

CHAPTER 14

The idea which this chapter gives us of Samson is not what one might have expected concerning one who, by the special designation of heaven, was a Nazarite to God and a deliverer of Israel; and yet really he was both. Here is,

- I. Samson's courtship of a daughter of the Philistines, and his marriage to her (v. 1-5, 7, 8).
- II. His conquest of a lion, and the prize he found in the carcase of it (v. 5, 6, 8, 9).
- III. Samson's riddle proposed to his companions (v. 10-14) and unriddled by the treachery of his wife (v. 15-18).
- IV. The occasion this gave him to kill thirty of the Philistines (v. 19) and to break off his new alliance (v. 20).

<0740> JUDGES 14:1-9

SAMSON CHOOSES A PHILISTINE WIFE

Here,

I. Samson, under the extraordinary guidance of Providence, seeks an occasion of quarrelling with the Philistines, by joining in affinity with them — a strange method, but the truth is Samson was himself a riddle, a paradox of a man, did that which was really great and good, by that which was seemingly weak and evil, because he was designed not to be a pattern to us (who must walk by rule, not by example), but a type of him who, though he knew no sin, was made sin for us, and appeared *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, that he might *condemn and destroy sin in the flesh*,
<818>Romans 8:3.

1. As the negotiation of Samson's marriage was a common case, we may observe,

(1.) That it was weakly and foolishly done of him to set his affections upon a daughter of the Philistines; the thing appeared very improper. Shall one that is not only an Israelite, but a Nazarite, devoted to the Lord, covet to

become one with a worshipper of Dagon? Shall one marked for a patriot of his country match among those that are its sworn enemies? He saw this woman (v. 1), and she *pleased him well*, v. 3. It does not appear that he had any reason to think her wise or virtuous, or in any way likely to be a help-meet for him; but he saw something in her face that was very agreeable to his fancy, and therefore nothing will serve but she must be his wife. He that in the choice of a wife is guided only by his eye, and governed by his fancy, must afterwards thank himself if he find a Philistine in his arms.

(2.) Yet it was wisely and well done not to proceed so much as to make his addresses to her till he had first made his parents acquainted with the matter. He told them, and desired them to *get her for him to wife*, v. 2. Herein he is an example to all children. Conformably to the law of the fifth commandment, children ought not to marry, nor to move towards marrying, without the advice and consent of their parents; those that do (as bishop Hall here expresses it) *wilfully unchild themselves, and exchange natural affections for violent*. parents have a property in their children as parts of themselves. In marriage this property is transferred; for such is the law of the relation that *a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife*. It is therefore not only unkind and ungrateful, but very unjust, to alienate this property without their concurrence; whoso thus *robbeth his father or mother*, stealing himself from them, who is nearer and dearer to them than their goods, *and yet saith, It is no transgression, the same is the companion of a destroyer*, ^{}Proverbs 28:24.

(3.) His parents did well to dissuade him from yoking himself thus unequally with unbelievers. Let those who profess religion, but are courting an affinity with the profane and irreligious, matching into families where they have reason to think the fear of God is not, nor the worship of God, let them hear their reasoning, and apply it to themselves: *“Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or, if none of our tribe, never a one among all thy people, never an Israelite, that pleases thee, or that thou canst think worthy of thy affection, that thou shouldst marry a Philistine?”* In the old world the sons of God corrupted and ruined themselves, their families, and that truly primitive church, by marrying with the *daughters of men*, ^{}Genesis 6:2. God had forbidden the people of Israel to marry with the devoted nations, one of which the Philistines were, ^{}Deuteronomy 7:3.

(4.) If there had not been a special reason for it, it certainly would have been improper in him to insist upon his choice, and in them to agree to it at last. Yet their tender compliance with his affections may be observed as an example to parents not to be unreasonable in crossing their children's choices, nor to deny their consent, especially to those that have seasonably and dutifully asked it, without some very good cause. As children must *obey their parents in the Lord*, so parents must not *provoke their children to wrath, lest they be discouraged*. This Nazarite, in his subjection to his parents, asking their consent, and not proceeding till he had it, was not only an example to all children, but a type of the holy child Jesus, who *went down with his parents to Nazareth* (thence called a *Nazarene*) and was subject to them, ^{<015>}Luke 2:51.

2. But this treaty of marriage is expressly said to be *of the Lord*, v. 4. Not only that God afterwards overruled it to serve his designs against the Philistines, but that he put it into Samson's heart to make this choice, that he *might have occasion against the Philistine*. It was not a thing evil in itself for him to marry a Philistine. It was forbidden because of the danger of receiving hurt by idolaters; where there was not only no danger of that kind, but an opportunity hoped for of doing that hurt to them which would be good service to Israel, the law might well be dispense with. It was said (^{<0135>}Judges 13:25) that *the Spirit of the Lord began to move him at times*, and we have reason to think he himself perceived that Spirit to move him at this time, when he made this choice, and that otherwise he would have yielded to his parents' dissuasives, nor would they have consented at last if he had not satisfied them it was *of the Lord*. This would bring him into acquaintance and converse with the Philistines, by which he might have such opportunities of galling them as otherwise he could not have. It should seem, the way in which the Philistines oppressed Israel was, not by great armies, but by the clandestine incursions of their giants and small parties of their plunderers. In the same way therefore Samson must deal with them; let him but by this marriage get among them, and he would be a *thorn in their sides*. Jesus Christ, having to deliver us from this present evil world, and to cast out the prince of it, did himself visit it, though full of pollution and enmity, and, by assuming a body, did in some sense join in affinity with it, that he might destroy our spiritual enemies, and his own arm might work the salvation.

II. Samson, by a special providence, is animated and encouraged to attack the Philistines. That being the service for which he was designed, God, when he called him to it, prepared him for it by two occurrences: —

1. By enabling him, in one journey to Timnath, to *kill a lion*, v. 5, 6. Many decline doing the service they might do because they *know not their own strength*. God let Samson know what he could do in the strength of the *Spirit of the Lord*, that he might never be afraid to look the greatest difficulties in the face. David, who was to complete the destruction of the Philistines, must try his hand first upon *a lion and a bear*, that thence he might infer, as we may suppose Samson did, that the uncircumcised Philistine should be as one of them, ^{<0973>}1 Samuel 17:36.

(1.) Samson's encounter with the lion was hazardous. It was a young lion, one of the fiercest sort, that set upon him, roaring for his prey, and setting his eye particularly upon him; *he roared in meeting him*, so the word is. He was all alone in the vineyards, whither he had rambled from his father and mother (who kept the high road), probably to eat grapes. Children consider not how they expose themselves to the roaring lion that seeks to devour when, out of a foolish fondness for liberty, they wander from under the eye and wing of their prudent pious parents. Nor do young people consider what lions lurk in the vineyards, the vineyards of red wines, as dangerous as snakes under the green grass. Had Samson met with this lion in the way, he might have had more reason to expect help both from God and man than here in the solitary vineyards, out of his road. But there was a special providence in it, and the more hazardous the encounter was,

(2.) The victory was so much the more illustrious. It was obtained without any difficulty: he strangled the lion, and tore his throat as easily as he would have strangled a kid, yet without any instrument, not only no sword nor bow, but not so much as a staff or knife; he had *nothing in his hand*. Christ engaged the roaring lion, and conquered him in the beginning of his public work (^{<100>}Matthew 4:1, etc.), and afterwards spoiled principalities and powers, triumphing over them *in himself*, as some read it, not by any instrument. He was *exalted in his own strength*. That which added much to the glory of Samson's triumph over the lion was that when he had done this great exploit he did not boast of it, did *not so much as tell his father nor mother* that which many a one would soon have published through the whole country. Modesty and humility make up the brightest crown of great performances.

2. By providing him, the next journey, with honey in the carcase of this lion, v. 8, 9. When he came down the next time to solemnize his nuptials, and his parents with him, he had the curiosity to turn aside into the vineyard where he had killed the lion, perhaps that with the sight of the place he might affect himself with the mercy of that great deliverance, and might there solemnly give thanks to God for it. It is good thus to *remind ourselves* of God's former favours to us. There he found the carcase of the lion; the birds or beasts of prey, it is likely, had eaten the flesh, and in the skeleton a swarm of bees had knit, and made a hive of it, and had not been idle, but had there laid up a good stock of honey, which was one of the staple commodities of Canaan; such plenty there was of it that the land is said to *flow with milk and honey*. Samson, having a better title than any man to the hive, seizes the honey with his hands. This supposes an encounter with the bees; but he that dreaded not lion's paws had no reason to fear *their* stings. As by his victory over the lion he was emboldened to encounter the Philistine-giants, if there should be occasion, notwithstanding their strength and fierceness, so by dislodging the bees he was taught not to fear the multitude of the Philistines; though they *compassed him about like bees, yet in the name of the Lord he should destroy them*, ^{<4812>}Psalm 118:12. Of the honey he here found,

(1.) He ate himself, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for the dead bones of an unclean beast had not that ceremonial pollution in them that the bones of a man had. John Baptist, that Nazarite of the New Testament, lived upon wild honey.

(2.) He gave to his parents, and they did eat; he did not eat all himself. *Hast thou found honey? eat so much as is sufficient for thee*, and no more, ^{<1216>}Proverbs 25:16. He let his parents share with him. Children should be grateful to their parents with the fruits of their own industry, and so *show piety at home*, ^{<5104>}1 Timothy 5:4. Let those that by the grace of God have found sweetness in religion themselves communicate their experience to their friends and relations, and invite them to come and share with them. He told not his parents whence he had it, lest they should scruple eating it. Bishop Hall observes here that *those are less wise and more scrupulous than Samson that decline the use of God's gifts because they find them in ill vessels*. Honey is hone still, though in a dead lion. Our Lord Jesus having conquered Satan, that roaring lion, believers find honey in the carcase, abundant strength and satisfaction, enough for themselves and for all their friends, from that victory.

<0740> JUDGES 14:10-20

SAMSON'S RIDDLE

We have here an account of Samson's wedding feast and the occasion it gave him to fall foul upon the Philistines.

I. Samson conformed to the custom of the country in making a festival of his nuptial solemnities, which continued seven days, v. 10. Though he was a Nazarite, he did not affect, in a thing of this nature, to be singular, but did *as the young men used to do* upon such occasions. It is no part of religion to go contrary to the innocent usages of the places where we live: nay, it is a reproach to religion when those who profess it give just occasion to others to call them covetous, sneaking, and morose. A good man should strive to make himself, in the best sense, a good companion.

II. His wife's relations paid him the accustomed respect of the place upon that occasion, and brought him thirty young men to keep him company during the solemnity, and to attend him as his grooms-men (v. 11): *When they saw him*, what a comely man he was, and what an ingenuous graceful look he had, they brought him these to do him honour, and to improve by his conversation while he staid among them. Or, rather, when they saw him, what a strong stout man he was, they brought these, seemingly to be his companions, but really to be a guard upon him, or spies to observe him. Jealous enough they were of him, but would have been more so had they known of his victory over the lion, which therefore he had industriously concealed. The favours of Philistines have often some mischief or other designed in them.

III. Samson, to entertain the company, propounds a riddle to them, and lays a wager with them that they cannot find it out in seven days, v. 12-14. The usage, it seems, was very ancient upon such occasions, when friends were together, to be innocently merry, not to spend all the time in dull eating and drinking, as bishop Patrick expresses it, or in other gratifications of sense, as music, dancing, or shows, but to propose questions, by which their learning and ingenuity might be tried and improved. This becomes men, wise men, that value themselves by their reason; but very unlike to it are the infamous and worse than brutish entertainments of this degenerate age, which send nothing round but the glass and the health, till reason is

drowned, and wisdom sunk. Now, 1. Samson's riddle was his own invention, for it was his own achievement that gave occasion for it: *Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.* Read my riddle, what is this? Beasts of prey do not yield meat for man, yet *food came from the devourer*; and those creatures that are strong when they are alive commonly smell strong and are every way offensive when they are dead, as horses, and yet *out of the strong*, or out of *the bitter*, so the Syriac and Arabic read it, *came sweetness.* If they had but so much sense as to consider what eater is most strong, and what meat is most sweet, they would have found out the riddle, and neither lions nor honey were such strangers to their country that the thoughts of them needed to be out of the way; and the solving of the riddle would have given him occasion to tell them the entertaining story on which it was founded. This riddle is applicable to many of the methods of divine providence and grace. When God, by an over-ruling providence, brings good out of evil to his church and people, — when that which threatened their ruin turns to their advantage, — when their enemies are made serviceable to them, and the wrath of men turns to God's praise, — then comes *meat out of the eater* and *sweetness out of the strong.* See ^{<III>}Philippians 1:12.

2. His water was more considerable to him than to them, because he was one against thirty partners. It was not a wager laid upon God's providence, or upon the chance of a die or a card, but upon their ingenuity, and amounted to no more than an honorary recompence of wit and a disgrace upon stupidity.

IV. His companions, when they could not expound the riddle themselves, obliged his wife to get from him the exposition of it, v. 15. Whether they were really of a dull capacity, or whether under a particular infatuation at this time, it was strange that none of the thirty could in all this time stumble upon so plain a thing as that, *What is sweeter than honey* and *what stronger than a lion?* It should seem that in wit, as well as manners, they were barbarous — barbarous indeed to threaten the bride that, if she would not use means with the bridegroom to let them into the meaning of it, they would *burn her and her father's house with fire.* Could any thing be more brutish? It was base enough to turn a jest into earnest, and those were unworthy of conversation that would grow so outrageous rather than confess their ignorance and lose so small a wager; nor would it save their credit at all to tell the riddle when they were told it. It was yet more villainous to engage Samson's wife to be a traitor to her own husband, and

to pretend a greater interest in her than he had. Now that she was married she must *forget her own people*. Yet most inhuman of all was it to threaten, if she could not prevail, to burn her and all her relations with fire, and all for fear of losing each of them the value of a shirt and a coat: *Have you called us to take what we have?* Those must never lay wagers that cannot lose more tamely and easily than thus.

V. His wife, by unreasonable importunity, obtains from him a key to his riddle. It was *on the seventh day*, that is, the seventh day of the week (as Dr. Lightfoot conjectures), but the fourth day of the feast, that they solicited her to entice her husband (v. 15), and she did it,

1. With great art and management (v. 16), resolving not to believe he loved her, unless he would gratify her in this thing. She knew he could not bear to have his love questioned, and therefore, if any thing would work upon him, that would: "*Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not, if thou deniest me;*" whereas he had much more reason to say, "*Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not, if thou insisest on it.*" And, that she might not make this the test of his affection, he assures her he had not told his own parents, notwithstanding the confidence he reposed in them. If this prevail not, she will try the powerful eloquence of tears: she *wept before him* the rest of *the days of the feast*, choosing rather to mar the mirth, as the bride's tears must needs do, than not gain her point, and oblige her countrymen, v. 17.

2. With great success. At last, being quite wearied with her importunity, he told her what was the meaning of his riddle, and though we may suppose she promised secrecy, and that if he would but let her know she would tell nobody, she immediately told it to the *children of her people*; nor could he expect better from a Philistine, especially when the interests of her country were ever so little concerned. See ^{<3705>}Micah 7:5, 6. The riddle is at length *unriddled* (v. 18): *What is sweeter than honey, or a better meat?*

^{<2813>}Proverbs 24:13. *What is stronger than a lion, or a greater devourer?* Samson generously owns they had won the wager, though he had good reason to dispute it, because they had not declared the riddle, as the bargain was (v. 12), but it had been declared to them. But he only thought fit to tell them of it: *If you had not ploughed with my heifer, made use of your interest with my wife, you would not have found out my riddle.* Satan, in his temptations, could not do us the mischief he does if he did not plough with the heifer of our own corrupt nature.

VI. Samson pays his wager to these Philistines with the spoils of others of their countrymen, v. 19. He took this occasion to quarrel with the Philistines, went down to Ashkelon, one of their cities, where probably he knew there was some great festival observed at this time, to which many flocked, out of whom he picked out thirty, slew them, and took their clothes, and gave them to those that had expounded the riddle; so that, in balancing the account, it appeared that the Philistines were the losers, for one of the lives they lost was worth all the suits of clothes they won: the body is more than raiment. *The Spirit of the Lord came upon him*, both to authorize and to enable him to do this.

VII. This proves a good occasion of weaning Samson from his new relations. He found how his companions had abused him and how his wife had betrayed him, and therefore *his anger was kindled*, v. 19. Better be angry with Philistines than in love with them, because, when we join ourselves to them, we are most in danger of being ensnared by them. And, meeting with this ill usage among them, he *went up to his father's house*. It were well for us if the unkindnesses we meet with from the world, and our disappointments in it, had but this good effect upon us, to oblige us by faith and prayer to return to our heavenly Father's house and rest there. The inconveniences that occur in our way should make us love home and long to be there. No sooner had he gone than his wife was disposed of to another, v. 20. Instead of begging his pardon for the wrong she had done him, when he justly signified his resentment of it only by withdrawing in displeasure for a time, she immediately marries him that was the chief of the guests, the friend of the bridegroom, whom perhaps she loved too well, and was too willing to oblige, when she got her husband to tell her the riddle. See how little confidence is to be put in man, when those may prove our enemies whom we have used as our friends.