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Samson and Delilah

Judges 16 v 1-22

Introduction

One of the questions we like to ask the kids if we're doing a general Bible knowledge kids is "who was the strongest man in the Bible?". It's an easy question to get because everyone knows about Samson and his great strength. But as we read through the story I can't help feeling that actually Samson was one of the weakest men in the Bible. Here is a man who is amazingly selfish, cares nothing about his God, shows no respect to his parents, lets his lust make decisions for him, is prideful, arrogant and vengeful. In fact we'd find it hard to name one of the ten commandments that he kept.

Now we all have weaknesses, and it's important to know where our weaknesses lie. I know that one of my weaknesses, for instance, is overconfidence. If you play Trivial Pursuit with me you'll find that I sound like I know all the answers, while I'm actually just guessing most of them. This overconfidence has been a problem at home. I can give you a list of all the plumbing tasks I've tried to take on and come a cropper, from the time when the radiator bleed valve came out, to the time I created an indoor fountain using a drill and a heating pipe.

But at least I know, and I can sometimes stop myself from causing disaster. Samson didn't seem to be aware of his weaknesses, though they were many.

We've been working our way through the book of Judges, looking at the downwards spiral of the nation of Israel, as they sinned, cried out to God, were sent a saviour and led by that judge in a period of peace before they died and the people started sinning again. But each period, and each judge, seems to be a step downwards, and a step away from God.

- Othniel - the lion of God showed true faith in delivering Israel
- Ehud - the left-hander tricked his way into the Moabite king's chamber to kill him
- Shamgar - killed 600 Philistines with just a pointy stick
- Deborah - persuaded Barak to go out and face the Canaanites
- Gideon - can't believe God can use him but defeats the Midianites with 300 men but made an idol
- Tola
- Jair
- Jephthah - defeated the Ammonites but sacrificed his own daughter
- Ibzan
- Elon
- Abdon
- Samson - and then we come to the low point of all the judges

And yet Samson had it all going for him. He was consecrated to God before he was even born, set apart as a Nazirite with his mother told not to drink wine because the child in her

womb had to keep his vows. The Spirit seems to have been with him for much of his life, giving him amazing strength and the ability to judge Israel and be a thorn in the flesh of the Philistines for 20 years.

And yet he has shown a poor character, despite everything.

Gaza Gates - v1-3

It's not hard to see what one of Samson's major weaknesses was. Every story we've read about him so far has come about because of his lust for a woman. Look at ch 14 v 1:

> *Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. [Judges 14 v 1]*

What came from this incident? He lost a bet concerning his riddle of the honey, and murdered 30 men to pay the debt. And yet we read in verse 19 that "*the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him*." God was using him even in his weakness.

Chapter 15 starts in a similar way:

> *Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. [Judges 15 v 1]*

What happened this time. When he was denied access to the woman, he threw a tantrum and burned the Philistines' crops and slaughtered some of them. When they came against him he killed a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jaw-bone. And again in verse 14 "*The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him*". Once more God uses him to rescue his people even in Samson's selfish rage.

In a moment we're going to start the story of Delilah with "*Some time later, he fell in love with a women*", and this passage starts "*One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute*". Are you starting to see a pattern here? He gets himself in trouble again, in the city of his enemies, surrounded and enclosed with the gates locked.

And again God protects and empowers his chosen servant. It doesn't mention that the Spirit came upon him here, but it doesn't have to. He rips the city gates out of the ground and walks with them on his back up the hill to Hebron.

Now, I've always pictured this as a slope outside the town, maybe a few hundred yards, which would have been impressive enough. But I looked at a map the other day only to discover that Hebron is 37 miles from Gaza. And it's uphill all the way! Here is not a man to contend with, but a God who is mighty, and uses the weakest among his own to carry out his will.

Delilah - v4-22

And so to the main part of our chapter. Samson once again becomes besotted with a woman. We don't know if Delilah was Philistine or a Jew who was tempted by riches, but we can see how desperate the Philistines are to defeat him, as they offer her a fortune to discover the secret of his strength. And so we have this pantomime of Delilah asking Samson for his secret, tying him up, calling the Philistines and God freeing him, over and over again.

Perhaps we wonder why Samson kept falling for the same trick. But it's really just a microcosm of the whole book, isn't it?

- We've seen a series of cycles as Israel sins, is occupied, calls out to God and is then saved by a judge, who gives them peace until he dies, after which they sin again.
- We've seen a series of calamities in Samson's life as he is attracted by a woman, gets himself in trouble, God gives him great strength and he wreaks havoc among the Philistines.
- And now we see a series of questioning by Delilah, Samson making up a reason for his strength, going for a nap, being bound up, the Philistines running in and Samson breaking free.

Was is stupidity? Pride? Over confidence in his own ability? It's easy to judge him, isn't it, and yet we fall into the same sinful traps ourselves, again and again. And each time God graciously picks us up.

But this was to be the last time Samson gave a reason for his strength. The cycle is about to be broken. This was to be the last woman he gazed upon with lust. And this was going to be the last judge God was going to send to save his people.

Samson here is a picture of Israel.

- He says that new bowstrings will bind him, but it wasn't in military strength that Israel was different from the other nations.
- He says that new ropes will hold him, but it wasn't in agricultural strength that Israel was different from their neighbours.
- He says that weaving his hair will trap him, but it wasn't their industrial strength that made Israel different.
- What made Israel different was what made Samson different - a covenant with God. With the 4th go around of this pattern, Samson breaks that covenant. With the 12th go around of their cycle, Israel breaks their covenant. God had said that as long as they followed him he would bless them. Remember what Greig pointed out was the difference this time round when he introduced Samson a few weeks ago? They didn't cry out to the Lord. They had abandoned him and so he abandoned them. The next few chapters of Judges are going to be pretty grim.

And God had abandoned Samson. All those times we read that the Spirit had come upon him, but look at verse 20:

But he did not know that the Lord had left him. [Judges 16 v 20]

What was this covenant that Samson have. We learned about it right at the start of his story. Remember an angel appeared to his mother. She was going to give birth to a son and he was going to be a Nazirite from before his birth. Let's go back to Numbers chapter 6 to find out what that means:

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the Lord as a Nazirite, they must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. They must not drink grape juice or

eat grapes or raisins. As long as they remain under their Nazirite vow, they must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.

"'During the entire period of their Nazirite vow, no razor may be used on their head. They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the Lord is over; they must let their hair grow long.

"'Throughout the period of their dedication to the Lord, the Nazirite must not go near a dead body. [Numbers 6 v 1-6]

So this was something that a Jew could voluntarily do: dedicate himself to God for a certain period, during which he would abstain from wine (or any grape products), not cut his hair and not touch a dead body. Samson was a bit different because he was made a Nazirite for life, but he was supposed to keep these three commands. So much so that his mother wasn't to drink wine during her pregnancy.

Did Samson break his vows? Well there is varied opinion on that, so let me present the cases for and against and you can decide for yourself.

Case for the Prosecution

Samson was not supposed to touch a dead body. Well he killed a lot of people but you could say that he touched them before they were dead. But he did reach into the lion's carcass when he took out some honey, didn't he? And he did use the jawbone of a donkey to fight the Philistines. That sure looks like touching a dead body.

He also wasn't supposed to drink wine, or eat grapes or raisins. Yet he took part in parties with the Philistines where surely wine was drunk. And when he went down to Timnah in chapter 14 he was going into an area of vineyards. Surely he ate some of the grapes while he was there.

And the final straw was his hair. Samson had grown his hair long, but when he revealed this secret to Delilah she called on someone to shave it off. The third vow was broken.

Case for the Defence

On the other hand, it's not as cut and dried as that.

Samson did touch a dead lion and a dead donkey, but the vow meant that he wouldn't touch the dead body of a person. We don't have a record of him doing this.

We also don't have a record of him eating grapes or drinking wine. He was certainly at a feast but that doesn't necessarily mean he joined in drinking the wine.

He did have his hair cut off though. So maybe breaking part of the covenant meant he'd broken it all, as James tells us about the commandments.

The Verdict

What do you think? Either way, it's clear that the Nazirite covenant had been broken by Samson, and the result was that the Spirit of God left him. God had given hm his strength and without the Spirit he was just "*as weak as any other man.*"

The same was true of the nation of Israel. They had left the ways of God and gone down the road of idolatry. They had broken their covenant with God and so had lost his help, and become as weak as any other nation.

What a terrible state to be in. Was there any hope for Israel, and any hope for Samson? Could there be redemption? Well there are hints for Israel later on in the book. And there is a hint at the end of our passage for Samson:

Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. [Judges 16 v 21-22]

As his hair began to be restored, could his relationship with God also be restored? We'll find out next week.

The Spirit

Our relationship with God is central to our walk with God if we are Christians. And central to that relationship is the covenant that binds us together. Samson had a Nazirite covenant, which only lasted as long as he kept his vows. We have a better covenant - the Bible calls it the new covenant, and Jesus talked about it at the last supper, before he went to the cross. He said "*this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*".

Like all covenants it is an agreement between two parties. But unlike the Nazirite covenant, or the covenant with the Jews, the cost was all on one side. Jesus paid that price as he went to the cross, and now that it has been paid, nothing can break it. If you belong to Jesus you can never be lost.

As part of the covenant with Samson God's Spirit periodically empowered him. We read that "*the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him*." In fact all through Judges there have been times when the Spirit came upon people temporarily. However in the new covenant the Spirit indwells believers. He comes and he stays, to comfort, strengthen and guide. It is a better covenant we have.

Of course we still stray. We all have our weaknesses and we let sin in at times. But Jesus has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. As the title of our series says: God is faithful, even when his people are unfaithful.