

Homiletics Analysis: Judges 14

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Judges 14 opens the Samson cycle proper, following the birth narrative of chapter 13. The chapter moves through three interlocking episodes: Samson's demand for a Philistine woman from Timnah over his parents' objections (vv. 1–4), the encounter with the lion and its aftermath (vv. 5–9), and the wedding feast, the riddle, and its betrayal (vv. 10–20). The narrator supplies two explicit theological interpretive notes — first, that Samson's insistence on the Timnah woman was “from the LORD, for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines” (v. 4), and second, that “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him” both when he tore the lion (v. 6) and when he struck down the thirty men at Ashkelon (v. 19). The chapter ends in rupture: the Philistine wife is given to Samson's companion, and Samson returns to his father's house in anger.

The narrative trajectory is deliberately ironic and unsettling. Samson is a man supernaturally empowered for a divinely appointed purpose, yet every decision he makes is driven by appetite, pride, and personal grievance. He sees a woman and wants her. He kills a lion and turns it into a game. He devises a riddle for personal advantage. He uses the Spirit's power to pay a gambling debt. The LORD is at work — the narrator insists on this — but Samson remains entirely oblivious to the theological significance of what he is doing or experiencing. He does not know (v. 4) what his parents do not know: that God is sovereign over even this.

This Text — Intent

God is using this chapter to confront readers with the uncomfortable reality that He works His sovereign purposes through deeply flawed instruments — and that the flaws do not invalidate the work, but neither does the work sanctify the flaws. Samson is not a hero to emulate but a mirror in which readers recognize the dangerous combination of genuine gifting and unchecked appetite. The intent is not primarily to assure readers that God's purposes cannot be thwarted (though that is present), but to produce in readers a sober recognition of how self-deception operates in the gifted and called — the assumption that divine enabling equals divine approval, and that spectacular capacity excuses disordered desire.

Subject Sentence: God advances His purposes through a gifted, self-deceived, appetite-driven instrument.

Primary Claim: God is confronting His people with the sobering truth that sovereign purposefulness and personal spiritual disorder can coexist — that being used by God is not the same as being right with God, and that the gifted person who mistakes divine empowerment for divine endorsement is already in danger.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Theological Interpretive Notes (vv. 4, 6, 19)

The most contested interpretive question in this chapter is what to make of the narrator's repeated insistence that Samson's behavior — including his theologically objectionable choice of a pagan wife — was "from the LORD." Several hermeneutical traditions handle this differently, and the differences are load-bearing for exposition.

A *Dispensational* reading frequently emphasizes Samson as a straightforward type of Christ — a deliverer raised up, empowered by the Spirit, and ultimately sacrificed among his enemies. This reading tends to smooth over Samson's moral disorder by framing his choices as providentially directed and therefore essentially correct. The problem with this reading is that it requires importing into the text a evaluative conclusion the narrator consistently refuses to supply. The narrator does not say Samson was right to pursue the Timnah woman; the narrator says God was using that pursuit for His own ends. These are not the same claim. The text actively preserves the moral disorder alongside the sovereign oversight — that tension is not a hermeneutical problem to be dissolved, it is the theological point.

A *Wesleyan/Arminian* reading, concerned with human cooperation and moral accountability, sometimes handles the "from the LORD" note by treating it as permissive rather than directive — God permitting and working within Samson's sinful choices without endorsing them. This has merit as far as it goes and is a more textually attentive reading than the typological flattening above. The framework of *permissive will* versus *directive will* is a legitimate theological category. However, the Reformed reading presses further: the narrator is not merely saying God permits this but that God is *actively pursuing an agenda* through it — "seeking an occasion against the Philistines." This is stronger than permission; it is purposeful orchestration. The Reformed tradition is better positioned to hold together both the sovereignty of the divine purpose and the genuine moral disorder of the human agent without collapsing either.

The *Reformed* reading, grounded in the broader witness of Scripture and the consistent emphasis of the Deuteronomistic history, reads the "from the LORD" notes as the narrator's theological frame without those notes constituting a moral endorsement of Samson. This is the reading that best accounts for the whole text: it preserves the irony the narrator has carefully constructed, it accounts for the Spirit's power being given for a specific judicial purpose (not Samson's personal benefit), and it coheres with the larger Judges pattern in which the LORD uses increasingly compromised instruments to advance

His purposes in a period of escalating covenant unfaithfulness. The Reformed insistence that divine sovereignty and human moral responsibility are held together without the one absorbing the other is uniquely equipped to preach this text honestly.

The Nazarite Vow and the Honey (vv. 8–9)

A secondary but significant interpretive question concerns whether Samson violated his Nazarite vow by handling the carcass of the lion and eating honey from it. Numbers 6:6 prohibits Nazarites from approaching any dead body. The text says Samson “scraped” the honey out and ate it, and gave it to his parents “but he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.” The deliberate concealment is the narrator’s signal: Samson knows this is problematic. Some interpreters argue this is not a clear violation (the prohibition may address human corpses specifically). Others read it as a probable violation that Samson suppresses. For exposition, the key exegetical note is the deliberate concealment — whatever the technical verdict, the narrator is showing us a man who hides what he does. He does not confront his action; he obscures it. This is character-forming information for the remainder of the Samson cycle.

Key Canonical Support

- **Numbers 6:1–21** — The Nazarite vow, providing the covenantal frame against which Samson’s behavior is to be evaluated throughout. His empowerment and his obligations are both established here; the chapter’s irony only registers against this background.
- **Deuteronomy 7:1–4** — The prohibition of intermarriage with Canaanite peoples, including the Philistines, grounded not in ethnicity but in covenant protection: “they will turn away your sons from following me.” Samson’s demand for a Philistine wife is not a neutral cultural preference; it is a covenant violation — which makes the narrator’s “from the LORD” note all the more theologically striking.
- **1 Samuel 16:7** — “The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” Samson consistently looks on the outward appearance (v. 1: “she is right in my eyes”). The contrast between divine and human perception runs through both texts.
- **Romans 9:17–18** — God’s use of Pharaoh — a pagan, hostile instrument — for His own display of power and glory. The theological grammar is the same as Judges 14:4: God is pursuing an agenda through an instrument who is not pursuing God’s agenda. Paul’s exposition of this principle provides the New Testament’s most direct canonical grounding for how to read the “from the LORD” notes in Judges 14.
- **1 Corinthians 9:27** — Paul’s fear of being “disqualified” despite his ministry — that one can run the race, preach the gospel, display spiritual power, and still be found

wanting in the end. The New Testament’s most direct applicational counterpart to the Samson pattern.

Aim: To guard against the self-deception of the gifted — the assumption that divine empowerment equals divine approval — and to call both individuals and communities to hold spiritual capacity and personal holiness together without letting the one substitute for the other.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Samson goes to Timnah; sees a Philistine woman; she is “right in his eyes”	The phrase “right in his eyes” is a thematic marker in Judges (cf. 17:6, 21:25) — it signals self-governed desire, not Spirit-governed discernment
2–3	Samson demands his parents get her for him; they protest — why not an Israelite woman?	Parents’ objection is theologically accurate; Samson’s response is bare demand: “get her for me, for she is right in my eyes” — he gives no other reason
4	Narrator’s interpretive note: this was “from the LORD, for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines”	Critical theological hinge. Samson does not know this. His parents do not know this. Only the reader knows. This is the narrator’s sovereignty flag — not a moral endorsement
5–6a	On the way to Timnah, a lion attacks; the Spirit of the LORD rushes upon Samson; he tears the lion with his bare hands	Second Spirit-empowerment note. Power is real and extraordinary. Samson acts entirely alone — “he did not tell his father or his mother”
6b	He does not tell his parents what he did	First of two deliberate concealments in this chapter; begins establishing the pattern of Samson

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
7	Samson speaks with the woman; she is “right in his eyes”	operating in secret Narrator repeats the phrase — desire confirmed, not challenged; the woman now has a personal hold on Samson
8–9	On a later visit, Samson turns aside to see the lion’s carcass; finds honey; eats it; gives some to parents without disclosing its source	Probable Nazarite violation (contact with carcass); definite concealment; Samson turns an occasion of supernatural experience into a private game
10	Samson’s father goes down to the woman; Samson makes a feast — “as was customary for young men”	Samson conforms entirely to Philistine wedding custom — no separation, no distinctiveness; he is at home among the uncircumcised
11	The Philistines bring thirty companions to be with Samson	The word for “companions” may suggest these were assigned as guards — the Philistines are already wary of Samson; there is a sense of surveillance
12–13	Samson proposes the riddle as a wager: thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes if they solve it; same if they cannot	The riddle is built on the concealed lion-honey episode — his private knowledge becomes the currency of a game; wisdom has been made commercial
14	The riddle: “Out of the eater, out of the strong, something sweet” — they cannot solve it for three days	The riddle is genuinely unsolvable without privileged knowledge; it is not a fair contest
15	On the fourth day (or seventh — text-critical issue), the Philistines pressure Samson’s wife: “Entice your husband to tell us the riddle, or we will burn you and your father’s house”	The wedding feast has become dangerous; the wife is caught between Samson’s pride and Philistine violence

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
16–17	The wife weeps before Samson; accuses him of hating her; he relents on the seventh day and tells her; she tells the Philistines	Samson yields not to love but to relentless pressure; “she pressed him hard” — he cannot maintain his own counsel in the face of emotional manipulation; this pattern recurs catastrophically in chapter 16
18	The Philistines answer the riddle; Samson recognizes what happened — “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle”	The language is ugly — Samson calls his wife a “heifer,” reducing her to an object of use; his anger is about the game, not the woman
19	The Spirit of the LORD rushes upon him; he goes to Ashkelon, kills thirty men, takes their garments, pays the debt, returns in anger	Third Spirit-empowerment note. The Spirit’s power is deployed to settle a gambling debt and express personal rage — Samson does not distinguish between the LORD’s agenda and his own grievance
20	Samson’s wife is given to his companion	The marriage collapses immediately; Samson departs without his wife; the “occasion against the Philistines” continues, but at the cost of everything Samson thought he was getting

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Demand and the Hidden Providence
2	5–9	The Lion, the Honey, and the Secret
3	10–18	The Wedding, the Riddle, and the Betrayal
4	19–20	The Spirit’s Power, the Gambling Debt, and the Wreckage

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God advances His purposes through a gifted, self-deceived, appetite-driven instrument.

Primary Claim: God is confronting His people with the sobering truth that sovereign purposefulness and personal spiritual disorder can coexist — that being used by God is not the same as being right with God, and that the gifted person who mistakes divine empowerment for divine endorsement is already in danger.

Applications (Five)

1. The phrase “right in my eyes” is a diagnostic — learn to hear it in yourself.

(*Mind/belief*) Samson’s repeated justification for his choices is that they are “right in his eyes” — and it is never interrogated, never prayed over, never submitted to counsel or Scripture. He has no hermeneutic of desire — no mechanism for asking whether what he wants is what God wants. The application is not merely behavioral (“make better choices”) but cognitive: develop the discipline of naming your own “right in my eyes” moments and submitting them to external accountability before they become demands. The person who cannot distinguish between “I want this” and “this is right” is already living in Samson’s territory, regardless of how gifted they are.

2. Divine empowerment is not the same as divine endorsement — do not confuse the two.

(*Mind/belief*) The Spirit’s power rushes upon Samson to tear a lion, to strike down thirty men in Ashkelon — and Samson appears entirely unaware that the Spirit’s agenda and his own agenda are not identical. He experiences the power and appears to interpret it as confirmation. This is one of the most dangerous spiritual errors available to the gifted: using the fact that God blessed “this” as evidence that God approved of “this.” The application is searching and specific — where are you currently interpreting God’s blessing of your work as God’s endorsement of the way you are living? These are different questions, and confusing them closes off repentance.

3. The things we conceal reveal the things we know are wrong — stop hiding.

(*Will/behavior*) Twice in this chapter Samson deliberately withholds information: he doesn’t tell his parents about the lion, and he doesn’t tell them the honey came from a carcass. The narrator marks both concealments. Samson knows. The application is direct: the Christian who is hiding something from the people who should know them — their spouse, their accountability partner, their pastor — is almost always hiding it because they already know it is wrong. Stop performing openness while maintaining concealment. Bring the carcass into the light. The concealments in chapter 14 directly enable the catastrophe of chapter 16.

4. Grieve over gifts deployed in the service of appetite. (*Affections/worship*) There is something genuinely sorrowful in this chapter that the reader is meant to feel: a man to

whom God had given extraordinary capacity, set apart from birth, empowered supernaturally — and every gift is turned toward self-service. The lion-tear becomes a riddle. The Spirit's power pays a gambling debt. The Nazarite is at home in a Philistine feast. The application is affective: do not read this chapter with clinical detachment or merely as a cautionary tale. Grieve it. And then ask honestly — are there gifts in your own life, genuine gifts that God has given, that have been slowly recruited into the service of your ego, your comfort, your reputation? The grief is not just for Samson. It is meant to be diagnostic for the reader.

5. God's sovereign purposes cannot be thwarted — rest in this even when the instruments are broken. (*Affections/worship*) The haunting note in this chapter is that the narrator tells us what Samson does not know: this is from the LORD. God is not surprised by the Philistine wife, the lion, the riddle, the betrayal, or the wreckage at the end of verse 20. He is pursuing “an occasion against the Philistines” — and He will get it. This is not a comfortable truth here — it is not meant to make the reader relax. It is meant to produce a particular form of worship: the recognition that the LORD is working His purposes out in the midst of human disorder, self-deception, and covenant failure, and that He does not require clean instruments to accomplish His holy ends. This is not a license for disorder. It is grounds for trusting God's governance of history even when the people He is working through — including you — are making a mess of things.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter teaches that God's sovereignty is comprehensive — it operates not merely alongside human freedom but through human appetite, pride, and failure, without those things being sanctified by that operation. The narrator's double register — “this was from the LORD” alongside Samson's evident self-deception — forces the reader into a mature theological position: God is never not in control, and human beings are never not responsible. The chapter also teaches something important about the Spirit's empowerment: in the period of the judges, the Spirit's rushing upon Samson is given for a specific judicial-redemptive purpose (deliverance from Philistine oppression), not as a continuous indwelling, not as a marker of holiness, and not as a reward for obedience. Power is not the same as presence. Capacity is not the same as communion. The Spirit can equip an unruly instrument without that instrument being in a right relationship with the God who equips him.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Judges 14 is a sustained, narrative illustration of what Reformed theology calls *concurrency* — the doctrine that God's sovereign purpose and human moral agency operate simultaneously at every point, with neither absorbing the other. The Westminster Confession's insistence that God's decree extends to all things,

including the sins of men, while “God being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin” (WCF 5.4), is exactly the theological grammar the narrator is deploying in verse 4. The chapter also functions as a redemptive-historical warning embedded in the covenant story: in a period when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” the judge himself is the most vivid exemplar of the disease he was raised up to address. Israel’s deliverer is not different in kind from Israel in its disorder — he is Israel in miniature, gifted and called and covenant-breaking, sustained by grace he neither understands nor acknowledges. This is the Deuteronomistic history driving toward the need for a different kind of deliverer — one whose obedience is not compromised by appetite, whose strength is not deployed in the service of grievance, and whose death accomplishes more than the sum of his kills.

Main Takeaway

Being used by God is not the same as being approved by God. Samson tears a lion, receives the Spirit’s power, and moves through this chapter entirely unaware that the LORD is accomplishing something through him that he is not accomplishing in himself. Do not mistake the gift for the relationship, the empowerment for the endorsement, or the results for the righteousness. The gifted person who never asks whether their obedience matches their capacity is already living in the gap where Samson lived — and that gap, left unexamined, grows.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Turning Samson into a hero to emulate.** The most common mishandling of this chapter is reading Samson’s feats of strength as the point of the narrative and preaching him as a model of courageous Spirit-dependence. The narrator does not sustain this reading. Every time Samson acts powerfully, the surrounding narrative context undercuts the moral frame. He kills the lion — to turn it into a riddle. He receives the Spirit — to pay a gambling debt. Preaching Samson as inspirational misses the deliberately ironic double register the narrator has constructed. He is a warning sign dressed as a hero.
- **Dissolving the tension of verse 4 too quickly.** Some preachers, feeling the theological discomfort of “from the LORD” applied to a covenant-violating marriage demand, resolve it too quickly — either by making Samson’s choice straightforwardly right (typological reading) or by retreating to permissive will and leaving the divine sovereignty vague. The tension is the point. Sit in it. The congregation needs to encounter a God who is genuinely sovereign over sinful human choices without that sovereignty meaning approval — and they need to hold both convictions without collapsing them.

- **Preaching application without preaching the diagnosis.** It is easy to generate applications from this chapter — “watch your desires,” “be accountable,” “don’t marry unbelievers” — and stop there. The deeper work the passage is doing is diagnosing a specific and recurring spiritual pathology: the gifted person who uses divine empowerment as personal cover. Applications generated without that diagnosis will feel like behavior modification rather than gospel-rooted confrontation. Name the pathology first; let applications flow from the named diagnosis.
- **Missing the Nazarite frame.** Samson is not an ordinary Israelite who happened to be strong. He is a person under covenant obligation from birth — set apart, consecrated, bounded. The honey-from-the-carcass episode only registers its full weight if the preacher has established what a Nazarite was and what the vow required. Without that frame, the concealment in verses 8–9 looks like a minor embarrassment rather than a significant early marker of covenant drift.
- **Importing a straightforward typology without earning it.** Christ is in view ultimately — the Samson cycle drives toward the need for a better deliverer, and Reformed preaching should get there. But the typological connection should be arrived at through contrast, not equation. Samson is not a type of Christ in the sense of foreshadowing His character; he is a foil that reveals, by negative space, what kind of deliverer Israel actually needs. Preach the contrast before the connection. The congregation that has genuinely felt the disorder of Samson will hear the announcement of a righteous, obedient, Spirit-empowered Deliverer with completely different ears than a congregation that was told Samson was a Christ-figure throughout.
- **Ending with the sovereignty note as comfort rather than confrontation.** The “from the LORD” note in verse 4 can be preached as pastoral comfort — “God is in control even of this mess” — and that is not wrong. But in context, the primary force of the note is confrontational, not comforting. The reader is being placed in the position of knowing something Samson does not know about his own life. The application is not primarily “rest in God’s sovereignty” but “do not be Samson — do not be the person God is working through who has no idea what God is actually doing because they are too busy following their own eyes.”