

A Faithful God for a Faithless People: A Study of Judges
Session 5: "Samson"
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Summary of the lesson from Father Jonathan:

Samson is the last major judge whom we encounter in the book of Judges, and his story is a fitting capstone to the series of flawed and tragic heroes whom we have met along the way. Unlike those other judges, however, Samson is from the very beginning the model of a born leader. His birth is announced by an angel. He is given a special purpose in life and is endowed with incredible strength and bravery. He seems to be in every way precisely the leader that Israel needs. But Samson turns out in the end to be a disappointment. Instead of honoring his special vocation and using his strength to deliver his people, he scorns his calling and seeks nothing more than his own gratification. God remains faithful even despite Samson's failings, but these failings also teach us something important. They teach us that perhaps the kind of deliverer that we want is not at all the kind of deliverer that we need.

Samson may be the most complex character in the whole book of Judges. He is somewhat of a riddle.

Barry Webb (Australian Old Testament scholar)
The story of Samson contains riddles, and in a sense that is what the whole story is – a riddle, an enigma, like Samson himself.

Samson is unlike earlier judges. Others were unlikely heroes. Samson is different – he was born to be a leader and a deliverer. He was everything the children of Israel were hoping for. He was strong, would stand up for the underdog, and could take down their enemies.

After the book of Judges, the people demand a king. The prophet Samuel warns against it, but they insist:

1 Samuel 8:19-20
No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.

It is an understandable desire to have a strong leader – a warrior to fight your battles. But in the story of Samson we see the result of what happens when such power is divorced from wisdom and responsibility; when power is used for selfish ends.

Poet John Milton raises this question in his epic poem about Samson:

John Milton (Samson Agonistes)
*But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall
By weakest subtleties; not made to rule,
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.*

Story of Samson is the longest one in the book of Judges, so Father Jonathan is dividing it in three parts:

The Calling of Samson
The Character of Samson
The Conclusion of Samson's Story

THE CALLING OF SAMSON

At the beginning of the story, Israel was once again abandoning the ways of God. An angel of the Lord comes to a couple in the tribe of Dan. The angel tells them that they will have a child, even though they are barren.

Judges 13:5
Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Numbers chapter 6 talks about the Nazirite vow, when someone is set apart for God. This vow is for Samson's entire life. As a Nazirite, Samson cannot consume grape based alcohol, cannot cut his hair, and he cannot touch dead bodies. He has a unique calling – to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Manoah doesn't believe his wife's account of the angel at first, but then meets the angel himself. Judges 13 ends with the Spirit of God coming upon Samson and he becomes strong as he grows.

Samson either doesn't know or doesn't care about his calling. He violates the stipulations of the vow on multiple occasions (taking honey out of a dead lion carcass and picking up the fresh jawbone of a donkey.) He shows no real interest in delivering Israel from the Philistines.

By the end of the story, it seems clear that Samson knows about his vow as he interacts with Delilah. The problem is he just doesn't seem to care.

Daniel Block (Old Testament scholar)
Samson's problem with his vow is not so much that he violates it; he simply does not take it seriously. Like his strength, and the people around him, it is a toy to be played with, not a calling to be fulfilled.

THE CHARACTER OF SAMSON

The question of Samson's character is raised because of his uncaring way of relating to his vow.

St. Augustine
In order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love.

What Samson loves is clear: he loves himself. He lies to his parents (about the honey), he demands a foreign woman for his wife, he casually sleeps with a prostitute. When Samson sees something he wants, he just takes it.

Judges 14:2
I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.

His parents object to this request but Samson insists. Israelites are not supposed to marry Canaanites. Soon after, we read that he sees the dead carcass of a lion filled with honey and he just takes and eats.

Judges 16:1
Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went into her.

Also notice that when Samson uses his strength, it is not to deliver the people. It is used for personal gain or for carrying out some angry vendetta. In Judges 14:1, Samson becomes angry at the men of the village of Timnah for cheating in finding an answer to a riddle he gave them. In his anger, he goes off and he kills 30 Philistines to pay off the wager. This does nothing to deliver Israel.

In Judges 15, he becomes angry because a woman promised to him is given to another man. He burns the fields of the Philistines and then kills them when they punish the woman and her father. He kills another 1000 Philistines after they capture him.

You could say that Samson seems very happy to live with the Philistines!

Lawson Younger (Old Testament commentator)
Samson is one of the most narcissistic persons in all the Bible. Self-gratification is what drives this man. Never does he operate in anyone's interest but his own. He does not care about God's plan or any of the divine standards of either his place as an Israelite or his Nazirite status. He does not care about the will of his parents or the hearts of his 'lovers'. All are to be manipulated for his sake.

Samson's character is determined by what he loves – and what he loves is himself.

THE CONCLUSION OF SAMSON

It is no surprise that ultimately what brings Samson down is his inability to deny himself the thing that he loves – the woman named Delilah.

There is real tragedy in this part of the story. We are told Samson loves Delilah. She is the first woman in the story to be named (not even his mother is named.)

Judges 16:4

After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

Delilah does not seem to return his love. She uses and manipulates him to get what she wants – money. The Philistine leaders bribe her to betray Samson.

The end of the story for Samson:

- The strong man who normally tricks and lies to others, finds himself tricked and betrayed.
- The man governed by sight (what he sees, he takes) finds himself blinded.
- The man who does what he wants and no one can stop him is bound, imprisoned, and having to be led around.
- The man who humiliates his enemies is humiliated in return.

But Samson's story is not over yet ... The Lord's of the Philistines gather for a feast to celebrate their god Dagon. They bring Samson out to entertain.

Samson is positioned between two foundation pillars of the building. He prays to God for one last bout of strength so that he can have **one last act of revenge**. Here is his prayer:

Judges 16:28

O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.

God answers Samson's prayer. He gives him strength to push down the pillars and bring down the entire building. He kills himself and everyone else present.

In some ways, this was an act of faithfulness. Despite Samson's flawed motivation, God uses Samson just as the angel said to begin to deliver the people of Israel from the Philistines by destroying their leaders.

What can we learn from this story of Samson?

Lesson #1: Like most of the deeply flawed characters in Judges, we learn from Samson something about ourselves.

In John Milton's epic drama, a line is often spoken by the chorus as the address Samson:

"O mirror of our fickle state!"

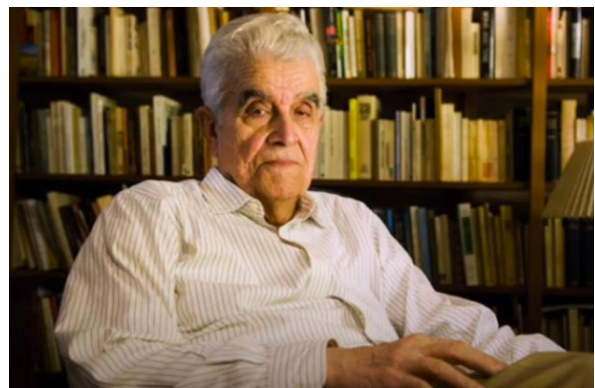
Samson is in many ways a mirror not only for the Israelites but for us as well:

- In Galatians, Paul talks about the tendency for people to live according to the flesh – to be led around by our self-indulgent desires.
- In Philippians, Paul talks about those whose stomach is their God; whose desires control what they do.
- In James, the apostle talks about how strong desires can be and the destruction to which they can carry us.

James 4:2-3

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel ... You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

The longest commandment in number of words is the 10th. Why prohibit the desire of what belongs to someone else?



French historian and philosopher René Girard spent his career thinking about this question. His answer is that "desire" (wanting what belongs to another) is the thing that inevitably leads to rivalry and to violence.

Samson is a perfect illustration of this idea and the words from James 4:2-3.

You and I may not be as strong as Samson, but our self-indulgent desires can still be our god.

The first lesson is that Samson throws up something to confront us with a truth about ourselves, about our “fickle state.”

Lesson #2: God still used Samson despite his many flaws.

Samson is not the kind of deliverer that Israel needed. The early church fathers would look for parallels to the person of Jesus. They would ask “how is Samson sort of a figure of Christ?”

But Samson seems to be the opposite of Jesus.

Samson is led by his stomach; he sees and takes. Jesus is led by the Spirit and resists temptation.

Samson responds to wrongdoing with vengeance. Jesus turns the other cheek when falsely accused and beaten. He prays for those who persecute him.

Samson uses his strength for himself. Jesus, though strong, embraces weakness for the sake of others.

This difference between Samson and Jesus is the challenge that Christ presents to us. In his lifetime, his followers wanted Jesus to be more like Samson, but he refuses to do so. He chooses the way of suffering. He tells his followers to “take up your cross and follow me.” He tells them to not embrace the way of power, but the way of weakness for the sake of love.

Which kind of deliverer do you want to be?

Samson the strong man?

The weak and humble Jesus?

This question must be answered daily.

Book of Common Prayer (from Holy Week)
*Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: **Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace ...***

What we learn in the story of Samson is that the way of strength and power, of seeing and taking, may seem attractive for a time, but it ultimately ends in destruction.

Whereas the way of the cross – if we follow Jesus – this may require suffering on our part, but this is ultimately what leads to fullness of joy.

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Judges 14:1-9

Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. 2 Then he came up and told his father and mother, “I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.” 3 But his father and mother said to him, “Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes.”

4 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.

5 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. 6 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. 7 Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes.

8 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. 9 He scraped it out into 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.