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July 3rd: Judges 14 & 1 Corinthians 3

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Samson and the lion. God's building.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges chapter 14. His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat.

But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes. After some days he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion.

And behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it

out with his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother, and gave some to them, and they ate.

But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion. His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him.

And Samson said to them, Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes. But if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.

And they said to him, Put your riddle, that we may hear it. And he said to them, Out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet. And in three days they could not solve the riddle.

On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us? And Samson's wife wept over him, and said, You only hate me, you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.

And he said to her, Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you? She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to her people, and the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? And he said to them, If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle. And the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and struck down thirty men of the town, and took their spoil, and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle.

In hot anger he went back to his father's house, and Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man. Samson begins his ministry between Zorah, meaning Hornet, and Eshter from the root to question. He ends up being buried at the same place.

And the spirit of God stirs him up at the end of chapter 13, and one of the first results of this is his journey down to Timnah in chapter 14, where he sees one of the daughters of the Philistines and wants to take her as his wife. This isn't the same Timnah as in Genesis chapter 38, but the fact that it shares the name might be significant. Samson's parents are obviously concerned about this decision.

Taking a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines seems to be a departure from the way of the Lord. Samson was supposed to be set apart, to be a Nazirite to the Lord from his

birth, and now here he is marrying one of the uncircumcised Philistines. It does not seem appropriate.

Even though the Philistines were not the Canaanites, and it was possible in principle to take one of them as a wife, it did not seem to be a wise thing to do, or a righteous thing to do. Surely Samson would be much better off taking a daughter of his own people. This isn't the only way that he seems to be bending or breaking the rules of a Nazirite in this chapter.

He goes after one of the daughters of the Philistines, he leaves the path to go into a vineyard, he takes honey from the carcass of a lion, and a few chapters later he ends up having his hair cut. Yet the Lord is using Samson, the Lord is seeking an occasion against the Philistines, and Samson is a tool in his hand. Even in his recklessness and his lust he ends up serving the Lord's purpose, creating enmity between Israel and the Philistines.

He goes down to Timnah a second time with his parents this time, and on the way, when his parents are not with him, he encounters the lion in the vineyard. It's a dreadful wild beast where one would not expect to encounter one. We might ask what Samson himself is doing in the vineyard.

He's supposed to stay away from all products of the grape, and yet he's walking off the path in a vineyard. It seems strange. There is of course no reference to him actually taking the fruit of the vineyard, and there may be some symbolic purpose to it.

The vineyard represents Israel, and Samson, although he does not eat the fruit of the vineyard, is one who guards the vineyard, and appropriately he's going to be the one that rids the vineyard of the beast that prowls within it. That this incident with the lion is symbolic is suggested by the next chapter. First of all in this chapter we read in verses 5-6, There's a parallel between these two statements.

The lion in the first case, in the vineyard, is paralleled with the Philistines in the next chapter. Israel, the vineyard of the Lord, is being possessed by this lion of the Philistines, and Samson, one stronger than the lion, has to come and rid the vineyard of the creature that prowls within it. Samson doesn't tell his parents about what he did to the lion.

The themes of knowing and not knowing, and telling and not telling, are very prominent ones throughout this chapter. The woman was right in Samson's eyes. This has been a refrain, and will be a refrain, throughout the rest of the Book of Judges.

Doing what is right in their eyes. It's not a positive indication. It suggests that Samson is following his lust, rather than wisdom, or the way of the Lord here.

A few days later, Samson returns to take the woman, and turns aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there's a swarm of bees and some honey inside it, and he sees, he takes,

he eats, and he gives to his parents, who do not know where the honey has come from. He defeats the lion in the vineyard, like the serpent in the garden, but then he takes and he eats, and he listens to the voice of his wife, who has been led by the serpents, in a way that brings a loss of clothing. Maybe there are themes of the fool here.

The taking, eating, and giving certainly do remind us of the forbidden fruit, and as Samson should keep himself from a dead body, the fact that he's getting food from the carcass of a lion is at the very least seeing how close he can get to the fire without being burned. So there are possible themes of the fool here. In the book of Judges there are progressive fool themes.

So we start off with idolatry in the form of Gideon's ephod, then there's the murder of brothers in the story of Abimelech, and then there's intermarriage in the story of Samson. In the wedding that follows, there are 30 companions selected for Samson after they see him. Perhaps Samson has an imposing physique corresponding to his physical strength, and so they feel the need of 30 men to surround him.

Numbers related to 3 are also prominent in the Samson narrative, while numbers related to 7 are prominent in the Gideon narrative. The marriage feast lasts for 7 days, and there's a riddle given for 30 linen garments and changes of clothes, under and outer garments. Now, as most people would only have one of such pairs of garments, this was a pretty costly wager.

To lose it would be fairly devastating. It serves as a natural occasion for conflict, it provokes the Philistines. They are unable to solve the riddle for 3 days, and on the 4th day they approach the wife of Samson.

They threaten Samson's wife, they'll burn her and her father's house with fire, all the people within her father's household. They are very angry at her, as they stand to lose a lot, and so she pleads with and accuses Samson of not loving her. The foreign women in Samson's life give his enemies a lot of leverage over him, and this case is no exception.

Finally, Samson gives in, and at the very end of the appointed time, the men interpret the riddle. Now they are described as the men of the city, not just the 30. And their answer is a sort of riddle of its own, it's posed as a question.

What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? Now on one level this could be read as a straightforward answer to Samson's question. On another level it could be read as a riddle of its own. What is stronger than a lion? Well, we know, Samson.

Samson is like a lion himself, he's like the sun, with a great mane and incredible strength. What is sweeter than honey? Love. Samson himself is the lion, who ends up being defeated by love and sweetness when he could not be defeated by strength.

This is a foreshadowing of Samson's defeat through Delilah. The woman of Timna, the

prostitute of Gaza, and Delilah are far more powerful against Samson than any of the strength of the Philistine lion. It's the honey from the carcass of the Philistines that really causes the trouble.

Just as it seemed that Samson compromised his Nazirite vow to eat the honey from the lion, so he will compromise his Nazirite vow with Delilah later on in the story. This foreshadows the way that Samson will meet his demise. And we might, perhaps, see the story of Israel playing out here.

Israel was set apart from their birth as a special people to the Lord. Their birth was announced by the angel of the Lord, and the spirit of God came upon them to defeat their enemies with great power. Yet they could not resist the honey of false gods and foreign wives, and ended up suffering great loss as a result.

Samson's response to the 30 men is an angry one. If they had not ploughed with his heifer, they would not have discovered his riddle. In speaking of a heifer, he's clearly referring to his wife in a very unflattering way, and in referring to ploughing, there may be some implication of sexual violation.

This also sets the scene for the way that Samson will get his revenge in the next chapter. The spirit of the Lord now rushes upon him again. He kills 30 men of Ashkelon, and takes their garments and gives those to the 30 Philistines.

Then he returns to his father's house, his marriage in tatters. His wife is given to his best man. It seems to me that there are more things going on in this story than we see on the surface.

First of all, it foreshadows what will happen in Samson's own life. The story of the lion, the bees and Samson gives some indication of how his story will play out. It also relates to the story of Israel more generally.

Beyond this, I think there is another passage in script that might shed some light upon it. In Genesis chapter 38 verses 1-2 we read, Once again there's a story of someone going down, seeing a daughter of a foreign people, and wanting to take her as his wife. That story continues in verses 12-16.

When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend Hira the Edalomite. And when Tamar was told, He went to her at the roadside and said, Judah then offers her a kid. Later on in the story she is threatened with being burned with fire.

In the next chapter Samson comes with a young goat to try and meet his wife again, and fails, much as Judah failed to bring the goat to the presumed prostitute in chapter 38 of Genesis. The woman of Timnah ends up being burned alive, as Tamar nearly was in Genesis. There seem then to be similarities between these stories.

In both cases, a man goes down from his people, meets a woman of a foreign people, marries her, is diverted from the road on the way to Timnah, is led astray by his lust, and ends up being humbled as a result. In both cases we have elements that are similar. A goat being sent to reconnect with a woman, and a threat to burn the woman with fire.

When we consider further that Judah is related to the lion in chapter 49 of Genesis, in a passage that alludes back to the events of chapter 38, and that Samson defeats the lion here in chapter 14 of Judges and is compared to the lion as well, it would seem that there are some deep connections to be explored. Samson, like Judah, is the lion brought low. In both cases, perhaps, these men represent the sovereignty and power and might of Israel.

They are the lions of the nation, and yet they are brought low by their lust for foreign women, and in giving their strength to strange women, they end up forfeiting their effectiveness. A question to consider. Samson is a man of the tribe of Dan.

Where do we see Dan compared to a lion? 1 Corinthians chapter 3 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour. For we are God's fellow workers, you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.

Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.

For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, He catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or

the world or life or death or the present or the future. All are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

No spiritual person can judge all things while being judged by no one. Yet beginning in chapter 3, Paul circles back to the problem he had highlighted at the beginning of this section in chapter 1 verses 10-12. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. As long as the Corinthians think and act in such a way, they cannot be addressed as spiritual people.

They haven't grasped the mind of Christ and his wisdom, but need to be taught the most basic rudiments of the Christian faith, being given milk rather than solid food. They aren't ready for anything more. We find a similar statement contrasting the milk of instruction for infants in Christ and solid food of wisdom for the mature in Hebrews 5-12-14.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

The sign that they are of the flesh, that they are operating as natural persons rather than persons of the spirit, is seen in the jealousy and conflict that currently marks the community. This is precisely the way of the flesh. The flesh creates a certain sort of community, a community of competitive and conflictual status-seeking, in which people bite and devour each other, as Paul discusses in Galatians 5. The flesh is naturally driven by the desire for power, natural wisdom, for status and dominance, and is as such antagonistic to the way of the spirit, which produces fruit of an utterly different character.

In Galatians 5, verses 20-21, among the works of the flesh, Paul lists enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy. And these are the sorts of behaviours and traits that are on display in the Corinthian church, where peace and brotherly love should be prevailing. The Corinthians seem to have exalted impressions of their own maturity, but Paul punctures and deflates these in this passage.

Far from being advanced in the ways of the spirit, they haven't really begun to understand the basics. The mind of Christ is clearly something that we do not receive suddenly and fully formed. Rather, it is something that we must mature and grow in.

It is a fruit that must grow within us, as we sow to the spirit rather than to the flesh. The Corinthians have received the spirit, but they haven't really begun to grasp the mind of Christ, that the people of God should participate in by the spirit. Indeed, they are forming sectarian camps around ministers of Christ like Paul and Apollos, taking the ministry of the undivided Christ himself as an occasion for competitive alignments.

Paul wants the Corinthians to be under no illusions about the nature of ministers like him and Apollos. They are merely servants of their master Jesus Christ, appointed for specific tasks. Apollos was introduced to us in Acts 18, verses 24-28.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

You can imagine that, with a man as brilliant and learned as Paul, and a man as eloquent and charismatic as Apollos, it was entirely natural for people to form camps around them. Entirely natural, but not spiritual. Paul and Apollos had different but complementary callings.

Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered, but God was the one giving the increase. Ultimately, God's work underlies everything else. Despite diversity of labour, everything is bound together in the one God.

Paul returns to this point in chapter 12 verses 4-6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. Ultimately, amidst the diversity of different ministers and gifts, there is one God who is active in everything.

Speaking of this diversity of gifts in the church, Paul also emphasises the unity of divine activity in chapter 12 verse 11. All these are empowered by one and the same spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. And here he is making a similar point in a different way.

The man planting and the man watering are unified by a common purpose, and both will be rewarded by their master. They are not each working their own personal field, but

they are both labouring on the same field, God's field. They are collaborating to produce the same fruit, rather than competing against each other.

They are fellow workers with God, God is working in and through them. Apollos and Paul are united expressions of God's work in the field of his church, they have the same source and the same end. And the Corinthians, rather than pitting the ministers of the Lord against each other, should see themselves as benefiting from their collaboration as the field of the Lord.

Paul now shifts to a building metaphor. Once again, diversity of ministries is an important theme here. The ministers of the church come from the same source and serve the same end, but do so in diverse ways.

A building built by builders in rivalry with each other would not be a very good building, but nor would a building where everyone was performing exactly the same task. You need a diversity of different ministries. Paul's task was to lay the foundation as a master builder.

No other foundation exists but Christ. And Paul in this letter is in many respects returning to inspect that foundation. His concern to this point has been to ensure that the Corinthians are absolutely clear that Christ is the only foundation upon which to build, and that the cross is the shape of this foundation.

Jesus is the Messiah who builds a new tabernacle, and Paul the tentmaker is, like Bezalel, a master builder working upon it. There is going to come a day of testing, revealing the quality of people's work and the foundation that they have built upon. Each one of the Corinthians is building their part of the building with their lives, and the judgment fire of the day of testing, whether the final great day of the Lord or a great day of testing in the middle of history, is going to prove what their work truly is.

We find similar language concerning a day of judgment in the prophets. Amos 7, verse 4 When the fire of testing comes, all work done in the flesh will be burned up. The difference between combustible and enduring work will be revealed, and the true character of what we have done will be shown.

It doesn't matter how wise, powerful, influential or successful we appear to the eyes of men. Our true character will be revealed on that day. If we have built with the materials of the flesh, our work, no matter how beautiful it appears on the surface, will be destroyed, as there is nothing enduring to be refined.

Such persons may be saved, but only as those snatched from the flames of divine purification. However, those who have built upon the true foundation and with good materials will receive a reward. As Christians, we are to be the builders of the temple of God, working as those who will face a final inspection and test of our labour.

And the building image is sharpened in precisely this way in the following verses. The building is not just a general building, it is the temple for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Here it is the whole church that is the temple of the Holy Spirit, whereas in chapter 6, verse 19, the temple is the body of the individual Christian.

The Messiah is the temple builder and the temple he is building is formed of people, and each one of us is building as part of it. This is imagery that we encounter elsewhere in the Pauline Epistles, in Ephesians chapter 2, verses 19-22. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. This temple is holy, and God is jealous for it. If anyone destroys or defiles the temple, God will destroy them.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Paul drives home the argument of the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 here. The Corinthians should not delude themselves.

True wisdom involves becoming as fools as we seek God's wisdom over that of this age. God outwits the wise of this age in their wisdom, while establishing a greater wisdom of the Spirit as its true alternative. In all of this, God demonstrates his supremacy and nullifies the boasting of man.

Paul quotes two Old Testament verses here. Job 5, verse 13, He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. Psalm 94, verse 11, The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

When it all comes down to it, all boasting in ourselves or in human things is negated. All things come from God and all things serve God. If we belong to Christ, all ministers and all forces of creation operate for our well-being under the super-intention of God.

God works in and through them all for his undivided purpose in his Messiah. A question to consider. What can we learn about the final judgment within this passage?