

SAMSON

The year is approximately 1200 B.C. Let's guess about two hundred years after Moses and one hundred years before Saul was anointed the first king of Israel. It has been two hundred years, then, since the children of Israel crossed the Jordan and entered the "promised land" under Joshua. Even after two hundred years, however, the position of the Israelites is precarious. There is no central unity. Each tribe inhabits its own territory with its own chieftains. Sometimes they quarrel and fight with each other instead of banding together against their common enemies. Can we imagine? Talk about stupid. Being God's chosen people and being rescued dramatically from Egypt do not automatically increase intelligence or wisdom or cooperation. So the promised purpose and plan of God often looks dangerously close to extinction. Some things never change.

The strongest and most troublesome enemies at this point in Israel's history are the Philistines. The Philistines are a seagoing people who own the coastlands and five major, stronghold cities. They are the most likely prospects to become the eventual owners and rulers of the land of Canaan. They have chariots and iron. Only, the Jews think of this land as theirs by divine decree. The stage is set for dramatic conflict. Israel seems to survive during this time of confusion and turmoil by the seemingly casual appearance of a series of "judges" – a "judge" being a warrior/chief with unusual prowess. The cause of righteousness and justice is being settled by combat rather than by courtroom. The theory is that the gods will not allow the wrong side to prosper, at least not for long. Most humans still believe this on some level, by the way (trial by prosperity or success; you cannot keep a good man down; virtue will be rewarded; honesty is the best policy; and other highly suspect truisms).

In any case, the ancient judges are warriors rather than arbitrators or legal experts. Among the judges of Israel, Samson is probably the most famous. Other judges rally the people of Israel, inspire them, lead them successfully into battle. Samson does not bother with this approach, and probably would not have been very good at "the community thing" even if he had tried. Samson is a one-man army. If any fighting needs doing, he simply does it himself. Doubtless there are many other Jewish men trying to protect the borders and keep the Philistines at bay; nevertheless, during the days of Samson, he seems to rove at will, causing constant confusion and

consternation among the Philistines and essentially keeping them out of the Judean hill country, and he seems to do it all by himself for twenty years. He is the Old Testament version of Rambo.

Samson literally means “man of the Sun”: All Leo and ego and hero, and his prowess is for real. It will take the Philistines years to stop throwing force against him and go looking for some other way to stop him. *Delilah* literally means “woman of Aquarius”: Delilah may actually love Samson, in her way; we will never know. But to Aquarius, her people and their welfare come first. Is that not what we would expect from Aquarius? So together they represent the great opposition (and attraction) of the Zodiac. Many threads, themes, lessons, memories, and reminders come forth in the story of Samson and Delilah. I hope you will not neglect to notice it, but I will not have time to get into it much today.

Samson does not represent the pinnacle of Jewish insight into the nature and will of God. He does not appear to be any kind of spiritual giant. He does not lead the people closer to love or grace or their great commission to be a light to the nations. He seems, in fact, to be a big, dumb strongman. (Not mentally disabled; just slow, simplistic, and strangely naive.) Samson has a bad temper and a passion for women. Not much material here, it would seem, for a biblical hero – a champion of God. Yet in the heritage of Judaism, it turns out that Samson’s life is important in God’s plan. God seems to use this unlikely man to preserve Israel for later and better things. And by the end of the story, it is clear that for all the low opinions we might have about Samson’s moral or spiritual character, God *does* turn out to be the real center of his life.

What can we learn from Samson? The first problem is that his story is rather unbelievable. His feats are altogether too grand. We get the distinct impression that we are reading about a Paul Bunyan or a Pecos Bill – a legend rather than a historical person. And if Samson *was* real, at least his stories must have been exaggerated into legends. To yank up and walk off with the gates of Gaza – gates built to protect a large city from an attacking army? Are you kidding?

For one man to kill a thousand men is also difficult to fathom. With a machine gun, by stealth, or against unsuspecting victims, it would still be hard to imagine. But with the jawbone of an ass, in one day, against armed enemies? The realism is poignant in that,

afterward, poor Samson was thirsty. Not wounded or tired, mind you; just thirsty. Perhaps it was a warm day.

To be sure, warfare was different in former times. One hero could make a difference in ways we find hard to imagine. There are many instances: Achilles, Paris, Ulysses, David, Asoka. You all know the story from Second Samuel about Joab's brother Abishai, chief of "the thirty" – David's mighty men? He killed three hundred men at one time. (II Samuel 23:18-19) No doubt we can allow for a little exaggeration here and there, or even a lot of it. With Samson, we still end up with a one-man army who held back the Philistine threat for twenty years. Whatever the facts, Samson was mighty. And the Philistines came to think of him as invincible, which in turn helped to *make* him invincible. No normal human force could stand before the wrath of Samson. For a short period of time, Israel's fate hung upon this reality.

Samson was not merely strong. That does not tell the whole story. No, something weird and mysterious was going on. Something would come over Samson that could not be defined or explained by a slightly superior anatomy. The story is bound to sound crazy because human language is mostly limited to superficial and surface phenomena. It is still clear that when the Israelites remembered Samson, they were not just thinking about *human* might. When Samson got angry, it was like somehow a portion of the power of the Lord was unleashed through him. And that was his sign: incredible strength. Samson was not just the champion Old Testament weight lifter. It was more like Samson embodied some inhuman power that knew no limits.

The "extra" dimension of the story is clear from the beginning. Manoah and his wife had a strange visitor. The visitor instructed them about a special child who was to be born to them. We are already into miracle, since Manoah's wife was barren. The child had a special destiny which the visitor did not reveal. But Manoah's wife was to discipline herself from that moment on. Samson was to live under special vows and keep certain disciplines – not merely from his youth, but from his conception. His mother must be as a Nazirite herself, to prepare her son even from the womb. It is a perspective only beginning to make its way back into the consciousness of our own time.

In any case, Samson grew up in the understanding and discipline of the Nazirite vows. It was built into his consciousness that he was somehow dedicated to the Lord, and that this meant certain specific disciplines were necessary for him which were not required of normal people. In our day, I suppose we would list Samson as a health nut (among other things): no intoxicants; nothing from the vine; special foods; no cutting or trimming the hair. Some folk took a Nazirite vow for a specific purpose or for a set time, but Samson was Nazirite from birth – and for life.

Naturally Samson would wonder what the Lord wanted him for. People of faith do not just dedicate themselves willy-nilly. They do not take on special disciplines because they are bored and have nothing better to do. They do not assume that discipline is a goal unto itself, or that the Lord simply likes for people to deprive themselves or do things the hard way. Dedication occurs because there is reason to believe that God has something special in mind. Dedication – a vow – is for a reason. What gift will God bestow? And for what purpose?

Clearly, if God wanted something special from Samson, then God would bestow some special ability upon Samson – some gift by which Samson could accomplish God’s purpose for him. There is no hint here of Samson or his parents bargaining with the Lord, trying to make some special deal for themselves. It was all God’s idea. Only, they knew and expected something to come of that.

Samson grew and grew. Whatever the gift, it did not seem very obvious. There was nothing special about his mind. If anything, he was a little slow. Nor did he seem to have any special contact, insight, or extra communication with God. This was no spiritual leader or prophet. He just kept on growing, and yes, he did seem to be unusually well-coordinated. Could that have been it?

We are into pure conjecture, but that’s okay. Try to feel your way into Samson’s personal awareness. Sometimes people with what we call a low IQ suffer from fewer distractions. If they lock onto an idea, sometimes they stay locked-on better than most. There was a kid in my Redlands youth group many years ago whose name was Warren. That was the only time I can remember when the kid with the lowest IQ was held in highest regard. Warren was single-minded. There was a “purity” about him. His parents had raised him with the Ten Commandments and a clear notion about right and wrong. End of discussion. That was the only thing that mattered to Warren.

You could not get him to worry very much about all the gray areas in life. Sometimes that kind of single-mindedness can become a great asset.

Samson locked onto the idea that he was strong because God wanted him strong. God had made him strong on purpose – that is, *for* a purpose. God in fact would lend him strength beyond his own. You can see what might happen if a person started thinking like that – and believing it without question.

In Samson, a sure and certain belief developed, and experience strengthened that belief. By the time Samson took on the Philistines, he knew – absolutely knew – that God was in his strength. No physical challenge that came his way would be beyond his strength because that was what God wanted him for – and *God's* strength was unlimited. As Samson came to believe it, so it came to be true.

You and I fight ourselves within our own minds all the time, wondering if we are able, plagued by doubts and fears and uncertainty. That kills three-fourths of our power and ability before we ever reach or lay a hand to our actual tasks.

By the time Samson came to those gates, the war on the inside was long over for him. He never asked if he would be able to break through; he already knew. It did not matter that it was an inhuman feat; he was not stuck with *human* resources. He was trapped by the Philistines, and God had given him power to overcome the Philistines. So stupid or faithful, he believed it. And knowing that God was in and beyond and behind all his muscle, there was no limit to his power. Out came the gates of Gaza. And Samson was just laughing. Perhaps God was laughing too. It was a strange team.

If you have ever watched or experienced hypnotism, you know that people under hypnosis can do incredible things. They turn their will over to the suggestion of the hypnotist. The inner civil war of self-doubt, fear, and uncertainty is temporarily suspended. The hypnotist says “You are cold,” and the person does not doubt or go look at the thermometer. The person simply starts shivering. There is no question about it. Under hypnosis, frail women are immensely strong, average people suddenly display photographic memories, and on and on. Without a doubt, people have immense potential when they are *without a doubt*. That is why faith is the second greatest power in the universe. Faith, at its apex, means life without a doubt. We do not

often experience it in any pure form. Like someone tried to tell us, pure faith the size of a mustard seed has enough power in it to move a mountain or transform a world. Do you remember the times when you were without a doubt, and how it felt?

My son Brennan was an excellent climber – Outward Bound’s best, in his day. In the Joshua Tree area one time, he fell. I was surprised, since he was rarely careless. But he was not hurt much – only a few scratches and bruises. I asked his friends if maybe it was not much of a fall. They said they could not believe he had survived. He had been high up on a sheer precipice, and they said he came down like a mountain goat, more running than falling, and taking advantage of every piece of terrain for slowing or gaining purchase – even though they could not see how he would be aware of any of them in time to use them. And they thought they heard him laughing. With his permission, I later ran an astrology chart for the exact time and place. After studying it, I said to him, “I don’t understand. This chart doesn’t show danger or accident; it shows spiritual tune in almost scary amounts.” He said, “That was the way it felt to me too. I was euphoric. I felt I could do anything. I have never been so confident or so capable – that’s why I fell.” Yes, but it was also why he survived the fall.

Back to Samson: In a sense, Samson was like a man under hypnosis – God’s hypnosis. And Samson was immensely strong to begin with. This link between God and Samson could not happen overnight. It took a real God, plus the real power of God, plus a genuine connection between a person and God in some way. And it required years of discipline, keeping vows, experiencing God’s presence, and learning to trust and believe in God’s power. During those years, there was very little that was beyond Samson’s physical prowess.

Then there came the day when Samson betrayed his relationship with God. For pleasure with Delilah, he traded his secret, broke his vow, and decided he could get along on his own strength. He was, after all, stronger than most men in his own right.

The story implies that Samson was tricked. Of course it does. And he was tricked a number of times before the time that counted. Let’s not be naive: People do not get themselves tricked that badly unless something in them wants to be tricked. Samson was tired of his role. He wanted to play with Delilah and let somebody else fight

the Philistines. Had he not done his part already, and more? Let somebody else carry the burden for a while. He wanted a few years to himself – some time to live a normal life and be like other people. He was tired of being a long-haired freak, cut off from the normal patterns of the life around him. Delilah was full of promises, and maybe the Philistines would leave him alone if he promised to leave them alone. His own strength would be sufficient if he could just withdraw from the special battle that God had put him into. No doubt Delilah helped to get him thinking this way.

But it is not possible to withdraw, is it? God does not make up the battles. God just tries to help us with the ones we really have. Samson only managed to withdraw from the source of power that was protecting him. When the enormity of his betrayal hit him, the power left him. (Cause and effect: Your Nazirite vows have been broken. You have allowed them to cut off your hair – the symbol of your obedience to God.) We suspect that physically Samson was as strong as ever – from our perspective. But the special power that was backing him was gone. With the vows broken, the faith went too, and the normal doubts of humankind flooded back in. Samson was still a strong man, but that was all. And that was not nearly enough.

Even if God were willing to empower Samson in that moment of crisis, Samson was unable to accept the gift. He had closed off the channel by his own disobedience. It was not just the loss of the hair. The hair only symbolized the vow, the dedication, the covenant, the link – the gift and its purpose – and the faithfulness that made the gift of power possible. The long hair meant that God was the top priority in Samson's life. When Delilah became more important than God, it was inevitable that the hair would be cut – that one way or another, the vow would be broken.

I have heard people say that the moral of Samson's story is "Never trust a woman." Well, that may be very good advice – for untrustworthy men. But that is not the point of Samson's story. When anything takes priority over God, one way or another the vows begin to crack and shatter – and then the power goes. It is ever the same in human disaster. God did not desert Samson; Samson deserted God. I wonder if any of us are ever truly able to comprehend that.

So they shaved off Samson's locks while he slept in Delilah's lap. And when Samson realized that his bond with God was broken, he became as weak as a normal man. So the Philistines were able to tie him up, gouge out his eyes, and set him to grinding at the mill in the prison. That is, he would push the beam that turned the great millstone, like an ox or a donkey would usually do. And on special feast days, the Philistines would bring the blind Samson out for public display, where they could taunt him, hit him, compliment themselves, and feel safer – because they had overcome such a great enemy.

Of course, Samson's people were suffering too. With Samson unable to protect them, they were beaten and pillaged and made poor and miserable, as in former days.

Meanwhile, back in the prison in Gaza, Samson did not say anything. There was not a lot to say. He had done it to himself: forsaken his vows; wandered farther and farther from God, until the bond itself was broken. Samson did not say anything. He just kept pushing that millstone round and round. But on the inside, Samson had gone back to God. Finally he could feel the bond growing again, just like his hair was growing again.

One day the Philistines held a great festival in Gaza, and all the lords of the five cities, with all their attendants and ladies and friends, came to the great temple of Dagon in Gaza. The place was mobbed, and naturally they wanted Samson there to be humiliated. But after he proved for a while how blind and helpless he was, they forgot about him. There was a young boy in charge of leading him about, and, with the lad's help, Samson got his hands on the main pillars that held up the temple. It occurred to no one that Samson was still a threat. Even if they had known what he was thinking, they would only have laughed.

Then Samson called upon the name of the Lord again, as he had done in former days when he was still young and true. Spirit touched muscle in a will that again had only one focus. "Purity of heart is to will one thing." (Søren Kierkegaard) And Samson brought those pillars down.

The Bible says simply, *"The dead whom he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life."*

SAMSON

So I leave you with the questions that Samson's story asks of those of us who pay attention to it – the questions that make his story worth knowing and telling and pondering:

- 1.) What disciplines do you keep in your life that symbolize your primary allegiance to God?
- 2.) What vows have you taken before God that keep you focused on what you are supposed to accomplish with your life? And if you have broken them, are you returning to them – are you keeping them again?
- 3.) What is your sign? That is, what gift of power has God granted to you through the channel of that discipline and those vows? And are you stupid enough to let some Delilah (man or woman) know the secret of your power or the source of your purpose?