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This way forward

(NOT SO) HEROES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: SAMSON

Judges 13-16

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Last week we learned about Rahab. She was a woman with profound faults, but turned to God in faith and, at the risk of her own life, helped the Israelites take hold of the Promised Land. In the midst of her brokenness she trusted God and turned her life in a new direction. Not so much with Samson.

I will tell you from the outset of this sermon there are more questions than answers and perhaps you, like I, will leave baffled by God's action/inaction in the case of Samson's story; his whole story runs contrary to our concept of justice, of mercy, of love, of fidelity. I could not find a single, clear virtue in the whole of the Samson cycle!

To tell you the truth, it was depressing to reread it. I had remembered a noble, courageous man of God with superhuman strength which he used to defeat the enemies of God. I remember, as a child, being mesmerized by the story of him using the jawbone of an ass to slaughter 1000 men. Undone by the trickery of a beautiful woman, in one last moment of desperate faith, he gave his life to vanquish the evil Philistines! But that's not the story.

He is not a hero not at all! At least not in the traditional sense. Every act he commits is based on self-aggrandizement, sexual bravado, and petulant revenge.

Samson was given an extraordinary gift from God. He was meant to be a hero. He was meant to be the original superhero. The Philistines had been a thorn in the side of Israel for decades, defeating and humiliating them time and again. God gave him this strength to defeat them; he was to keep and protect Israel but, instead, he used his gift for his own entertainment and personal revenge.

He wreaks such havoc that his own people tie him up and give him over to the enemies!

Unlike, Rahab, Joseph, Sarah, and Jonah who are flawed characters with some redeeming qualities, Samson does not demonstrate a single one. Not one redeeming or godly act. Read it for yourself! Even his most famous act of pulling down the temple is simply to get revenge for being blinded by his enemies, but he is perfectly willing to kill 3000 people – men and women – for this purpose! This is what Samson said in Judges 16:28, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes." He could have said, "Lord God grant me strength so I may repent for my acts and defeat your enemies and save the Israelites!" He wasn't doing it for God or the Israelites. It was revenge, pure and simple.

Samson is a man whose virtues are clouded by his own **personal faults and demons**. He is like the star athlete that becomes so enamored with his own bravado that his entire life becomes a train wreck. Samson never used any godly virtues such as patience, love, or mercy in his trials. He never sought the wisdom of others who could have helped temper and moderate his raw passions.

And yet, the Bible tells us he judged Israel for 20 years. *He* was the leader of the people for that time. It was clear that God had given him this special gift.

But God is oddly silent throughout this whole story. We might expect a call story like God's encounter with Jeremiah as a boy in which God declares, "Samson, I have given you this strength that you might free my people from the Philistines." Nothing. You might think God might warn him, "Samson, only use this gift in battle. Do not tell the secret of your strength lest you spurn this gift and violate my command and die."

God never speaks. Furthermore, the narrator does not offer any evaluative judgements regarding Samson's actions for good or ill. We are left on our own to judge Samson's.

In God's story of salvation, it is ultimately about the purposes of God and not our faith. Samson keeps Israel for 20 years because God wills it and so it will be. God is sovereign over heaven and earth and, as such, the Lord's plan cannot be thwarted by humans. Samson is the Lord's appointed.

However, if Samson had been a godly man, this story could have been much different. Take the horrific incident regarding Samson's wife. He asks the people a riddle about a lion that he killed, which was filled with honey. The riddle was impossible to guess. In the end, because of his actions, 300 foxes die, olive groves, vineyards, and wheat fields are burned, his wife and father-in-law are murdered, and 30 random men are slaughtered. All of it completely unnecessary. All of it due to his low moral character.

As you can see, if Samson had simply fought the Lord's enemies in battle with his God-given strength, things would have been very different for everyone. God's intentions were fulfilled, Israel had defeated the Philistines, but rather than a story of triumph, it is a story of tragedy.

The key to understanding Samson's tragedy rests in his hair. That was the source of his power, that special gift from God and he spurned it.

Samson was a Nazirite. This was a tradition found in the book of Numbers in which people devoted their lives to God, abstained from wine, cutting one's hair, or touching a corpse. His strength was literally in his hair, but there is another layer of meaning for us all.

For each of us, our strength is found in those places in our lives we have devoted to God. When we cut them off or treat them cheaply we lose that strength.

Think about someone who is given the gift of a medical supplies salesperson. To use that gift to

honor God is to try and provide the best product that will lead to healing and wholeness for people, while making a living for herself and her family. Everyone is blessed and God's purposes are fulfilled.

But if she was like Samson, she wouldn't care about the quality of the product she was selling. She wouldn't care about the lives lost. She would simply use her abilities to sell shoddy products for maximum profit. It is the recipe for disaster and the likes of which billion-dollar-Ponzi-scheme investor Bernie Madoff demonstrated, that it is a road to ruin for everyone.

When Israel first arrived in the Promised Land, Moses reminded the people that God had blessed them "with houses full of good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant...take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

All that we have is a blessing and gift from God and God calls us to dedicate it all, in Nazirite fashion, to the Lord.

Consider Eric Liddell whose story was told in *Chariots of Fire*. Like Samson, Eric was given a gift from God – to run as fast as any human on the planet. He was born in China to deeply-devout missionary parents. He enters the Olympics but is so devoted to his faith, he refuses to run the 100-meter race. It was on Sunday. He delivers a sermon in Paris, "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." Liddell truly devoted his gift of running to God with utmost conviction and tremendous work.

He gets a second chance to run when his teammate gives him his place in the 400 meter. There is no way Liddell can do well in that race! He was training for the 100! People give him little chance to win, but one of the American runners

hands him a note offering his support. Liddell wins the Gold!!

God gives us the call and the abilities, but the shape and character we put on it is our own. Samson had extreme power but made poor choices, which ended in his death despite his power. The strength we have is the strength of character we execute each day we wake up and we implement with every single person we meet.

Samson used his gift for his own fame and pleasure. Liddell said, "I believe that God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure." May you feel pleasure in serving God. Always. Amen.