

Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 14 — Samson and the Riddle

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chequered history follows. "And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines, and he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife" (Judges 14). His father and mother remonstrate in vain. "Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?" Samson was just as self-willed as he was strong. "And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well. But his father and his mother knew not that it was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines." Now that the occasion calls for it, one may notice by the way the transparent boldness of Scripture, as wonderfully instructive as the reserve we have already remarked. If man had the writing of the story, would he have dared to speak out thus plainly? I doubt that any believer, without inspiration, would have felt it desirable to write that verse, and many more, as God has done it. If unveiling the fact at all, he would have apologized for it, denounced its evil to clear himself, spoken much perhaps of God's permitting and overruling. Now I am far from denying that it is right for us to feel the pain and shame of Samson's ways. But there is one thing that God's Spirit always assumes — the perfect goodness and the unswerving holiness of God. And this, beyond all doubt or fear, we are entitled always to keep before our hearts in reading the Bible. Never then let the breath of suspicion enter your soul. Invariably, when you listen to the written word of God, range yourself on His side. You will never understand the Bible otherwise. You may be tried; but be assured that you will be helped out of the trial. The day may come when nobody appears to lend you a helping hand. What is to become of you then? Once allow your soul to be sullied by judging those living oracles, and real faith in the Bible is gone as far as you are concerned. If I do not trust it in everything, I can trust it in nothing. So dangerous is apt to be the reaction against one ever so honest; the more you have trusted, when you begin to doubt, the worse it is apt to be, even with poor erring man, who knows not what a serious thing it is. Nor ought anyone to allow a suspicion until he has the certainty of that which can be accounted for in no way save by guilt. And this, I need scarce say, is still more due on the score of brotherly relation and divine love, not merely on the ground of that which

we might expect for our own souls. But when God and His word are in question, it ought to be a simple matter for a child of God. How often it is ourselves who make the difficulties of which the enemy greedily avails himself against our own souls and His glory! For objections against scripture are always the creation of unbelief. Difficulties, where they exist for us, would only exercise faith in God. The word of God is always in itself not only right, but fraught with light. It makes wise the simple; it enlightens the eyes. "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." Undoubtedly there are many things in scripture of which we are ignorant; but then we are not entitled to interpret the word of God by ourselves. There is such a thing as to be taught of God. The Holy Ghost is given for this as for other purposes. It may often be doubtless that we are obliged to wait, and a wholesome thing too for our souls it should be. It is well sometimes for all those who teach that they should be obliged to learn; well that they should be forced to feel that they do not know; an excellent moral lesson that they should confess it — not only be conscious of it, but own it; for indeed the necessary claim of scripture is that it be confided in as the word of God, though it does not thence follow that we are competent to explain all. By the Holy Spirit only can we enter in and enjoy. It is not here meant that there is any special difficulty in that which has been the occasion of these general remarks; still less is it implied that he who speaks makes any pretension to know anything as he ought to know, more than those he sees around him. If through the unction from the Holy One we know all, it is equally true that we all are but learners. Again, it is not of course any attainment of mine that leads me to speak as I have done now. If I have spoken strongly, it is only, I trust, what becomes every believer. I have taken no ground beyond your own, my brethren; but surely this is a ground that calls you to assert the very same inestimable privilege that I boast as by grace a man of faith. It is not the vanity of setting up oneself as possessed of exclusive powers or special means of attaining or explaining anything; for I should distrust anyone who pretended to anything of the sort, no matter who or where he might be. But that which does good to every saint and to every soul is the unqualified confidence in God and His word, which, if it does not reproduce itself in hearts purified by faith, at least deals with the consciences of all others till utterly blinded by Satan. Nor are you thus called to believe anything like an extravagance, though it surely would be so if the Bible were a human book, and so to be treated like any other, which after all even infidels do not: witness their occupation with it and zeal against it. Who troubles himself with the Koran or the Shastres, save their votaries? But scripture claims always to be the word of God — never the word of Isaiah or Ezekiel, of Peter or Paul (1 Cor. 14: 37; 2 Peter 3: 15, 16); for, whatever the

instrument may be, it is as truly God's word as if the Holy Ghost had written it without a single instrumental means. If this be submitted to (and you might more consistently reject the Bible altogether, if you do not submit), one sees the hollowness and falsehood of sitting in judgment upon it: for who can question that to doubt that which comes directly from God Himself would be to take the place, not merely of an unbeliever, but of a blasphemer or an atheist? And if unbelief be probed home, it comes to this: it is a virtual denial of God's veracity, of His revelation, if not of His being. But returning from this to the simple tale of Samson's life, I take it as the plain fact that God meant us to learn that He saw fit at that time to deliver by an unworthy instrument, by a man who showed how low he was, if only by the moral incongruity of an Israelitish Nazarite seeking a wife from the fiercest of Israel's uncircumcised enemies. The grossness of such conduct is left to tell its own tale; and yet God, by the man that was thus pursuing his own self-willed course, meant to overrule the occasion for His glory, snapping the more violently the ties which Samson's ungoverned passion and low thoughts induced him to form. The descent is great, when one bearing the name of the Lord slights His word and seeks a path of his own. If God permits him for a season to do his own will, what shame and pain he must reap ere long! Meanwhile the man, morally speaking, is ruined — his testimony to His name being worse than lost. Even if God interfere and produce the direct opposite of the fleshly enjoyment which self-will had sought, it is in no way to the man's praise if God effects his purposes by his acts, spite of wrong and folly. Never indeed is good the fruit of man's will, but of God's. This only gains the day; for it alone is as wise and holy as it is good. I take it therefore, that in the present case there is nothing to stumble the simplest believer, though no doubt there may be to one who knows not God and His word. Alas! how many there are in these days of audacious free-thinking who are disposed to sit in judgment on His word, and give His revelation no credit for telling us the truth as it was and is. Whatever then might be Samson's motives and conduct, it was the Holy One, as we are told, who prompted him against the aggressors of Israel. "It was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel. Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him." Thus there was an arrest on the road. We know that the spirit of ease and self-indulgence readily finds a lion in the way — can make one where none is; but here was a real lion that roared against the self-willed youth. "And the Spirit of Jehovah" — to some minds a marvellous fact under the circumstances — "came mightily upon him." It is the expression of the agent of divine power — in no way the seal of redemption or the earnest of

the inheritance, as we know Him dwelling in us now since the shedding of the blood of Jesus. It was the energy of His Spirit who thought of His people showing out by the way, as we have remarked, in that wayward man the fallen state to which they were reduced by their own sin, with the highest claims outwardly but morally in as low a condition as could then be conceived. "And the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand." Samson stands alone; of Israel none with him, as with the others before him. There was the plainest proof of what God could be, even where there was but one man to work by; but this very fact showed to what a depth was Israel now sunk. It was bad enough when Gideon had only three hundred that God would employ. What was it when there was only one, and such an one as Samson? In order to have communion, we must have some good which is shared together. There was, there could be, none any longer as Israel was. What a picture of the true state of things! Even his father and mother knew nothing about their son's movements. Everything was out of course. Scanty honour paid he to his parents, but ardently gave himself up to the pursuance of his own plans. Yet was God behind and above all; and God, deigning to employ even such a man, at such a time, and under such circumstances, to accomplish, or at least to begin, the deliverance of His people. Samson was afterwards about to put a riddle to the Philistines from this lion. But did he heed the lesson conveyed in the fact himself? Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Treat Satan as Satan when he betrays himself; and what can he do against the name of the Lord? Yet is the victory won by God's Spirit, without anything in the hand; but it is by direct antagonism to the enemy, not by guilty connection with his instruments. Grave truth! Ah! why did not the strong man learn wisdom in the fear of Jehovah, as he again visited the place where his first lesson was given? His victories had then been as holy as they were brilliant; for he surely needed not to have defiled his Nazariteship by an unholy marriage in order to have punished the Philistines. Alas! we next hear of Samson's visit to the Philistine woman who pleased him well: no small sin for an Israelite, as it is worse for a Christian, to marry one of the world. "And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion. So his father went down unto the women: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do." Then follows the story of his companions and the riddle — a riddle which he was clever enough to put, but which he had little faith to understand or appropriate himself. Is it not evident that

Samson feebly knew what God was teaching him by the lion which he slew, and by the lion's carcase which he found with the honey in it? Carried away by his uncurbed feelings (to whatever end God might turn all, for He always governs), he was mighty to act; but as to intelligence, little more than an unconscious instrument. yet did he propose a most instructive riddle, which set forth justly the then condition of the people of God. In that image we have the enemy in great power, but God infinitely above him, able as well as seeing fit to use the least worthy vessel of His power, and out of the slain enemy to furnish the sweetest refreshment. How triumphantly has it been done in Christ our Lord, but in how different a way! Absolutely immaculate Himself, He was made sin for us, that we might become God's righteousness in Him who for us by death annulled him that had the power of death, and gave us out of that defeat our unfailing comfort. Bright contrast between Samson and the man that overthrew Satan on that cross where He Himself reached the very climax of weakness! For He won by no external strength but by suffering. He was crucified in weakness, but rose in the power of God; but there, instead of folly, instead of shame, instead of unhallowed alliance with the enemies of God, how does unsullied perfection shine in Him of whom we boast! The result in the type alas! is that, whatever might be the victory over the lion and whatever the sweetness of the honey, the effort to connect himself with the woman of Timnath turns out no small trouble to the man of might, whose anger was kindled at the treachery which sold his riddle, and, when his wife was given to the companion he had used as his friend, issued in such vexation for the Philistines as is known to us all. (Judges 15: 4, 5)