

JUDGES

SAMSON: A MAN OF POWER AND WEAKNESS (13:1–16:31)

If you were to ask any children's class, "Who was the strongest man in the Bible?" the children would likely answer, "Samson!" Most of us know about Samson and his great strength. We also know that his strength was associated with his hair. His uncut hair was part of the Nazirite vow, but his strength was unique. Other Nazirites did not have the amazing physical strength that he had.

Samson, like many of the judges, was a deliverer of God's people but was not a man who could always be commended as a spiritual hero. His life was not consistently a godly model; he made choices that we do not want to emulate. God did use him at times, however, and he is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as having had great faith (vv. 32–34). By faith he was used by God to accomplish superhuman feats.

Samson was a judge in the sense of being a deliverer, but he did not deliver Israel completely. Perhaps God did not intend for Samson to complete the task of delivering Israel from the Philistines, for 13:5 says, "He shall begin to deliver Israel. . . ." Israel was under the oppression of the Philistines at this time, and they continued to struggle with them until the time of David's reign.

How did Israel come under oppression by the Philistines? The Book of Judges is remarkably repetitious. God's people would begin to pay homage to the gods of the nations around them, and God would send a foreign power to overrun Israel so that they would realize their mistake and repent. Then God, in His great mercy, would send a deliverer. In Judges 13 the story of Samson repeats this pattern, at least partially. The story begins, "Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. . . ." (13:1). This

is the first step. The word “evil” in the Book of Judges usually means or includes the worship of idols. Then we read, “. . . the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years” (13:1). This is the second step. The step that is missing in Judges 13—16 is the step of repentance. They must have repented, according to the pattern, but it is not mentioned.

In Acts a parallel is seen. Certain steps were taken as men and women became Christians. Do you realize that belief is not always mentioned in those accounts? We must assume that it was present. A person cannot respond to God without belief. Repentance is not always mentioned in the conversions recorded. Confession of Jesus as the Son of God is referred to in only one of them. Baptism is the only step specifically named in every detailed account of conversion recorded in the Book of Acts.

We have seen a pattern repeated in the Book of Judges. It should not disturb us that repentance is not named here. God did not just oppress the Israelites for a while and then start delivering them. We may assume that they repented. Because of His great love, God began the deliverance through Samson.

Let us examine four aspects of Samson’s life.

SAMSON’S BACKGROUND: A CHILD OF PROMISE (13:2-23)

The Angel of the Lord (13:2, 3)

Samson’s father, Manoah, was from Dan (13:2). In each deliverance God chose the deliverer from the region of Israel where the people were the most oppressed. This person would have the greatest realization of need and perhaps the greatest zeal against the enemy.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Samson’s mother (13:3). Who is the angel of the Lord? The angel who appeared to Gideon (6:12) seems to have been the presence of God Himself. Here, we also find the angel referred to as God. The angel of the Lord may be God Himself taking on some kind of physical presence. This angel told Samson’s mother that she would have a son who was to be a Nazirite all of his life (13:7).

A Nazirite From Birth (13:4-7)

Samson’s mother had been a barren woman. The angel said that she would have tremendous joy, for she would bear a son. He said,

Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines (13:4, 5).

The Nazirite vow is an interesting one. It seems that God gave Israel Nazirites as examples of righteousness. These people had the awesome responsibility to stand for absolute purity. Numbers 6 tells about that vow.

Samson would be an example of righteousness through his vow, although he failed to keep the vow many times. What else was involved in this vow?

“. . . ‘When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the Lord, he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh or dried grapes. All the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from the seeds even to the skin’” (Numbers 6:1-4).

One commitment that would distinguish the Nazirite from others was that he would consume nothing produced from grapevines. According to Numbers 6, this vow was not necessarily a lifelong vow. The regulations were for “all the days of his separation.” Samson, however, was a Nazirite from his mother’s womb—in other words, all of the days of his life.

Verse 5 adds the most distinguishable characteristic of the Nazirite: “All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long.” Perhaps the long hair was a way to distinguish Nazirites, maybe even recognize them from a distance. In addition, he was not to touch a dead person, but was to remain ceremonially clean (v. 6). In case he happened

to be close to someone who died suddenly, he had been given instructions on the process of purification (vv. 9-12).

Manoah's Request (13:8)

The last half of Judges 13 shows that Manoah could hardly understand or believe his wife's word that an angel of God had come and said that she was to have a child. He prayed, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom Thou hast sent come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born" (v. 8). That verse presents a great moral lesson for us. Samson was unique, and perhaps his father thought that if he were an ordinary child they would know what to do, but since he was such an extraordinary one they needed special instruction on rearing this child. Every parent should regard children as being so special that we need God's instruction on how to rear them. Manoah was assuming that God would give them something beyond the ordinary. We have all that we need in the Scriptures. May we rely on God for instruction on rearing our children.

The Return of the Angel of the Lord (13:9-23)

The angel did return, and Manoah prepared food for him, but the angel said that he would not eat (13:16). Instead, he performed a wonder when he touched the food with his staff: The food went up in flames, and the angel vanished in the smoke. Obviously, something was magnificent about this being who had appeared to him. Manoah thought that he and his wife would surely die because they had seen a man from God, or God Himself. Manoah's wife showed greater understanding than he did when she said, "If the Lord had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have let us hear things like this at this time" (13:23).

SAMSON'S STRENGTH: A MAN EMPOWERED (13:24, 25)

The event that the angel foretold took place: "Then the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the Lord

blessed him" (13:24). Note the next phrase: "And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him..." (13:25).

Four different times in three chapters, we read that the Spirit of the Lord stirred Samson, or the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him. Judges makes it clear that Samson's tremendous strength was the result of the moving of the Spirit of the Lord in his life.

SAMSON'S WEAKNESS: A MAN OF PASSION (14—16)

A Bride at Timnah (14; 15)

The Philistines had overrun Israel to the extent that Philistines roamed freely through all of the region of Dan in the southern plains of Israel. The Israelites seem to have walked among the Philistines without concern. The two groups knew one another. It was acceptable for the Israelites to go into the Philistine territory and lawful for the Philistines to go into Israelite territory. Evidently, freedom of travel and some degree of friendliness existed between these people. However, Samson knew the Philistines and knew their character. It was unusual for Samson to want to marry a Philistine girl at this time. This is where he made one of his great mistakes. He did not know how to choose women. He chose a woman who did not worship Jehovah God. God had warned His people against this from the very beginning. Israelites were to marry Israelites. It was not for purity of bloodline as some have suggested; it was for purity of spirituality and devotion to God. As soon as they began to intermarry with foreigners, they began to worship the gods of those foreigners.

Samson went to Timnah, found a Philistine woman, and wanted to marry her (14:1, 2). The reaction of his parents sounds like good parental thinking. They said, "Isn't there a good Israelite girl whom you could marry?" (14:3). They did not know that "it was of the Lord" (14:4). While the Lord had given instructions that the Israelites were to marry Israelites, He did, at least on this occasion, make an exception. We are told that "it was of the Lord, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines" (14:4). How could Samson's indifference about finding a godly wife have been "of the Lord"? Arthur Lewis wrote,

The answer is complex but important for Christians to consider today. The sovereign God can turn our decisions to fulfill His ends, even when we make them in transgression of His laws of holiness. Pharaoh freely determined to enslave the Hebrew tribes in Egypt, yet the Bible states, God “hardened his heart” to do this (Exodus 10:1). Rehoboam made a bad choice when he said he would add even heavier taxes on the northern tribes, yet we read, “It was a turn of events from the Lord, that He might establish His word” (1 Kings 12:15a). In this same manner, we may conclude that Samson’s decision was a wrong one, yet it was allowed by God and ordained to accomplish an initial victory over the enemies of God’s people.¹

Those who are not married should notice one other great mistake that Samson made. In choosing a mate, he had absolutely the wrong foundation. He told his parents, who were to arrange for the marriage, “Get her for me, for she looks good to me” (14:3). Later, when he went to see her, the Scriptures make a point of saying, “She looked good to Samson” (14:7). Too many marriages have been made on the basis of how someone looks to someone else. Physical appearance has its place, but it should not be the foundation for marriage.

Samson’s parents argued with him, but they lost the argument. They went to Timnah to make wedding plans, and Samson went with them. Evidently, he was away from them, for they did not know about what happened next. A young lion charged Samson, and God gave him tremendous strength to kill the lion. Judges 14:6 says, “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, . . .” How can any man take on a lion with his bare hands and tear the lion so badly that he dies? Samson could accomplish such a feat because the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him. He killed that lion and left it on the side of the road. The next time Samson went to Timnah he noticed that bees had made a hive inside its carcass. This fellow who was strong enough to kill a lion apparently was also strong enough to endure the stings of honey bees. He took some of the honey from the hive and went on his way to see his bride-to-be.

Samson married this woman, and the wedding feast at Timnah provided the backdrop

for a riddle. The Philistines appointed for Samson thirty companions, called friends. One was his best friend, probably the equivalent to a best man. With friends like this, Samson hardly needed any enemies. He started trouble with these friends by proposing a bet. He said,

Let me now propound a riddle to you; if you will indeed tell it to me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes. But if you are unable to tell me, then you shall give me thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes (14:12, 13).

The riddle became a matter of national pride. It was not a matter of whether or not they could afford a change of clothes. On the fourth day of the seven-day feast, they went to Samson’s bride and demanded, “Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle, lest we burn you and your father’s house with fire” (14:15). She cried and cried before Samson, until eventually Samson confided in her.

I want to defend her. She was different from the next two women who caused Samson trouble. Samson should have had more sense than to become involved with the harlot at Gaza or Delilah, the woman from the Valley of Sorek. This woman from Timnah evidently loved him. Only out of fear for herself and her father’s house did she betray him regarding the riddle. She told the answer to the riddle to her people and left Samson owing thirty men a change of clothes.

The men returned to Samson with pride, saying, “What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?” (14:18). Samson said, “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle” (14:18). As uncomplimentary as the terminology is, Samson was not accusing these friends and his bride of adultery, but rather of breaching the confidence which should have existed between a man and his wife.² Immediately he went to Ashkelon, a Philistine city, and killed thirty Philistines. He took their clothes and brought them to the men who had solved his riddle. Then he returned home in great anger.

Samson’s father-in-law assumed that he was gone permanently and gave Samson’s

¹Arthur H. Lewis, *Judges and Ruth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 77, 79.

²*Ibid.*, 80.

bride to the one who must have been the best man. After the harvest (chapter 15) Samson took a present and went back to his wife. He told her father that he was going in to his bride. He likely meant to have sexual relations with her, since he thought that they were married. Her father said, "I thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion." The father tried to make it right with Samson, saying, "Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead" (15:2).

Samson was angry. He was so angry that he said, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines. . . ." He must have realized that he had not been justified in killing the thirty Philistines at Ashkelon. This time, however, he thought he had just cause to take revenge on the Philistines. He caught three hundred foxes, tied their tails together, and put torches on them. They ran through all the grain fields of the Philistines. The grain was ripe, so the fire destroyed the crops. The Philistines recognized that this was not something that had happened accidentally, so they began to search for the one who had caused the fire. They discovered that Samson had done it because his wife had been given to his companion. Therefore, the Philistines burned her and her father to death. Samson responded, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit" (15:7). He "struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock at Etam" (15:8).

The Philistines marched into the southern territory of Israel to battle against Israel. Israel said, "Why have you come up against us?" The Philistines answered, "We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us" (15:10). Three thousand men of Judah went to the rock at Etam and asked Samson to surrender himself to the Philistines to save his country. He agreed to go with them on the one condition that they would not kill him. They bound him with two new ropes and took him to the Philistines who had come after him. The Scriptures say that after he was presented to them and the men of Israel were freed from any obligation for the burned fields, the Spirit of the Lord again came upon him mightily. He

broke the ropes, picked up the jawbone of a donkey, and killed one thousand Philistines. That was a tremendous battle—no doubt a long and exhausting one. Samson was so exhausted that he fell on the ground and asked God if he was to die of thirst. God opened up the ground and caused a spring of water to come out, because God was not done with him. The last part of chapter 15 tells that Samson judged Israel for twenty years. I suppose that during those twenty years Samson performed more heroic events like the killing of the thousand with the jawbone of a donkey.

A Harlot at Gaza (16:1-3)

Chapter 16 tells that Samson went to a harlot in Gaza. He was no example of morality, except perhaps as an example of what not to do. The people of Gaza were told that Samson had come to their city. The army encircled the city, and when he discovered that he was surrounded, he displayed his strength. He tore the city gate off of its hinges and carried it forty miles up to the top of a mountain. No one stopped him. They no doubt were afraid of him because of his great strength.

A Girlfriend at Sorek (16:4-31)

Samson loved another woman, one from the Valley of Sorek. Her name was Delilah. The Philistine lords came to her but did not threaten her as they had threatened his wife at Timnah. They said, "We will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver if you will find out the source of his strength." In order to receive the bribe, she began to ask Samson about the source of his strength. He said that it came from having never been bound with fresh cords: "If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man" (16:7). He went to sleep, and she bound him with fresh cords and shouted, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:9). He popped those cords off as if they were nothing.

He should have had enough sense to get out of the Valley of Sorek right then. She began to ask him again, and he said, "If they bind me tightly with new ropes, . . . then I shall become weak and be like any other man" (16:11). She bound him with new ropes and then shouted,

"The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:12). Once again, he simply snapped off his bindings.

She asked a third time. His answer was a little closer to the truth this time. He said, "If you weave the seven locks of my hair with the web and fasten it with a pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man" (16:13). So she wove and pinned his hair and cried, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:14). He pulled out the pin of the loom and the web and delivered himself from the Philistines.

She asked a fourth time, and he told her that the secret of his strength was in his uncut hair. Why did he tell her? What kind of foolishness would lead him to tell her? Did he not know what she would do? After he went to sleep, she had his hair cut and then cried, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:20). He thought he could wake up, shake himself, and frighten his attackers away, but they could see that his strength was gone, and they captured him. They gouged out his eyes, put him in prison, and made him a grinder. They forced him to do the work of a beast of burden, pulling a heavy grinding rock as a donkey would.

SAMSON'S DEATH: A MAN OF PRAYER (16:23-30)

Evidently, he was in prison for a long time, for in 16:22 we read, "However, the hair of his head began to grow again. . . ." Perhaps Samson renewed his vow to the Lord. Perhaps he repented, and his hair began to grow back. How long does it take a shaved head to grow relatively long hair? Samson had to grind in the prison for a long time.

One day the Philistines held a celebration to their god, Dagon. They said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hands" (16:23). Three thousand people had gathered at the temple of Dagon. All of the Philistine lords were present. They said, "Call for Samson, that he may amuse us" (16:25). They brought him in, and Samson told the young man who was leading him to bind him where he could feel the main pillars supporting the temple. He prayed and asked God to remember him: "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my

two eyes" (16:28). Verse 30 says that he added, "Let me die with the Philistines!" and he did. He bent forward with all his might and pulled down the two supporting pillars. The temple fell and killed the Philistines. Samson killed more enemies of God in his death than he had in all of his life (16:30). The story concludes in 16:31 by telling how his family took his body and buried it. Samson had been a judge, a deliverer, in Israel for twenty years.

Samson's life is a sad story. Children's Bible literature, in telling about his killing a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey, makes him look like a tremendous hero. When we look at all four chapters which tell about his life, we probably come away with the feeling that he wasted great potential.

LESSONS FOR US

Choose the Right Mate

Samson did not choose women well. Loving the wrong things and the wrong people kept him in trouble. He died in bondage and in shame. His life teaches us some great lessons. One of the most important of life's issues is to choose a mate wisely. Do not choose someone who worships another god. Most likely, we will not encounter individuals who fall down before a piece of stone, but we could become involved with those who do not give themselves to the Lord and to the purity of His way. I know of only one decision that is more important than the choice of a mate in life. That is whether or not a person will serve the Lord. The choice of a mate is the second most important decision in life; it directly affects one's spiritual growth and well-being. The statistics are astounding and frightening. When Christians marry outside the Lord, many leave the Lord and His church. Learn from Samson about the dangers of choosing the wrong mate.

Do Not Flirt With Evil

How easy it is for us to blame others! Anyone can see from Samson's life that he was responsible for his own trouble. He got his hair cut for himself just as if he had gone into a barber shop. He was in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, asking for trouble. We often get ourselves into difficulties by associating with

the wrong people and doing the wrong things. We flirt with evil, and eventually it ensnares us. Then we tend to say that difficult circumstances have made life unfair to us. God never promised that life would be fair, but in many instances, we make our own situations.

Be Strong in the Lord

The real strength of Samson was not in his biceps; it was in the Lord. This is one of the principal lessons we can learn from the story of Samson. He had tremendous strength. Four times the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. We can add a fifth time, because when he pulled the temple down on those three thousand Philistines, it was because God answered his prayer. Every time Samson had a show of tremendous strength, it was because the Lord blessed him with strength. While we do not fight Philistines today, we have battles against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places, and we need His strength to win those battles. The encouraging thing is that He will give it to us. We can be victorious in our battles today by the strength of the Lord.

GOD'S INVITATION

The whole Book of Judges is designed to show what happens to a nation when there is no king and every man does what is right in his own eyes. This is simply another example. Do not do what is right in your own eyes. That is what the Bible is all about. "It is not in man that walketh to direct his own steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). We need God to direct our steps. Follow Him and His Word. Rely on His strength. Do His bidding. Put His will first and foremost in your life, and you will not die in shame as did the strongest man of the Old Testament.

EXEGETICAL NOTES (13—16)

13:2—The location of the home of the deliverer is important.

13:3-5—The Nazirite vow is explained in Numbers 6.

13:6ff.—The angel of the Lord is called an angel in verses 3, 6, 9, 13, 15-18, 20, and 21. He is called a man in verses 10 and 11. He is called a man of God in verses 6 and 8. He is called God in

verse 22. He was probably God in human form. The Spirit of the Lord is named as source of action and strength in 13:25; 14:19; and 15:14.

16:22—Samson's hair had grown back, and his strength returned. Some have supposed that he renewed his Nazirite vow. All we know for sure is that the Lord answered his prayer.

A Prayer: "Remember Me"

Samson prayed it as he asked for strength: "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judges 16:18).

Hannah prayed it as she asked for a son: "O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thy maidservant and remember me, and not forget Thy maidservant, but wilt give Thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head" (2 Samuel 1:11).

The thief on the cross said it as he asked for salvation: "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42).

The Land of the Danites

The failure of Dan to take and hold its allotted land was one of the greatest disappointments of the Israelites in their entire conquest of Canaan. Dan had been next to the largest in number of all the tribes—62,700 fighting men, second only to Judah (Num. 1:39). Not only was their retreat to the north a moral blow to the pride of Israel, but it also created a military weakness by allowing the Philistines to control the central coastline. With this loss also went the valuable port city of Joppa, which would have provided the inland tribes with trade and rich commercial opportunities. Dan should have expanded and enlarged its territory, but instead the tribe became more and more cramped as the Philistines managed to overpower them and drive them back into the foothills of Judah and Ephraim (cf. Josh. 19:47 and Judg. 1:34, where "Amorites" stand as a general designation for the local Philistines).

Judges and Ruth
Arthur Lewis