

## **SAMSON**

Judges 14:1-16:31

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This week we complete the 100-year arc that is the book of Judges. It started so well, so positively, so full of hope. It showed us how well things go when a people subject themselves to God's will and God's law. It showed us an obedient and righteous people growing and prospering.

Then those people became polluted with success, complacent and arrogant, and their complacency and arrogance led them into apostasy and idolatry and their culture began to collapse in on itself. Their fall began with civil war and the destruction of people by their own countrymen and kinsmen. When civil war didn't get them what they wanted they tried to bargain with God and make deals with providence even to the point of sacrificing their own children.

And now, finally, the culture has completely collapsed and we shall see in this final story how desperate and how miserable, how ugly, low and cruel people can be when they have chosen to absent themselves from God's presence.

The final story in the book of Judges will reflect in its outline the outline of the entire book up to this point: It will begin boldly and full of promise; it will document how, once successful, the main character flirts with and dabbles in foreign cultures and, thus, foreign religions; and it will end, as does the entire book, with betrayal, failure and destruction.

The story begins as many in the second half of the book of Judges do. The Israelites have displeased God with their behavior and God has turned them over to the separation they have sought. And in that separation they suffered.

The Philistines, having perfected the art and science of iron smelting, have created for themselves superior instruments of war – iron swords, iron shields, and iron chariots – stronger, sharper, more resilient than those of the Israelites who are still struck in the bronze age. And they have used their superior weapon technology to oppress the Israelites these past 40 years.

The difference, here, however, is that, unlike before, the Israelites no longer even know enough to ask God for help and relief as they have done in the past. They have simply folded their hands and submitted to the oppression as if there is no choice but to suffer.

If they are to be saved God will have to take the initiative, and God does take the initiative. But, we are told, because it is not sought by the people, the relief which comes will be only partial and temporary. And, because we are students of biblical history, we know that the Philistines will re-emerge as thorns in the side of the Israelites under King Saul and King David.

But right now God has a plan to give temporary relief and it begins, as do so many stories in the book of Judges with a woman.

### **THE BIRTH OF SAMSON**

We are never told her name. She is called, simply "The Wife of Manoah," and she is barren. She has given birth to no children and she wants to. Desperately.

Now, again, as students of the Bible, we realize that this is a clue that something, or should we say "someone" important is about to happen. Sarah was barren and she gave birth, in her old age, to Isaac. Rebekah was barren and she gave birth to Jacob/Israel and Esau. Rachel was barren and she gave birth to Benjamin and Joseph. Important men, it would seem, are always born to women who are, up to their birth, barren and desperate.

The wife of Manoah is so desperate that she will do anything and, when the angel appears to tell her she is going to have a son who will save his people (Sounds familiar, doesn't it?) she is willing to do anything.

If God will just give her a son, she says, she will raise him as a nazirite, just as the angel has instructed – that is, one who is consecrated or set aside for special service to the Lord. Mainly, that meant three things: The nazirite lived by fairly strict dietary laws that included abstinence from wine and, presumably, any fermented alcoholic beverage. Nazirites did not cut their hair and they were prohibited from touching anything that was unclean, especially a corpse – human or animal. Usually, the nazirite pledge was taken by an adult for a relatively short period of time – a year or, maybe two. To dedicate a child to a lifetime of nazirite discipline was not unheard of but it was very, very unusual.

If God will just give her a son, she says, she will raise him to be a nazirite for life. God does grant her wish. She gives birth to a son and names him Samson, and Samson, we can presume, will be put to use by God in some special ways because his mother was barren up to his birth and because he was a nazirite.

### **SAMSON THE RIDDLER**

The next we see of Samson, he is a young man and, to be perfectly honest, he is something of a disappointment. He is arrogant. He's bossy. He's condescending, prideful, lusty – everything a Nazirite and a special leader, consecrated for God's work, isn't supposed to be.

But he is also, physically, very strong. We are told that his strength comes from his long hair and, presumably, the lifestyle that goes with it and then we are given an example of that strength. One day he is walking from one place to

another when he is attacked by a lion and he kills the lion with his bare hands. That in doing so he has touched a corpse, a taboo for a nazirite, is left unremarked.

As if all that other stuff wasn't bad enough, he falls in love with a woman of the enemy, a foreigner, and the worst kind of foreigner of all, a Philistine. He goes to his parents and says, simply, "I want her. I must have her. Get her for me." They whine and complain and argue about it but, finally, they do as he asks and arrange for the marriage.

On the way to the wedding he passes by where he killed the lion and notices that the skeleton is still there and some bees have made a home in the skull and it is full of honey. He takes a double handful of honey, gives some to his father and they agree that it is really quite delicious. Again, the fact that the honey was created in a corpse and, thus, unclean, goes unremarked.

They arrive at the wedding feast and the party goes on and on and everyone gets a little tipsy and before long they get into a riddle contest. Samson then decides to place a bet just to make it interesting.

He looks around the room at his new father-in-law's friends and says, "I have a riddle for you and if you can guess the answer I'll give each of you a new suit of clothes. But if, after seven days, you haven't given me the answer, you must each buy me a new suit of clothes. That's thirty suits, total, for those of you keeping score at home."

They agree and he gives them the riddle: "Out of the eater, something to eat / Out of the strong something sweet. What is the answer? You have seven days to come up with the answer or...well, you know."

After three days they haven't figured it out and they are getting worried so they go to his new wife and ask her. She goes to Samson and he refuses to tell her. On the sixth day the Philistines go to the new bride and they are so worried that they aren't going to figure out the answer that they threaten to kill her and her father if she doesn't get the answer for them.

So that night she uses...uh...her womanly wiles on him and he spills the answer. He tells her about the lion and the honey and she, of course, tells the wedding guests to save her life and that of her family.

The next day Samson shows up to collect his thirty suits of clothing and the Philistines are smiling. "Not so fast there, Sammy. We think we may just have a solution to your little riddle. What "eater" could be stronger than a lion? And what is sweeter than honey?"

Samson realizes he has been betrayed and storms out, leaving his new wife with her family. To pay off the bet he kills thirty Philistines, takes their clothing and sends the suits to the Philistine wedding guests and goes back to Judah and his family.

Now comes a series of quick and increasingly violent incidents of revenge and counter revenge. After a while Samson misses his new bride and goes to her father's house to see her and reconcile. But her father says that he thought Samson's absence was a *de facto* divorce and he gave her in marriage to the best man.

Now Samson is really mad. He catches 300 foxes, we are told, and ties torches to their tails and sets them loose in the grain fields, vineyards and olive groves of the Philistines where, in their panicked running they manage to burn down most of the grain fields, vineyards and olive groves in Gaza.

To retaliate, the Philistines burn down the house of his wife and her father, killing them both. And they threaten war against the Israelites of Judah.

The Judahites come to Samson, nearly apoplectic with fear. You must give yourself up to the Philistines or they will make war on us and we can't resist them what with their iron chariots and swords and shields and all. We are afraid that we really must insist. Now, please let us tie you up and deliver you to them

Samson makes them swear that they won't, themselves, kill him, only tie him up and deliver him to the Philistines and they agree. The next morning they deliver him, tied up, to his enemies.

But as soon as the Philistines have him he breaks the bonds which tie him as though they were string, picks up the jawbone of a donkey that happens to be lying there in the desert sand and proceeds to slay a thousand Philistines in that single day. So thirsty and exhausted is he after that feat that he nearly dies but God makes a spring well up right there so he can drink and be saved.

Then, we have a twenty year intermission while Samson serves justly as one of those Judges, a tribal leader of Israel.

### **SAMSON AND THE PROSTITUTE**

Now we don't hear from Samson again for twenty years but when we do he has fallen back into his old ways. He is in Gaza again, Philistine country. (Yes, it's the same Gaza that is Gaza today – a little strip of land on the western edge of Israel nestled up to the Mediterranean Sea.) And he's there because he has taken a fancy to a little prostitute that he has seen there.

The Philistines hear that he is there and make plans to ambush him the next morning, when he leaves the prostitute's house, and kill him. But instead of waiting until morning he leaves at midnight and, seeing that an ambush had been laid for him, he uproots the gate of the city and takes it with him, setting it down in his hometown as an insult to the Philistines.

## DELILAH

Not much later, we are told that he falls in love with a woman named Delilah.

Delilah is something of a mystery to us and to biblical historians and other scholars. Her name means, simply, “flirtatious girl.”

And we don’t know where she was from. It has been argued that she was an Israelite. Others insist she was a Canaanite, and still others believe she was a Philistine. There is simply no way of knowing and, quite frankly, it doesn’t really matter.

Samson’s first wife was a Philistine as was the prostitute he slept with earlier in the story. He has already broken his nazirite vows by drinking wine at his wedding and touching the corpse of the lion and the donkey whose jawbone he converted into a weapon. He has broken his people’s cultural taboo by marrying and sleeping with foreigners, and not just any foreigners but the enemy-oppressor, the Philistines.

He has murdered thirty men and stolen their suits of clothing. He has waged private war on the Philistines for private reasons.

There is at least a sixty percent chance that Delilah is just another in the series of bad personal choices that have made up his life. And before long we discover that she is, indeed, a bad choice for him.

His first wife betrayed him because she and her family had been threatened. Delilah betrays him for money. The Philistines come to her and offer her a small fortune. Contemporary scholars put the value of the silver they held out to her at somewhere between one hundred and five hundred thousand dollars in modern terms. And she takes it.

The first night comes to him all sexy and sweet smelling.

“Samson, honey, do you love me?”

“Baby, you know I do.”

“Then tell your little Delilah: What makes you so strong?”

“Well,” he says, “the fact is that if you were to tie me up with leather thongs, bow strings that have never been allowed to dry out, I will be as weak as a child.”

So that night he goes to sleep and she ties him up with wet, leather thongs and opens the doors to the Philistines. “Samson, wake up! The Philistines are upon you.” He wakes up, breaks the thongs like they weren’t there and the Philistines sneak back out before he sees them.

The next night it goes pretty much the same only, this time, with “new ropes.” She gets mad and pouts and says that he’s just toying with her and making her look like a fool. He says, well, okay, he’s sorry and this time he’ll tell her the truth. He says, “It’s my hair.” And we all gasp but then he says, if you braid my hair I lose my strength (another lie).

So he goes to sleep, she braids his hair, calls the Philistines, he jumps up strong as ever and the Philistines beat a hasty retreat.

Now she’s mad and, as you know, “hell hath no fury as a woman scorned.” (Wm. Congreve)

“You don’t really love me. You just like to make me look stupid. I think maybe you should leave.” And cute as she is he just can’t help himself. He apologizes and spills the whole thing.

And she knows she’s got him.

He falls asleep with his head on her lap and she cuts his hair. Then she calls in the Philistines and this time he really is weak and they grab him and put out his eyes, leaving him weak, blind and alone. Now they will have their revenge. He is enslaved and treated as a beast of burden, put on the wheel with the oxen, walking in a circle all day long, pushing the mill, grinding the grain.

Sometime later the Philistines have gathered in the temple of Dagon, one of their Gods, for a festival. We are not told the total number of people in attendance but we are told that the house was so full that the overflow, some three thousand people, were on the roof, looking in through the skylight.

Generally, these festivals took several days and on one of the last days of this one the people get bored and want to ratchet up the entertainment a couple of notches. Concerned that they could have a riot on their hands, the Philistine leaders suggest that they bring out that Samson guy that caused them so much trouble, the big strong one, you remember him, the one that’s been turning the grinding wheel these past six months. Maybe he could provide some entertainment.

So they go out and get Samson and, we are told, they have forgotten that, in the ensuing months, his hair has grown back! So they drag him into the temple and he asks his guards to place him between the main pillars or columns of the temple so he can lean against them because he is so weak. They allow this one concession and place him between the main columns in and there they taunt him and humiliate him.

Then, as he stands there being humiliated he prays this prayer which is very telling, and pretty far from anything like a prayer that we would expect from a biblical hero. He says: “Okay, God, give me back my strength so I can have my revenge on these...Philistines...who blinded me.”

The positive part of this is that he has come to realize that the strength doesn’t really come from his hair but from God. The bad part is that it’s still all about Samson. “Give **me** back **my** strength so **I** can have **my** revenge...”

That's it. No "thy will be done," here. He doesn't pray, "God give me strength to do your will"

In fact, God's will doesn't factor into this prayer at all. This is about Samson, what he wants, what he needs, his personal revenge on the people who hurt him.

And because Samson's desire doesn't run contrary to God's, God allows it. God gives him back his strength for one final act of revenge and Samson pushes the pillars apart, the main pillars, the pillars that are holding up the roof and the whole temple collapses so that Samson manages to kill more Philistines in one day than he had killed in all of the other days of his life, combined.

And, of course, himself as well.

His final act is an act of suicidal personal revenge.

How far we have fallen, O Israel. How promisingly we began and how far we have fallen, O Israel.

His parents went to the site of his death, found his body, brought it back to Judah for burial, and, we are told, as a conclusion to the story, his rule as a judge in Israel was for twenty years

Thus ended the age of the judges.

### **EPILOGUE**

The final judge has killed himself and, in doing so, has brought a delicate peace while the Philistines rebuild their culture. In the meantime, the Israelites, without the Philistines to worry about, dissolve into civil war, killing each other as quickly and efficiently as they can.

Finally, they come to the realization that they have fallen as far as they can go. They have devolved into chaos, anarchy, lawlessness, and rampant apostasy. If they are ever going to become "one nation under God" they will have to be united by one strong and powerful leader, in other words, a king.

There is a prophet in the land, a man who seems to know the mind of God. His name is Samuel and they go to him. "Tell God," they say to Samuel, "That we want a king. We are a vile and evil race that cannot be trusted to do what is right unless we have a king to order and require right behavior."

Samuel says that he doesn't like this idea but he takes it to God and after some give-and-take and back-and-forth God says, "Okay, appoint a king for them."

Samuel says, "Whom should I appoint?"

God says, "Oh, I don't know. Who's that big guy over there, the one who's a head taller than anyone else?"

Samuel says, "That's Saul."

"Okay," says God. "Make him the king."

"Because he's tall?" Samuel asks.

"Sure," says God. "Why not?"

### **AMEN**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Proverbs 16:18 warns that "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." How does this apply to the story of Samson?
2. In Old Testament times people would occasionally consecrate a period of their lives to God and give one or two years to God's service. The nazirites did this and made a visible, public commitment that showed what they were doing by not cutting their hair, touching any unclean thing, or drinking alcohol. Can you think of any people or groups who live this way, today? What do you think of it?
3. Samson's mother made a promise to God in order to get what she wanted. What does Dean say is the problem with doing this? Why is it a theologically dangerous thing to do?
4. Samson is often thought of as one of the heroes of the Bible but when we look at his story we see that he was actually a tragic figure. What makes him tragic? Can you think of other tragic characters from literature and what makes them tragic? How does Samson fit in with this group? What do tragic figures have to teach us as a group?
5. Often one of the lessons from tragic figures is that God can use "even him." Do you find this lesson comforting? Why or why not?