

The Cloud of Witnesses

Samson The weak willed strong man

Lesson 1: Samson's miraculous birth

Reading: Judges 13:1-25

According to the Book of Judges, the life of the people of Israel seemed to sway from one crisis to another. This was mainly due to their propensity to lead selfish, independent and godless lives.

Because the people of Israel rejected God, God allowed them to reap the consequences of being removed from under His protection. This resulted in their becoming vulnerable to their neighbours, who were jealous of them and became their enemies, seeking their destruction, enslavement or captivity.

However, God is a gracious God. He raised leaders who would lead the people in righteousness, particularly so they would turn their hearts back to the Lord.

Samson's birth was foretold during a time when the Philistines were the oppressing force. The people of Israel had turned their back on God and so, for forty years, were subjected to Philistine hostility. However, God recognised that there were some people who, nevertheless, followed His ways and worshipped Him. Manoah and his wife were two of them.

It would appear that Manoah and his wife had been longing for a child but Manoah's wife was unable to bear them any children. The nation was desperate; Manoah and his wife were desperate.

It was into this milieu that God came. God intervened, not only for Manoah and his wife, but for the nation of Israel as well. How often God uses people to achieve His plans on earth. Yes, God would save the nation but it would be through a person, a human being.

God sent His angel to Manoah's wife with some great news. The angel laid out the fact that she was barren, and then added that she would become pregnant and have a son. However, the angel's message did not stop there. He went on to give her some precise and yet, seemingly, strange directions. There were two 'conditions'.

The angel gave Manoah's wife some specific instructions on, firstly, how she would have to behave during her pregnancy and, secondly, how she would have to treat her miracle baby, her new son to be.

Whilst she was pregnant, Manoah's wife was to refrain from drinking any wine or other fermented drink and ensure that she only ate what was considered Biblically kosher. This would keep both her and her baby ceremonially and spiritually clean.

However, once her child was born and had become a teenager, she was to refrain from allowing him to shave. Her son was to conform to the rules and regulations of a Nazarite all his life. Furthermore, he would be separated out to God from the moment of his birth. Not only would Samson become a Nazarite but, more than that, God would separate him out to be the new judge for the community, who would begin to deliver the people from the Philistines.

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When Manoah heard his wife's recount of her experience with the angel, he was understandably excited but cautious. Manoah asked God to send the angel back so he could also be instructed on how to nurture the boy. The angel returned and repeated the instructions he had already given to Manoah's wife.

Manoah then proposed to give the angel a meal. However, the angel told Manoah to present his offering to God instead. When the angel ascended to Heaven in the flame of the offering, Manoah was awestruck and was initially convinced that he and his wife would die. However, his wife rightly pointed out that if God had wanted to kill them, He would not have accepted their offering.

Eventually, their son was born and she named him, Samson. God blessed Samson and the Spirit of God started stirring up his spirit in preparation of his destiny.

Samson would say to us today...

Yes, my birth was both miraculous and special. However, never forget every birth is a miracle. Only God makes babies and God made you very special too. Your job is to find out what God wants you to do so you would fulfil it.

Prayer

Father, thank You for recording Samson's birth. Thank you for reminding me that, in your eyes, I'm special too. Please help me fulfil my destiny. In Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen.

Additional Readings

- 1 Samuel 1:1-20
- 2 Kings 4:8-17
- Luke 1:3-25

Questions

1. How was Samson's birth different?
2. What was special about the rules the angel gave Samson's mother?
3. Why did Manoah think he was going to die?

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Lesson 2: Samson's marriage to a Philistine girl

Reading: Judges 14:1-20

The story of Samson's first marriage arouses many mixed emotions. To start with, there is the joy of a young man falling in love with a woman of his dreams. There was obviously a lot of passion. Samson saw her and then went home and told his Mum and Dad.

She wasn't a prostitute and Samson's intentions appeared totally honourable. He wasn't wanting to just enjoy a one-night stand or fleeting sexual experience. He was sufficiently devoted to want to take her as his lifetime partner in marriage.

Samson's parents were understandably horrified that he should shun a spouse from Israel and choose a foreigner. What made it worse was that she was a Philistine, a daughter of their enemy and a pagan god worshipper. They expressed their horror and distaste of the proposed match as vehemently as they could. Nevertheless, Samson demanded that they arrange the marriage.

The author of the Book of Judges added that Samson's parents did not understand that the Lord had actually initiated this union with the express purpose of organising Israel's ascendancy over their enemies.

We are also told that even as Samson and his mother and father journeyed on their way to the Philistine town of Timnah, a young lion sprang at them from out of the vineyards. The lion would undoubtedly have killed them if Samson hadn't killed it.

The Spirit of God came on Samson and he tore the lion limb from limb, apparently out of sight of his parents, who didn't know what had transpired. Samson just rejoined them in their journey down to Timnah where he met up with his girlfriend once more, and became even more convinced that she was the one for him.

Later, Samson noticed some wild bees swarming around the carcass of the lion that he had killed. The bees had already started making honey within it. Samson grabbed a handful for himself and then some more for his parents.

Eventually, Samson's father went and made arrangements for his marriage to the Philistine girl. Samson prepared a seven-day feast. When everyone came together, he found he had thirty Philistine men in his groom's party. Samson decided to have some fun and told the men a riddle. He then goaded them by offering an incredible prize for the winner who could come up with the correct answer before the end of the feast. The trophy was to be thirty linen garments and thirty-two changes of clothes – a very impressive prize; one well worth striving for.

Samson based the challenging riddle upon his meeting with the lion.

“Out of the eater, something to eat;
out of the strong, something sweet.”

Remember, Samson had not even told his parents this story; he had kept it completely to himself.

For three days the guys struggled to decipher the riddle without any success. However, being totally unprepared to lose face in front of their arch-enemy, they decided to resort to blackmail and threats. They secretly cornered Samson's wife and threatened to burn her, her family and their

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household, unless she revealed the answer. She, of course, knew their threats were by no means idle, but were made by ruthless fighters.

Petrified, she approached Samson in the hope of soliciting the answer without divulging her dilemma, obviously not thinking that he would protect her and her family.

Samson had no more intention of revealing the answer to the riddle to her than he had to his parents. In desperation, she resorted to emotional blackmail and dissolved herself into free-flowing cries and floods of tears. Samson could bear it no longer and gave in, thus divulging the answer.

Samson's groomsmen came with smug pride and provided the answer just in time. Samson was furious when he realised their duplicity. In a rage he went over to a nearby town, struck down thirty of the male inhabitants and gave their clothes to the delighted groomsmen. Samson stormed off home. The Philistines took Samson's wife and gave her to one of the groomsmen as his wife.

Samson would say to us today...

Beware, Satan will always attack you where you are the most vulnerable and that can often be through your spouse and/or family.

Prayer

Father, please help me to remember to always put on the whole armour of God everyday, and lead me not into temptation but deliver me from the evil one. For Your Name's sake. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Genesis 6:1-7
- Proverbs 31:10-31
- Ephesians 6:10-18

Questions

1. Where did Samson get his strength from?
2. Why did Samson set his groomsmen a riddle?
3. Why did Samson give in to his wife's hysteria?

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Lesson 3: Samson the leader of Israel

Reading: Judges 15:1-20

I often refer to this chapter at our Weekend Away on the Alpha Course – where we consider who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. I begin by challenging the people there that I look a lot like Samson. He was a lot younger, he had much longer hair and his features were Middle Eastern; however, his physical build may have been just like mine, without the glasses.

Quite naturally, I receive many bursts of laughter and mocking sniggers. Nevertheless, when we read the Biblical account, we find that Samson, far from being a BC equivalent of Sylvester Stallone, the Incredible Hulk or the Governor of California, was an enigma. If you remember, the people were always astonished at where his strength had come from. In other words, it was not obvious. I don't think he had rippling muscles, bulging biceps or a six-pack chest.

No, even the prostitute Delilah, who most probably saw Samson in a more undressed state than anyone else, still had to ask him, *"tell me the secret of your great strength."* The answer was not – his hair. No, it was the Holy Spirit who came upon him in power.

After Samson's groomsmen had cajoled his wife into finding out and revealing the answer to the riddle Samson had set them, he stormed off home in a rage, back to his parents. The locals assumed that he no longer wanted his wife and gave her to one of the groomsmen instead.

However, Samson returned for her, and when he found that she had been allowed or forced to commit adultery, he went ballistic. Somehow, after he left the family, he caught 300 foxes and tied them together by the tails. Then he made flammable torches that he attached to each pair of foxtails, set them on fire and released the foxes amongst the ripe grain harvest. The ensuing fire decimated the standing grain, the harvested sheaves, the vineyards and olive groves. It was total devastation.

When the Philistines discovered that it was Samson who had caused all the damage, they went and burned Samson's wife and father to death. On learning this, Samson went into their territory and killed many of their men in revenge.

The Philistines then marched on Judah and demanded that Samson be handed over to them so they could kill him. Since the Israelites still considered the Philistines their masters, they agreed. They put together an army of three thousand men to go and capture Samson in order to hand him over.

When they met Samson and told him what their intentions were, Samson made them promise not to kill him but to merely tie him up and hand him over. This they readily agreed to.

The Israelites bound Samson with two brand new ropes and led him towards the Philistine camp, and then retreated in a hurry. When the Philistines saw Samson, they all charged at him to take their revenge.

However, as soon as the Philistines reached Samson, the Holy Spirit came on him. The new ropes became just like charred flax and fell from his hands, and Samson was totally released. He grabbed a donkey's jawbone that happened to be lying nearby and, with it, went on to kill one thousand of the Philistines.

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Samson then cried out to God, as he was very thirsty. The Lord caused water to flow from a hole in the ground to quench his thirst.

Please note it was not Samson's imposing physique that won the battle – it was the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon him, giving him the victory over Israel's and God's enemies. As we read in Zechariah 4 – *it is not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord.*

We need to remember that when we are engaged in a battle with the enemy, the battle is not ours; it is the Lord's and He has already won the victory.

Samson would say to us today...

The Holy Spirit made all the difference. Without the power of God in my life, history would have recorded a completely different story. Allow the Holy Spirit to make a difference to and through your life. You will never regret it.

Prayer

Father, thank You for proving through Scripture that you will use anyone to accomplish great exploits for the advancement of Your Kingdom and plans. Please help me to choose to avail myself for You to use as You will, at any time. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Proverbs 1:1-7
- Romans 13:1-14
- John 11:17-44

Questions

1. Is the Holy Spirit's power available to everyone?
2. What were Samson's characteristics that qualified him to be used by the Holy Spirit?
3. What has the Holy Spirit been able to do through you?

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Lesson 4: Samson and the prostitute

Reading: Judges 16:1-21

Samson was able to use great physical strength but, unfortunately, lacked moral strength of character. He succumbed to man's basic instincts and gave in to sexual gratification.

One could be forgiven for thinking that God gave Samson a warning. Samson went to Gaza, and there saw a prostitute and decided to spend the night with her. The local inhabitants decided to kill Samson at dawn, and so closed and barred the city gates to keep Samson in. However, Samson woke in the middle of the night, left the prostitute and made for the city gates. When he found the gates shut, he just lifted them up at their foundations (including the hinges), carried them away to the top of the hill overlooking the town, and left them there, thus escaping his potential fate.

Samson did not, however, heed the warning. He continued to seek out sexual gratification and found a new source in a prostitute called Delilah, who lived in the Valley of Sorek, also in Philistine territory. He visited her regularly and eventually formed an emotional attachment with her.

The Philistine rulers were delighted and went to Delilah with a proposition. They offered her a huge ransom in silver if she discovered the source of Samson's strength.

Being used to receiving money for sexual favours (it must have seemed like all her Christmases had come at once), she diligently set about earning her extra keep.

Samson obviously interpreted Delilah's first attempt as little more than a playful tease and answered accordingly. She expressed what everyone was thinking, "*What is the secret of your great strength?*" (as it is not obvious by just looking at you...) "*How can you be tied up and subdued?*"

Samson replied, "*Tie me with seven undried bowstrings and I'll be just like everyone else!*" She did, shouted that the Philistines had arrived and he broke free in an instant.

At her next attempt, Delilah became more serious and Samson upped the stakes. "*Tie me up with unused ropes.*" Delilah obliged and the result was the same. She shouted and Samson broke free.

You can almost sense the play-acting going on. He was sexually aroused by her interest and she was enjoying the challenge. However, she decided that she would go to the next level of interrogation. Stop playing the fool with me and tell me the truth, she demanded.

Samson had no intention of revealing the secret and so fabricated yet another but more involved and plausible lie. "*Weave seven braids of my hair into a loom.*" So again, as Samson was sleeping, Delilah did as Samson had suggested. Once more she gave the warning and Samson rose up in full strength and broke the whole contraption.

This really riled Delilah and she chided Samson for his deception. Nevertheless, Samson withstood her protestations. Notice she then changed tack and said, "*How can you say you love me in one breath and yet can't confide in me in the next – what's with that?*" The goalposts had shifted slightly. Delilah seemed to have moved herself from being a prostitute to a mistress and potential wife. Samson failed to restore the status quo.

Delilah, having thought she had gained credibility, then moved into the final phase. She nagged

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and nagged and nagged Samson into a corner. Instead of seeking his sexual satisfaction elsewhere, he fell for Delilah's murderous intentions. He gave in. He told her it was all about being a Nazarite and never having shaved his head. He was wrong, but she carried out the plan. When she shouted this time that the Philistines were there, Samson tried to respond as usual but found his strength had gone. The Philistines overpowered him, took him into captivity, gouged out his eyes and set him to work grinding grain.

But Samson's strength wasn't from his hair – it was from the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit had left Samson. The saddest comment of all was that Samson did not know that the Lord had left him.

Samson would say to us today...

I blew it. I should not have allowed my emotions to over-ride my conscience. I also forgot that my strength did not belong to me, it was a gift from God to be used for extending His Kingdom, not for me to become proud or famous.

Prayer

Father, please protect me from ever thinking that the gifts You have entrusted to me are for my benefit or my glory. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
- Proverbs 7:6-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Questions

1. How do we overcome temptation?
2. Why did Samson treat Delilah as his wife?
3. What gifts of the Holy Spirit has God given you?

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Lesson 5: Samson makes his final bow

Reading: Judges 16:22-31

Samson's hair began to grow again. So began his restoration and forgiveness.

I have often wondered why Samson is mentioned in that great Hall of Fame chapter 11 of Hebrews. His character has always seemed to me to be very suspect. He spent a lot of his time and energy with prostitutes, and failed to control his emotions. Yet God chose Samson. God also chose to record his name as a hero of faith.

Sexual sin is obviously not the unforgivable sin that I was brought up to believe when I was a young man. Neither does God demand sinless character and perfection, and nor do the Gifts of the Holy Spirit denote spiritual maturity. So why should we all try so hard to be holy and righteous? Surely, I can let up a bit and have some fun...

It's interesting how those sorts of thoughts invade our minds. And yet the two don't follow. I can still have fun being holy and righteous. God invented humour as well as sex. He is a God of laughter and joy. Nevertheless, He is a God of righteousness, justice, holiness and purity.

Did Samson have 'fun' in his sexual relationships? The fact that every time he was with a prostitute the enemy tried to destroy him one way or another suggests otherwise. Delilah deliberately set out to destroy Samson for the sake of money. Her trade was sexual favours for a price, and Samson fell in headlong and paid the ultimate price. He lost his freedom, his dignity and his eyesight.

What was worse was that he lost his intimate relationship with God. The Holy Spirit left Samson and he didn't even realise it. The reality is that when we turn our back on God, He will often leave us to our own devices. As someone said, *"The Holy Spirit is a gentleman, He will not force Himself on us."* Each of us has as much of the Holy Spirit as we want.

Similarly, God's blessing is like an umbrella. Whilst we keep in step with the Lord, His umbrella of blessing protects us from the curses and attacks of the enemy. Once we go outside the umbrella of His blessing, we receive all the curses and evil intents of the enemy. That is not God being vindictive because of our disobedience; it is the natural consequence of our freewill decisions. Samson chose to divulge his secret to Delilah and the natural consequence was for him to be captured, humiliated and tortured.

Nevertheless, we saw at the beginning of our reading a token of God's faithfulness, His love and His grace – Samson's hair began to grow again. Yes, Samson had blown it big time; however, God is a God of mercy and grace, and would prove His faithfulness and provide His miraculous strength once more.

The Philistines played into Samson's hands. They held a feast and celebration to honour their god, Dagon, for giving Samson into their hands. That was abhorrent to the God of Creation – the God of Israel and Samson's God. During the celebration, someone had the great idea of making a spectacle of Samson and so he was summoned to perform before the Philistines.

However, while Samson waited for his entrance, he asked the girl who was attending to him to place his hands on the foundational pillars supporting the temple ostensibly so he could support his weight whilst he waited for the start of the performance. Once positioned appropriately, Samson prayed to the Lord to give him miraculous strength once more so he could avenge the loss of his

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eyes, adding that he wanted to die with the Philistine rulers.

God granted his request and he literally brought the house down. More Philistines were killed in that one incident than those killed during the rest of Samson's years as leader of Israel.

But please note, the strength was not in Samson's hair – it was the Holy Spirit who performed the miracle.

Yes, none of us is perfect, and the record of Samson's life is a wonderful reminder that our God is an awesome God of love, mercy and grace.

Samson would say to us today...

God is gracious, but it is not our right to challenge His grace. It is better, by far, to live in obedience to His Word and His will for our lives.

Prayer

Father, thank You that Your mercy, grace and faithfulness are never-ending and new every morning. Help me never forget or take them for granted. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Genesis 49:22-33
- 1 Kings 1:11-40
- Romans 6:1-14

Questions

1. Can we lose our salvation?
2. Can we lose the use of the gifts God has given to us?
3. Can God's grace be exhausted?