going to have a son who is very special in God’s plans. Let me point out three things here:

1c1) Withheld blessings are opportunities to trust God’s purposes.

Childlessness is not the only affliction through which God works. It might be joblessness or financial difficulty or an alienated relationship or loss of something you love. You may feel ache or shame over any number of perceived withheld blessings.

I say “perceived” withheld blessings because, while all we have has been entrusted to us by the Lord, it all comes as pure gift. He owes us nothing. He does not create any of us with a guarantee of an 80-year lifespan or a healthy body or a keen mind or an American Dream lifestyle. Unlike Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, the Lord does not make all women strong, all men good looking and all children above average, nor is He obligated to.

Everything you enjoy is pure blessing, and none of it is automatic. But we tend to forget that it is a blessing, and we tend to forget the Giver on whom we depend for every millisecond of comfort and pleasure—that is, we forget *until* we long for something that we don’t have and realize that our only hope of having it is if the Lord chooses to grant it.

And when He grants a blessing, it is not meaningless. Both the withholding and the granting are purposeful, whether we look to Him for wisdom or not. It is likely that the Lord withholds some blessing from you because of His purposes in your life.

So all of us should be able to relate to this woman on some level.

1c2) The Lord has challenges and purposes for mothers.

It should grab our attention that the Lord has special plans for mothers, because this kind of story is so common in the Bible. If we did a study on God’s work in the lives of all the mothers in the Bible, we would be studying for quite a while.

And if we looked at all their stories, from Eve to Sarah to Hagar to Rebekah to Leah and Rachel to the mother of Moses to this story and on to Naomi and Hannah, all the way to the mother of Jesus, we would find two huge factors at work in the lives of each of these mothers: (1) the Lord is involving them in His plans, and (2) human difficulty was part of the plan. I think it would be fair to say that it was *in their difficulties* that God revealed Himself.

So we see that the Lord teaches His people through their difficulties, and that He is profoundly at work through the difficulties of mothers who know Him. He is sovereign, personal, and purposeful.

1c3) Importance in God’s plan does not guarantee earthly credit.

It seems significant that throughout the story we never learn this woman’s name. We are told Manoah’s name, although it’s not as if many people over the last 3000 years have named their sons Manoah. We probably know His name because genealogies recorded it, and the chronicler of the book of Judges had access to it.

But the Lord spoke specifically to this woman. She was extraordinarily chosen and privileged by the Lord to have an important role in His plans for His people. This much of her story is recorded in our Bibles, yet we don’t know her name.

Most of us who are called by the Lord for His purposes are not granted fame. I assume that we'll all be known in eternity, and we'll hear of the great work the Lord did in each of our intricately-designed stories. But that kind of attention is Heavenly. Most of us don't get to be stars in this broken world.

And that does not diminish in the least our significance as people chosen to fulfill a meaningful part in God's plan. We may know the Lord is clearly leading us, and that what we are doing is important. But God's assignments don't guarantee credit in this world.

As for me, I'm not really interested in fame. What brushes with fame I have are mostly through people I've been close to. I grew up Marge Shelley's nephew, then Bruce Shelley's son, then Marshall Shelley's brother. The next thing I knew I was Zach Shelley's dad. I've known more famous people, but I haven't shared their fame.

And the more I get to know Jesus in the Gospels, the less I want large-scale attention. In my career, my focus shifted from writing to teaching, in part because I am *not* highly motivated to communicate truth to a faceless mass audience. I want to know the people with whom I am communicating.

Jesus did most of His human work on a small scale. When He taught crowds, He was largely misunderstood. Making disciples is essentially a person-to-person process.

And throughout Scripture, the Lord uses people like the wife of Manoah in His plans. Whatever else she considered her identity, she is known to us as the mother of Samson. I don't know how well she could cook, sew, sing, do business or lead seminars. But she could listen to God, and He chose her to be a mother and carry out a part in His story, and for that reason, I care about her. I can relate to her.

2. The obstacles to experiencing the Lord are not always obvious. (verse 5)

"He will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

Deliverance from the Philistines was not completed until over 100 years later, under the rule of King David. But Samson, the son of Manoah and his wife, was to be the *beginning* of that deliverance.

Samson would begin the deliverance by bringing the conflict with the Philistines out into the open. You see, the other predatory nations from which Israel had to be delivered during the time of the judges—the Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites and so on—were raiders who openly attacked Israel's farms and settlements. But the Philistines began more peacefully than that.

The Philistines settled on the coast and began gradually to trade with the Israelites, to intermarry, and to spread their pagan, often brutal culture among them. The people of Israel, being quick to forget the Lord, did not recognize the threat the Philistines were. The Philistines did not attack God's people at first. Instead, they lured them into thinking they were harmless.

The Israelites were in danger precisely *because* they did not know they were. The Lord used Samson to bring the danger out into the open.

We are most in danger when we don't know that we are. I am more likely to fall into a pit if I don't know the pit is there. I am more likely to get myself into trouble if I

am naïve about what I'm getting into. I am more likely to ignore the Lord if I don't realize that ignoring the Lord is what I am doing.

The peril for God's people in Judges 13 is that they don't realize how bad it already is—this spreading corruption of the Philistines.

Pause before we continue. Notice that there is a danger for God's people. Notice that His people are largely ignorant of the danger. Notice that God has a sovereign plan to deliver His people, even before they know they need deliverance. And notice that the Lord is personal and purposeful in sovereignly bringing adversity into individuals' lives in order to fulfill his saving plan.

3. The Lord's medium and message are not always what we expect (verses 6-11)

3a. Sometimes He incarnates the message (verse 6).

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."

Throughout the narrative, the messenger is called just that: the messenger of God. We use the Greek term for messenger: angel, because "angel" means "messenger."

But when the woman refers to him, she calls him "a man of God" (verse 6), and "the man who appeared to me" (verse 10). Scholars call this a "theophany," a visible, tangible revelation of God to a human. God speaks through human form.

Following the New Testament, we have a fuller understanding of God incarnate. Jesus has shown us God in the flesh. God in the flesh is Jesus. Whenever you are portraying the God of Scripture in a human form, it is Jesus you are portraying, whether He looks like Jim Caviezel or Morgan Freeman. Jesus is how we know God in the flesh.

And that has prompted many students of the Old Testament to speculate that these theophanies are actually Old Testament appearances of the Christ. What else would God look like in human form—when He appears to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18) and to Jacob (Genesis 32) and to Manoah's wife—than Jesus?

We don't know for sure, but it's not far-fetched to imagine Jesus speaking directly to this woman, just as He spoke to Peter over breakfast at Lake Galilee following the resurrection.

At the same time, she describes him as a man of God who looked like an angel, very awesome. She knew this was not just any man passing by, and she knew he was from God. Consistently, when God speaks to someone in this way, they have no question that it is God who has spoken.

It's possible to have a dream or a vision and wonder if it was from God. But it's also possible to have God speak to you in such a way that you know without a doubt that it was God, as in the cases of Isaiah (6) and Paul (Acts 9) and this woman.

3b. God's assignment is both a blessing and a frightening challenge (verses 7-8).

"But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to 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 birth until the day of his death.'

Then Manoah prayed to the LORD : "O LORD, I beg you, 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."

The woman tells Manoah about this message, about having a son—which would be big enough news to the couple—and about setting Him apart for the Lord.

Apparently Manoah believes his wife's story, because his reaction is to pray for guidance in how to raise this son. So I can relate to Manoah also. From the time I've known my first child was on the way, I've prayed in fear and trembling about how to raise them. No assignment has so terrified me as raising children.

And no books or seminars have adequately informed me as to how to do it, because it turns out every child is different. What approach helps one child grow in wisdom and faith does not necessarily help the next child, and other approaches are needed. I know how Manoah feels. "Lord, I beg you, teach me how to do this."

But he asks for more than that: "Let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us." Maybe Manoah was overlooking the words of God that he already had. Or maybe he was simply seeking God's guidance in raising this particular child. Either way, Manoah represents a parental anxiety that many of us still live with.

So get the picture: This woman is supernaturally made to understand that after years with the cultural shame and disappointment of no children, she and her husband will now have a child, and that they are to raise him to know the purposeful Lord, and that he will be instrumental in the deliverance of his people from a threat to their souls.

"We're going to have a baby!" That has to be at the forefront of her mind.

And at the forefront of her husband's mind is, "We're going to have to raise a son!" I'm not sure Manoah has the fear of the Lord so much as fear of the assignment.

God's assignments bring both joy and fear, both privilege and challenge. Manoah is anxious, and he prays. Notice what happens next.

3c. God can use wives to lead men to Him. (verses 9-11).

9 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. 10 The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"

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

"I am," he said.

Notice that the Lord hears Manoah's prayers, and answers . . . by speaking to his wife again.

Men, don't be surprised if the Lord wants to make something known to you through your wives. I fear that sometimes we get the impression that being a man means hearing the Lord better than any woman does. That idea doesn't seem to come from the Bible. A man is wise to consider what the Lord is saying to his wife.

For the second time, the Lord speaks to Manoah's wife. She hurries to tell him, and *he follows his wife* to the Lord (verse 11).

4. God's people fear God's power and rely on His grace (verses 12-25).

4a. We must act on what God has already commanded (verses 12-18).

¹² So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?"

¹³ The angel of the LORD answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. ¹⁴ 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 still wants to know how to raise this son. Let's give him credit for seeking the Lord's will for training up a son in the way he should go.

The messenger answers that Manoah's wife must do what she has been directed to do. It involves dietary purity, pointing to a recognition that this child should be raised with *higher* standards than other children—but *not lower*. He should learn the same Scripture about God and His ways that all children should learn.

But given the threat that Philistine culture was to God's people, we have to wonder how much of that Manoah understood. For a generation the Philistines had been infiltrating the Hebrews' way of life. How much had Manoah become like the Philistines? How much of God's Word did he know and live? We don't know.

But the Lord twice tells Manoah to act on what has already been spoken: in verse 13, "Your wife must do all that I have told her," and in verse 14, "She must do everything I have commanded her."

Not only do they already have the first five books of the Bible but they have a specific calling in raising this child.

I look back with some shame at the times I have asked the Lord for direction while I was largely ignoring the clear direction already in His Word.

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

Manoah wants to offer a feast. Middle Eastern hospitality was not going out for a one-hour dinner. It involved extensive preparation. Manoah is wanting to establish covenant friendship with the visitor, as a feast would symbolize.

¹⁶ 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.)

The messenger says "I won't eat your feast. Instead, you should give it to the Lord as an offering."

And *now* we are told that Manoah still did not realize this was a messenger from the Lord. The Lord is speaking, but Manoah is not hearing this as the Word of the Lord. He is asking for God to *send* someone to help them, but he is not expecting God's direct involvement.

Don't underestimate this: We all need our thinking to be transformed, at some point, *away from* the idea of a distant god who "sends" messages, people, opportunities and blessings our way, and *into* the awareness that God is here, directly involved in our lives, wanting intimate interaction with Him. He's not distant; He's right here with you. He's not "the man upstairs"; He is Immanuel, God with us. We must nurture the awareness of His presence.

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

¹⁸ He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."

Manoah wants to know this messenger. When he asks, the messenger tells him the name is too wonderful for Manoah to understand.

The term He uses to describe the name is the same term used in **Isaiah 9:6**, "*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given . . . and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor.'*"

The name that is given to this messenger is the name that is given to the coming Messiah. It is a name too wonderful for Manoah to comprehend yet. In the Lord's timing, it will be revealed.

Manoah has been told how wonderful this messenger is, but now he's going to experience it.

4b. When God's people obey Him they experience Him (verses 19-21)

¹⁹ 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: ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.

Manoah wants specific instruction, and the messenger tells him to act on the instruction already given. When Manoah wants to offer a meal, the messenger tells him to give it as an offering.

Manoah's offering is his first act of direct obedience to the messenger, and the immediate result is an experience of the Lord's holiness. As the flame arises from the obedient offering, the messenger ascends—another foreshadowing of Jesus (Acts 1).

Both Manoah and his wife are so overcome with awe at this that they fall on their faces, and Manoah suddenly realizes this was a true representative of God. He has moved from head knowledge to personal experience. After obeying the will of the Lord he becomes aware of the reality of the Lord.

4c. His people get to know not only His sovereignty, but also His grace (verses 22-25).

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

Manoah, like others who have seen the Lord (Genesis 28:16-17; Judges 6:22-23; Isaiah 6:5), thinks he is going to die. Now the fear of the Lord seizes him. You cannot come to grips with awesome holiness of God without the realization that you do not deserve it. Not only do we *not deserve* to see the Lord; we don't even deserve to go on living.

That is the awe that accompanies a true awareness of God's sovereignty. When you realize even a glimpse of God's power and authority, you realize you are deserving of nothing but doom. But that fear of the Lord is followed by the transforming awareness that He has not treated us as we deserve. Instead, He has come to us in grace.

²³ *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."*

Manoah's wife realizes that God is both fearsome and gracious. He has provided a means for approaching Him. He has provided blood sacrifice as an acceptable substitute. He has come to us not to condemn us, but to call us to His purposes for our lives.

That is the gospel of Christ. God is sovereign. As Creator and Sustainer of all, He has ultimate power and authority. All authority in heaven and on earth belong to Christ (Matthew 28:18). We are, therefore, completely dependent on Him and fully answerable to Him.

But we have not given Him the attention and worship that is rationally His and rightly His. We have worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. That is rebellious, foolish and deadly. We have allowed Philistine deception to blind us to the truth of our dependence on Him.

Not only is this self-destructive, it's also rebellious against Him. We not only deserve the trouble we find ourselves in, but we deserve far worse.

But He has not treated us as our sin deserves. Instead He has come to us, in the person of Jesus, to carry out justice by paying the ultimate blood sacrifice, a perfectly acceptable offering.

So now, meeting Him brings not only the rightful fear of the Holy One, but also the wonderful assurance that the sacrifice has been accepted on our behalf. Instead of condemning us, He calls us to obey Him and carry out His purposes, and assures us of His ultimate deliverance.

He is sovereign, personal and purposeful, and what each of us most needs is to know Him that way for ourselves.

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