

SAMSON

The year is approximately 1100 B.C. Let's guess 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. Being God's chosen people, and being rescued dramatically from Egypt, does not automatically increase intelligence or wisdom or cooperation. Isn't that chilling? The promised purpose and plan of God often looks dangerously close to extinction. (I even know some people who get to wondering about this kind of thing today. I can even go there myself on a bad day.)

The strongest and most troublesome enemies at this point are the Philistines. The Philistines come from a seagoing people. They 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. Only, the Jews think of this land as theirs by divine decree (i.e., Deuteronomy 7). 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" is 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. Most humans still believe this might be true on some level, by the way (trial by prosperity or success; you can't keep a good man down; virtue will be rewarded; etc.). In any case, the ancient judges were warriors rather than arbitrators or legal experts. Among the judges of Israel, Samson is probably the most unusual. Other judges rally the people of Israel, inspire them, lead them successfully into battle. Samson doesn't bother, and probably wouldn't have been able to do that if he had tried. Samson is a one-man army. If any fighting needs doing, he simply does it himself. Doubtless there were 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.

Samson – 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 physical force against him and go looking for some other way to stop him. Delilah – woman of Aquarius: The great opposition (and attraction). She may actually love him; we will never know. But for Aquarius, her community and its welfare come first. So many threads, themes, lessons, memories, and reminders come forth in the story of Samson and Delilah. I hope you won't neglect it, but I'm not going to get into it much further 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 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 rather 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 to God's plan. Is there anybody God cannot use if they are willing? 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, rather than about some real flesh-and-blood 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? Say what? Are you sure?!

For one man to kill a thousand men is also difficult to fathom. With a machine gun, by stealth, or against unsuspecting victims – well, maybe. 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, but thirsty. Perhaps it was a warm day.

Warfare was different in ancient times. One hero could make a difference in ways we find hard to imagine. There are many instances:

Achilles, Paris, Ulysses, David, Asoka. Read Second Samuel 23:18 (Abishai). No doubt we can allow for a little exaggeration here and there, or even a lot of exaggeration. With Samson, we still end up with a one-man army who held back the Philistine threat for twenty years. Whatever the actual 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 about twenty years, Israel's fate hung upon this reality.

Samson was not merely strong. That doesn't 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 wasn't 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. Samson's birth is clearly the pattern for Jesus' birth as we find it in the Gospel of Luke. Manoah and his wife had a strange visitor. The visitor instructed them about a special child that was to be born to them. 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 from his youth, but from his conception. His mother must be as a Nazirite herself, to prepare her son even from the womb. She must drink no wine during her pregnancy. 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 other people. In our day, I suppose we would list Samson as a health nut: 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. Samson was Nazirite from birth – and for life. (*"The body is the temple of the Lord, dedicated unto the Lord."* (I Corinthians 6:19))

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 else 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 when we think 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. There is no hint here of Samson or his parents bargaining with the Lord, or trying to make some special deal for themselves. It was all God’s idea. Only, they did expect something to come from that.

Samson grew and grew. Whatever the gift, it didn’t seem very clear or obvious. There was nothing special about Samson’s 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. But who expects God to care about that kind of gift?

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, they stay locked-on better than most. I remember a kid named Warren in my Redlands youth group, years ago. Doubtless his IQ was the lowest of any kid in the group. But his faith was the highest. He had a clearer idea about what God wanted from him and how God expected him to behave than any other member of the group. He inspired us all – not with verbal skills, but because nothing could distract him from his obedience. He was very impressive, without any notion that he was impressing anyone. 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.

In Samson, a sure and certain belief developed. 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 as he 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 before we ever reach or lay a hand to an actual task.

By the time Samson came to the gates of Gaza, the war on the inside was long over. He never asked if he would be able to break through. He already knew. It didn't matter that it was an inhuman feat. He wasn't stuck on notions about human abilities or limitations. He was trapped by the Philistines, and God had given him the power to overcome the Philistines. 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 wills 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 it – does not go looking for a thermometer to confirm it. 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 don't often experience it in any very pure form. Like someone said, 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 Joshua Tree one day, he fell. I was surprised, since he was rarely careless. But he wasn't hurt much – only a few scratches and bruises. Later I asked his friends if maybe it wasn't much of a fall. They said they couldn't 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 the fall – even though they couldn't 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 and eagerness, 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 like 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. But 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 he was tricked. Of course. And he was tricked a number of times before the time that counted. Let's not be naive: People don't 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. Hadn't he done his part, 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 isn't possible to withdraw, is it? God doesn't make up 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. (Straight “cause and effect.”) Physically he was as strong as ever. But the special power that had always infused him was gone: Gone because he believed it was gone. Gone because he no longer deserved it. Some things we cannot fake. 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 no longer able to accept the gift. He had closed off the channel by his own disobedience. It wasn't 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 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 is gone. 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, and then they gouged out his eyes and set him to grinding at the mill in their prison. That is, he would push the beam that turned the great millstone, like an ox or 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 safe – because they had overcome this 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 the former days. And none of the children could play or get presents or have any fun because everybody was so afraid and poor.

Meanwhile, back in the prison in Gaza, Samson didn't say anything. There wasn't 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 didn't 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 they had 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 proving for a while how blind and helpless he was, they forgot about him. There was a young boy in charge of leading him about; 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 once again had only one focus. "Purity of heart is to will one thing." And Samson brought those pillars down.

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

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 your discipline and your vows?