

Samson, the Lion, and the Riddle

Judges 14

There are few Bible characters as famous as Samson. Did you know you can go on Amazon.com right now and order a Samson action figure? I checked it out. It's from the Almighty Heroes Action Figure set. The product description says, "*Samson with staff and jawbone. Poseable figure includes accessories and a fully illustrated Almighty Heroes Storybook!*" I looked further down the page and found the customer reviews. One said,

It's very refreshing to find a series of toys that represent values we believe in. This action figure is well built and includes play accessories. This is the biblical character Samson. Samson knew all his power came from God. He praised God and said, "Thank you Lord, for giving strength to do great things in life. You are a loving God and I will do what you ask"

And I thought, really? Has this person ever read the story of Samson in the Bible? The Lord did give Samson strength and Samson certainly did some great things in life, but I am not convinced that this deliverer in the book of Judges truly represents the values we believe in.

Oh, how this judge would fall short. Though he is a man of faith and maybe one of the best men of his times, his character is more reflective of just how bad these times are. Because although he was a man of faith, he was a man of incredible folly. In chapter 13 we saw such a bright, promised beginning with Samson the promised deliverer. But as it turns out in Samson's story, God would not deliver Israel from their enemies though the integrity and obedience of Samson, but in spite of his lustful passions and his compromise.

Samson was the most gifted, the most powerful, and the most feared judge and warrior that Israel ever had, but he failed to claim his spiritual heritage and to give God his best, squandering much of what he had. He lived a life of decadence, excess and indulgence. In private and public, he was promiscuous, vulgar and vengeful. He was the master of men but the slave of women. Samson the judge was an undefeated challenger with Philistine men but a pushover with their women. He had robust physical strength but fatal moral weaknesses.

The lessons we learn is not what a hero Samson is, teach your kids to be like him. The lesson we learn is what a hero God is! Samson was destined to be used by God but it seems everything that motivates him has nothing to do with the Lord and everything to do with Samson: his pride, his lust, his anger, his revenge. Yet God seems to use him anyway. God uses Samson despite himself. God overrules Samson's desires in order to accomplish His will.

Listen as I read Judges 14:1-4,

1 Now Samson went down to Timnah, and saw a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines.

2 So he went up and told his father and mother, saying, "I have seen a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife."

3 Then his father and mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" And Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she pleases me well."

4 But his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord--that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

Let's Pray:

So on this chapter we have first of all:

1. Samson's Desire for a Philistine Woman (14:1-4)

Samson's first error - he went to Timnah which was on the fringes between Judah and Philistia. He saw something that enticed him and gave into the lust for this woman of the world. How often do we look into the world just out curiosity--into things we know aren't right but we just want to check it out. Temptation arrests us and as we give in, those temptations pull us further and further in.

Here's the second problem: upon returning from gazing into the world and lusting after it, he rejected godly counsel from his parents. Have you ever done that? Our minds start to become set on doing those things we know are wrong but must justify it to ourselves, so we reject those around us who tell us "don't do it!"

Then we come to that strange line in verse 4, **"But his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord--that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines."** Now reading this you could draw the conclusion that God directed Samson to lust after a Philistine woman and to marry her as a way to destroy the Philistines.

There's a huge problem with that. Did God want Samson to lust after a Philistine? No! God will never lead us to sin in order to do His will. He may accomplish His will in spite of our sin, but that does not give us an excuse. We cannot justify our actions by saying to ourselves: "I know I shouldn't be dating an unbeliever, but it will give me an opportunity to win him to Christ!" Or, "I know I shouldn't cheat on my taxes. But I'll tithe on that extra. That'll make it all right."

God is not impressed by our ability to rationalize our compromise. It is still sin. And it hinders our fellowship with the Lord.

At the end of this message I want to come back to verse 4, that's the key to understanding what God is doing here.

Exodus 34:12 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3 make it crystal clear that the Israelites were not to intermarry with the nations around them in Canaan. Samson was not obeying God by seeking to marry a Philistine. He was only out to please himself. Notice the phrase at the end of verse 3, **"Get her for me, for she pleases me well."** Literally that reads, "She is right in my eyes."

Verse 7 repeats that phrase for emphasis, "she was right in his eyes." It's the same terminology Judges 17 and 21 use to describe the whole nation of God's people during the time of the judges, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** Samson was being motivated by his eyes, by his desire for this woman.

Understand, what is being portrayed in this text is compromise. Samson is compromising his Israelite heritage and his Nazarite vow.

Now, that being said, God can easily overrule our desires in order to accomplish His will, and that's what happens in Samson's life. You don't want to be in that position because you will get no reward out of it. Listen to what Paul says about our service to God in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15,

11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.

15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

I don't want to stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10) only to have Him say "You lived only for yourself. You built with wood, hay, and straw. I used you, but you really were not faithful to Me. How much more we could have done together."

Next we see,

2. The Wedding Arrangement and the Lion Episode (14:5-9)

5 So Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came to the vineyards of Timnah. Now to his surprise, a young lion came roaring against him.

6 And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

7 Then he went down and talked with the woman; and she pleased Samson well.

8 After some time, when he returned to get her, he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. And behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the carcass of the lion.

9 He took some of it in his hands and went along, eating. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they also ate. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion.

He apparently left his parents for a while on the trip (not a good idea while traveling). I have a question, though. What was Samson doing walking through a vineyard when he was under a lifelong Nazirite vow against having anything to do with grapes or their byproducts? See the progression away from honoring God? Our disregard for God's character leads to our departure from His character. Are we fooling around with sin, seeing how far we can get without getting hurt?

It was there that the lion attacked Samson. In Sunday school stories we see this used as a way to tell of Samson's great strength. And boy was he strong. I wonder if he knew

just how strong he was until that lion attacked? He tore it apart with his bare hands. God had a purpose for Samson, and no enemy was going to thwart that purpose. Only Samson could do that.

So the wedding deal is done, and sometime later Samson returns. Remember that a Nazirite was not to touch a dead body. But, Samson touches the carcass of the dead lion in order to get out honey.

3. The Wedding Feast and the Riddle (14:10-14)

- 10 So his father went down to the woman. And Samson gave a feast there, for young men used to do so.**
- 11 And it happened, when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him.**
- 12 Then Samson said to them, "Let me pose a riddle to you. If you can correctly solve and explain it to me within the seven days of the feast, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing.**
- 13 But if you cannot explain it to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing." And they said to him, "Pose your riddle, that we may hear it."**
- 14 So he said to them: "Out of the eater came something to eat, And out of the strong came something sweet." Now for three days they could not explain the riddle.**

When it says Samson "gave a feast" it was not sparkling apple cider and Ritz crackers we're talking about. There would have been the drinking of wine and fermented drink a plenty. We are not told if Samson breaks his Nazirite vow by partaking or not.

So now Samson loses self-control over his mouth. He wants to gloat, apparently, over his victory with the lion, though it points to his sin, not obedience to the Lord. So he makes this bet with the men at the feast. Thirty changes of clothing was a huge amount and so the Philistines will do anything not to have to pay it.

4. Plowing with Samson's Heifer (14:15-18)

- 15 But it came to pass on the seventh day that they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband, that he may explain the riddle to us, or else we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us in order to take what is ours? Is that not so?"**
- 16 Then Samson's wife wept on him, and said, "You only hate me! You do not love me! You have posed a riddle to the sons of my people, but you have not explained it to me." And he said to her, "Look, I have not explained it to my father or my mother; so should I explain it to you?"**
- 17 Now she had wept on him the seven days while their feast lasted. And it happened on the seventh day that he told her, because she pressed him so much. Then she explained the riddle to the sons of her people.**
- 18 So the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down: "What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, You would not have solved my riddle!"**

So here is where Samson reaps from sowing to his flesh and the world. He's given himself over to lusting after this woman so she has a real hold on him. Samson probably thought he was being pretty clever. When it comes to trying to handle sin we may think we have it all together but at some point our deeds will catch up to and overcome us. He's basically making a joke out of his sin!

The Philistines are going to kill the woman, so she gets the riddle out of Samson. He tells them that the only way they could have found out was from his wife ("plowed with my heifer").

5. Samson Pays the Bet by Killing Philistines (14:19-20)

19 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men, took their apparel, and gave the changes of clothing to those who had explained the riddle. So his anger was aroused, and he went back up to his father's house.

20 And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

The Spirit of God comes upon Samson and he gets the changes of clothes he owes by killing 30 Philistine men. Samson is then overcome by anger. He leaves the scene and loses the wife he lusted after. You know, sin looks so great when it's tempting us. But in reality it is sweet in the mouth and bitter in the stomach.

Lest you think this is all just the sin of Samson and not the sovereignty of the Lord, verse 19 tells us the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily as he killed these 30 Philistines.

What a story! What a rough beginning! Samson is somewhat of a confusing character isn't he? To see him compromising by going after a Philistine wife and hanging out with the enemy—then to see the Spirit of the Lord come upon him and do powerful things. It makes us wonder what God is up to.

I'm convinced that the Lord intended Samson to be an object lesson for everyone who would read his story and to anyone in his generation who would look clearly at him. The whole nation's character was distilled to a single person in Samson; he was living out the spiritual insensitivity of the entire nation around him. The fact that God would choose this man to be their leader was saying something about the people: that although they were protected by the power of God who was faithful to a faithless people, they did not truly love righteousness. God was teaching them to see the compromise in themselves by seeing it in Samson.

The secret of this chapter, the riddle of this chapter, is not the wit and wisdom of Samson, nor his awesome power. It is the strength and sovereignty of God at work in spite of Samson's compromise.

In this dark time in Israel's history, and in the story of Samson, a very disobedient and compromised vessel, we find that line in verse 4, **"But his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord--that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel."** The Lord was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. The Lord wanted to deliver His people, even during this dark time and through this compromising judge.

Do you understand that our God is sovereign over your own disobedience? God is sovereign over every dark episode of human history. God is in control, even when His

servant is out of control. God is working behind the scenes. Samson is God's chosen deliverer at this time and God will work through Samson to begin to deliver Israel from their enemies. God will do it through this imperfect vessel to show that He is sovereign, He is in control, He is the rightful ruler and king of Israel. He is on the throne. And ultimately He is the one who will Himself be the Savior of His people, because as promised in chapter 13, Samson is only the beginning.

We may think about all that Samson might have been if he had been holy and obedient. But God is not hindered by his imperfect servant. We must never mistake usefulness with faithfulness. Samson will be used mightily by God to begin the deliverance from the Philistine enemy. But usefulness does not always equal faithfulness. God used Samson in spite of his compromise and disobedience.

But what we don't see in Samson is what could have been done. What victories could have been won had Samson been faithful to God instead of driven by his passions. Too many times we do the same as Christians. God has blessed us and we begin to think that His strength and presence in our lives belongs to us and so we can just go about doing anything we want and He'll still work through us the same.

While God may still use you, you will hamper what He wants to do in you. It doesn't mean you hamper God's overall plan, only your part in it.

It might be easy to look at people's successes and blessings and to conclude that God is pleased with them. But just because someone is greatly used by God does not mean that God is greatly pleased with them. They may be living in compromise and sin. God is able to use people to fulfill His plans and He is not hindered by our compromise. Now be careful—the lesson to take away from this is not, "I can do whatever I please because God will ultimately accomplish His will anyway."

If you are not being faithful to God, He knows this. Your compromise will not hinder Him in making progress in His plans, but it will deter you from what God calls you to, which is not to be useful—He calls you to be faithful.

If God can use Samson, compromised Samson, how much greater might God use you if you will be faithful. God uses imperfect people, but it is not His desire that we should stay that way. God has called us, as believers, the faithful in Christ Jesus, to love Him, and to show that love by obeying Him.