

Heroes of the Faith - Samson

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Judges 16:4-21

One of the most famous – or rather, infamous - heroes of the faith was a fellow by the name of Samson. You may recall that he possessed super-human strength – a kind of Israeli Tarzan. He started out well – the Spirit was with him, at least in the beginning. But I am sorry to say he turned into something of a bad apple and his story is essentially one of tragedy and failure. I believe we can learn something from his life, if only what not to be and what not to do.

Samson's story is found in Judges, chapters 13-16. By this time, Israel had entered the promised land of Canaan and the loose confederation of tribes that was Israel constantly had to contend with various enemies -- the Philistines in particular; they were the most powerful in the land. Since these were the days before kings, God would from time to time raise up specially gifted people known as "judges" (essentially military leaders) who would rally the people and lead them to victory. One such "judge" or leader was Samson. (You remember that Gideon was also a judge.)

Though I have already said that Samson was something of a failure, don't get me wrong. Samson had a lot going for him. He was blessed with unusual gifts and wonderful abilities. He was strong, as I have mentioned, and courageous and energetic. He was endowed with intelligence and natural cunning. He was quite dashing and could be a real charmer. He was apparently very popular with women. In many ways he was a very attractive and likeable human being.

His exploits were the kind that make for great drama and entertainment. If you want some good beach reading, read Judges, Chapters 13-16.

Samson was a pretty amazing guy:

For example, there was the time when Samson sought revenge against the Philistines. Samson went out and singlehandedly caught three hundred wild foxes, tied them in pairs, put flaming torches in their tails and turned them loose in the Philistine's grain fields, burning down their crops. (By the way, this is the first reference in history to "taillights!")

And then there was the time when Samson was in the town of Gaza and the Philistines locked the gates of the city one night to trap him. Samson responded by uprooting the gates, posts and all, carrying them twenty miles, and depositing them on a hillside. It was reported that he killed a lion with his bare hands and killed a thousand enemy warriors with nothing more than the jawbone of a donkey.

Samson may have been able to subdue his enemies for a time, but as I say his story is tragic really, because Samson could have been so much more than he turned out to be. You see, Samson was magnificently endowed by God to be a great leader of his people in a moment of crisis. Yet, he never lived up to his extraordinary potential. He spent his days as a silly prankster and as a promiscuous playboy.

So what happened? How could someone who was destined to be such a winner turn out to be such a loser? How did he go from hero to zero? In a word, he forgot who he was and whose he was.

You see, from birth Samson had been set apart for special service to God as a Nazirite. A Nazirite was someone who vowed to be totally dedicated to God, and that vow could last for a lifetime or for only a limited period. As an outward sign of that commitment, such a person would agree to abstain from all alcohol and any ceremonially unclean food, and they also could not allow a man-made razor to cut the hair.

As a Nazirite, Samson was set apart to live a life for God, much like a monk is set apart through a vow. The tragedy lies in the fact that Samson ignored his vow. He attended drinking feasts, touched the carcass of a dead lion -- which was ceremonially unclean. To top it all off, he got a really bad haircut. It seems his commitment to God just didn't seem to matter. He was no longer living a holy life.

Listen to the story as I read it from Judges 16, beginning at verse 4. Its one of the great classic stories of the Bible:

Jdg 16:4 Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah.

Jdg 16:5 The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."

Jdg 16:6 So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

Jdg 16:7 Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."

Jdg 16:8 Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them.

Jdg 16:9 With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the thongs as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

Jdg 16:10 Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied."

Jdg 16:11 He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man."

Jdg 16:12 So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

Jdg 16:13 Delilah then said to Samson, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied."

He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric ^L on the loom^L and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric ^{Jdg 16:14} and tightened it with the pin.

Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

^{Jdg 16:15} Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength."

^{Jdg 16:16} With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

^{Jdg 16:17} So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

^{Jdg 16:18} When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands.

^{Jdg 16:19} Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

^{Jdg 16:20} Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"

He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

^{Jdg 16:21} 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 in the prison.

In Delilah, Samson met his match.

I like Fredrick Buechner's take on her, writing rather cynically:

She knew from the start that all she had to do to ruin Samson was cut off his gorgeous mop. It wasn't for nothing that she'd lain in bed watching him brush it in the mirror like a girl, the self-conscious way he tossed it out of his eyes on the dance floor, the silk bandana he tied it back with when he went gunning for Philistines. It was only to give them a few more days together that she pretended to swallow his clumsy fibs about how the way to get the better of him was with new rope, bowstrings and so on.

But Philistine Headquarters got tough with her finally, so one night when he was asleep with his head on her lap, she slipped out her scissors, and by the time she was through with him, he looked like Mr. Clean. Even the Philistine goon squad had some qualms about jumping a man who was crying like a baby when they came in to get him, and after the look she saw him give his reflection in the dresser mirror, as they dragged him out, she had the feeling that it was almost a relief to him when they put out his eyes.

[Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, p 26]

Samson, in love with himself and drunk with his own power, turned his back on God. He ignored his calling. He became weak. He chased women, played jokes, grew self-centered and selfish, and essentially self-destructed. By the time of his haircut, the Spirit has already abandoned him. What a waste!

Someone has said: *"Human beings, by sin, can waste themselves, which is to waste that which on earth is most like God. This is humanity's greatest tragedy, God's heaviest grief."* Samson must have brought God lots of grief.

The Philistines had put out both his eyes and made him do the work of an animal amid taunts and jeers. Finally one day, after he had been paraded around in ridicule at one of their gatherings, he asked to be taken to the place where the pillars that held up the roof were located. There he prayed one last prayer -- a prayer of anger and revenge: *"Please God, restore my strength one more time, that I may let them have it."* He then proceeded to bring down the house (literally), killing himself and a bunch of Philistines with him.

What a tragedy! He had such promise and potential to be used by God. He had such wonderful gifts. He could have accomplished so much for his people. He could have been an effective spiritual leader - becoming another Abraham or Moses. Instead he essentially threw himself away. He ignored God. His haircut symbolized his loss of identity; no longer set apart for God, he grew weak and ineffectual and self-destructive. It's the tragedy of great potential unfulfilled!

It's an old, old story that has been repeated again and again down through history. I think of another biblical character (to name just one) – King Solomon. He began his rule with such promise, displaying amazing wisdom and judgment. But then power went to his head and he gave himself over to wine and women and money – ignoring the God of his fathers. Great potential unfulfilled.

It has happened to many a leader, to many a person since, who started out with noble motivations and good intentions and lost his or her way.

Linus, of Peanuts fame, says, *"Everyone's so upset because I didn't make the honor roll... my mother's upset, my father's upset, my teacher's upset, the principal's upset... Good grief! They all say the same thing... They're disappointed because I have such potential."* Then he cries out, *"There's no heavier burden than a great potential!"*

It's true, isn't it? One of the saddest things is to have had great potential and never to have realized it.

Someone has said:

*"What you are is God's gift to you....
What you become is your gift to God...."*

The question is, what are you and I becoming?

Like Samson, you and I have been set apart for God. That's what our baptism signifies. We belong to God. God has created you and me, and has endowed us with many wonderful gifts, and has in mind for us to do great things for him. But unless we abide in him, we can do nothing. Day by day you and I must remember who we are and whose we are and what God is calling us to be and do.

We constantly have to ask ourselves in times of prayer and reflection: *"Who am I living for?" "Am I living for God or for myself?" "Is my lifestyle consistent with my Christian identity?" "Can others tell, by the very quality of my life, that I belong to Christ?"*

As Peter reminds us: *"As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy -- that is set apart -- so be holy in all you do, for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy."*

Samson's life is tragic and ended in failure. Admittedly, though, strange as it may seem, Samson's name appears in Hebrews 11 as one of Israel's heroes of faith. It seems God can use everyone, even someone as flawed as Samson. Everyone has a checkered history when it comes to following God. Samson no doubt did some good along the way; he wasn't a total failure. But just think what Samson could have become had he stayed true to his God and to his calling! Will we learn from his example?

*"What you are is God's gift to you....
What you become is your gift to God...."*

May we remember who we are and whose we are, so that we may become all that we were created to be. Amen!