

# Spinning Out of Control

## (Judges 12–16)

About one year before my family and I moved to Kenya, there was an attempted coup in that East African country. It all started when a group of military leaders captured the national radio station and began announcing that they were overthrowing the government of President Daniel Arap Moi. We have heard from our friends who were there at the time that the next few days were terrifying as that beautiful African nation temporarily plunged into anarchy. With the control of the government in doubt, there was nothing to restrain the latent wickedness in the land. Those who were strong enough took whatever they wanted from stores and homes with no fear of justice. Until the coup was put down, gunshots could be heard all over town, and no one felt safe from the nightmarish bedlam that covered the land. Being “out of control” is a terrifying condition for either a nation or an individual!

### AN OUT-OF-CONTROL PEOPLE

Jephthah, the tragic judge of 11:1–12:7, was followed by three minor judges who led Israel for a total of twenty-five years. Ibzan of Bethlehem is remembered for his thirty sons and thirty daughters (12:9). Elon the Zebulunite is remembered only for the place of his burial, Aijalon (12:12). Abdon, son of Hillel, is remembered for his “forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; . . .” (12:14). Following the brief account of these three, the Scriptures return to the woeful refrain that the

reader of Judges learns to dread: “Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, . . .” (13:1). Here we go again! This time God delivered his wicked people into the hands of the Philistines for forty years, the longest oppression recorded in Judges.

Later, when God delivered Israel from their pagan enemies, He did so by sending an angel to carry a wonderful message to a childless woman from the tribe of Dan. She was told that she would conceive and bear a son; and this son, she was informed, was to be a Nazirite from his birth. As a specially chosen servant of God, he would be forbidden to drink wine, eat anything unclean, or have his hair cut (13:3–5; see Numbers 6:1–21). His astonished mother-to-be was told that he would “begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (13:5). Time passed, and the words of the angel of God came true:

Then the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the Lord blessed him. And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol (13:24, 25).

### AN OUT-OF-CONTROL JUDGE

When he reached adulthood, Samson traveled from Zorah (his Israelite home fifteen miles west of Jerusalem) to the town of Timnah, four miles southwest of Zorah. There he saw and fell in love with a young Philistine woman. Returning to his home, he told his

parents, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife" (14:2). As we go on, let us be alert and watch for the words "see" and "want" in the story of Samson. This self-absorbed Nazirite did very little thinking, but plenty of seeing and wanting!

Samson's parents were justifiably shocked at their son's demand. "Why couldn't he have found a girl among 'our people'?" (14:3), they wondered. It made no sense to them that the one who was to deliver Israel from the Philistines would want to marry a Philistine. After all, God had made it clear that the Israelites were not to intermarry with the wicked nations they encountered in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 7:1-6). Samson was unyielding. "Get her for me, for she looks good to me," he insisted (14:3). At this point, we find inserted in the Scriptures the assurance that even in Samson's hardheadedness, God was still working out His will for Israel (14:4). Samson's brokenhearted parents eventually consented to the marriage, and the family of three went together to Timnah to make arrangements for the wedding.

They neared Timnah, and while alone, Samson was attacked by a young lion. With the power of the "Spirit of the Lord" he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. His parents did not see the spectacle, and Samson did not mention it to them. His mind was on his Philistine love. The wedding plans were finalized, and later, when Samson was returning for his wedding, he stopped to look at the lion he had killed on the earlier trip. There in the carcass of the beast was a swarm of honey bees. He scooped out some of the honey and ate it, and he took some to his parents.

At the wedding feast, which lasted for seven days, Samson was given thirty companions. He challenged them with a riddle he composed from his recent experience with the lion.

Out of the eater came something to eat,  
And out of the strong came something sweet  
(14:14).

If they could solve this riddle during the seven days of the wedding, Samson was to give each man a set of linen garments and a change of

clothes. If they were unable to answer Samson's riddle, they were to give him thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.

After three days of frustration, Samson's thirty wedding companions went to his wife and demanded that she get Samson to tell her the answer to the riddle. They threatened that if they lost the contest, they would burn her and her family to death. (So much for a wedding celebration!) After the threat made on her life, Samson's wife begged him for the answer and cried for seven days before he finally gave in to her pleas. He told her, she told them, and they gave Samson the answer to his riddle:

What is sweeter than honey?  
And what is stronger than a lion? (14:18).

Crazed with rage, he traveled twenty miles to Ashkelon, one of the five major Philistine cities. There he killed thirty Philistines, stripped them of their clothes, and gave the garments to his wedding companions. Bitter and hurt, he then went back to his father's house in Zorah, leaving behind his Philistine bride.

## **MORE TROUBLE WITH WOMEN**

After some time, Samson's anger cooled, and he returned to Timnah to claim his wife. However, in the meantime, her father had given her to one of Samson's friends as a wife. Hearing this, Samson again flew into a rage against the Philistines. He caught three hundred foxes, tied them tail to tail in pairs, placed torches between their tails, and set them loose in the Philistines' fields of standing grain (15:5). In a short time their harvest was burned, their vineyards destroyed, their livelihood taken away, and their land devastated! When they discovered that Samson, the crazy Israelite, had done all of this, they burned his bride and her father to death and set out to capture him.

Hearing that the Philistines were coming with their army, the people of Judah were terrified. They knew they were facing great peril, so three thousand men from Judah went out to the Rock of Etam, where Samson was hiding, to bring him back "dead or alive" to their Philistine overlords. Samson was not willing to fight his own people, so he negotiated an arrangement with them. They exchanged their assurance that they would not

kill him for his promise of a peaceful surrender. Samson was then bound with two new ropes and led away to the Philistines. What happened next would rival any action-thriller you could ever watch in a movie theater!

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as they met him. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it (15:14, 15).

## **SAMSON AND DELILAH**

Sometime later, Samson went to the Philistine city of Gaza. (Why couldn't he stay away from those people?) There he spent the night with a prostitute (16:1). Thinking they had Samson trapped, the people of Gaza waited to kill him when he departed the next morning. However, Samson got up and left in the middle of the night, tearing down the city gates and carrying them to the top of a hill!

Eventually, Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who was from the Valley of Sorek. The Scriptures never call her a Philistine, but it is almost certain that she was. When the Philistine rulers saw that Samson was again thinking with his hormones instead of his brain cells, they secretly went to Delilah to make her an offer. If she could find the secret of her lover's strength, they would each pay her eleven hundred shekels of silver. While it is always difficult to translate the buying power of money from the ancient world to modern times, it is at least clear that they were offering to make her one of the richest people among all the Philistines!

Apparently, Delilah had little or no inner struggle over whether or not to sell out her lover. She soon began scheming. At first she simply demanded of Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you" (16:6). When he told her that seven fresh bowstrings would make him as weak as any other man, you can guess what Delilah did. She tied him up with seven fresh bowstrings and then shouted, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:9). When he jumped up, the bowstrings snapped like pieces of string in a hot fire.

Delilah immediately slipped into the role of the victim and cried, "Behold, you have deceived me and told me lies; . . ." (16:10). Why Samson did not have a clue what she was doing is something I will never understand! When Delilah persisted with her question, Samson told her that being tied with new ropes would make him as weak as any other man. This time, you do not even have to guess; you know what Delilah did! She tied him with new ropes and again awakened him with the cry "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:12). The new ropes snapped as if they were mere threads. Again, Delilah whined that Samson was making a fool of her. Again, we marvel at Samson's naiveté!

The next time, Samson told her the secret was in his hair. If this were a game of hide-and-seek, we could say that Delilah was getting a lot "warmer" and a lot closer to being a rich woman. Samson told her that if she would weave the seven braids of his hair into the fabric on a loom and tighten it with a pin, he would be as weak as any other man. She did what he said, then awakened him with the same old shout. Samson again arose in full strength, and Delilah continued to play the role of a wounded lover. Her audacity and Samson's stupidity both reach their climax in what happened next.

Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is." And it came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death (16:15, 16).

Therefore, Samson told her everything about his strength and his hair and his special calling from God. Realizing that he had finally told her the truth, Delilah called the Philistines and told them she would deliver Samson into their hands. Lulling him to sleep in her lap, she had a man come in and shave Samson's head. (He had to have been one of history's soundest sleepers!) Then she awakened him with that worn-out shout of alarm: "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" (16:20a). Again, he jumped up, but this time things were different. As the Scriptures say in the saddest words of this story, "the Lord had departed from

him" (16:20c). Seeing that Samson's strength was gone, the Philistines captured him, gouged out his eyes, and took him to Gaza, the place where he had once torn down the city gates. There they bound him in bronze shackles and made him work like a donkey, grinding at a mill in the prison. What a tragic fall for a once-invincible judge of Israel!

### SAMSON AND PEOPLE TODAY

Samson was an out-of-control judge for an out-of-control Israel. Driven through life by his lust and rage, he was a one-man hurricane, leaving behind death and destruction everywhere he went. Samson may not appeal to us today, but we have no trouble at all recognizing him. You might say he had a very typical, modern attitude. He perfected the "I can't help myself" philosophy long before it was popularized in our day. Samson thus becomes a powerful biblical tool for diagnosing and treating the spiritual problems that are tearing out the hearts and souls of people today!

Nowhere does Samson remind us more of present times than in his almost complete lack of self-control. He would have been right at home in a culture which tells its teenagers, "Since you can't control your sexual drives, at least be safe." A *Time* magazine cover story pictured a broken wedding ring with the title below it reading, "Infidelity: It may be in our genes."<sup>1</sup> As a result of such wrong-headed values, the United States now has the highest rates of teen-age pregnancy, abortion, and out-of-wedlock childbirth in the Western world. The outlook for the future is gloomy also, because the greatest increase in sexual activity today is among those under the age of sixteen!<sup>2</sup>

### SAMSON AND JESUS

I would not call the account of Samson a hero story; I would call it a tragedy. It is a tragedy about an out-of-control judge of an out-of-control people. It is violent and reckless, and it is dangerously close to the world

<sup>1</sup>"Infidelity: It may be in our genes," *Time* (15 August 1994): Cover.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph P. Shapiro, "Teenage Sex: Just Say 'Wait,'" *U.S. News and World Report* (26 July 1993): 57.

in which we live today. We can be thankful that there is another way. The One who shows us the way is Jesus. Before He began His public ministry, Jesus entered the desert to be tempted by Satan.<sup>3</sup> After fasting for forty days, He was terribly hungry. It was then that Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread. Jesus could have taken the Samson way out and let His hunger control His behavior, but He chose instead to follow the will of God. He knew that Satan was a liar and that bread can never fill a soul, so He "just said no."<sup>4</sup> He subjected gratification of the flesh to doing the right thing. He did it again when Satan tempted Him to test God, and again when he offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" (Matthew 4:8). At every crossroad, both in the wilderness and in the rest of his life, Jesus chose what was true and right over what "just came naturally."

### CONCLUSION

Jesus and Samson make for a striking contrast. One lived for himself; the other lived for others. One demanded everything now; the other submitted to the way of the cross because of "the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2). One brought death and disaster everywhere he went; the other brought life. Which one offers the better way? Which way can lead us out of our cultural chaos and into the peace of God? It is no contest!

Samson has shown us the way of death. Jesus and His teachings show us the way of life:

2 Peter 1:5, 6

"Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness."

The only question for us is which way we will choose to follow. ■

<sup>3</sup>See Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>4</sup>"Just say no" is a slogan used in the U.S. as part of an anti-drug abuse effort.