

The Enigma of Samson

Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union as "...a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma." When applied to a person, the word "enigma" means "a person of puzzling or contradictory character." It's interesting that every Sunday school child has heard of Samson but next to none of them have heard of the object of our study last week, Jephthah. The two men are polar opposites. Jephthah, while he did make one enormously dumb decision regarding a vow, otherwise showed himself to be a natural-born leader of extremely high character and tremendous spiritual maturity. Samson had none of those qualities. So, why do we hold him up as a hero for our children? I have no idea because he was a confused, two-faced, childish boy masquerading as a man. So, if you've always loved Samson as a Bible hero, this could be a rough day for you. Even so, there are valuable lessons to be learned from this man's story. We begin by examining...

I. Samson's Call from God.

God knows what men and women are meant to do with their lives because He created us and He created us with a purpose in mind. We catch a glimpse of the purpose for men in particular in Samson's call from God. The angel of the LORD appeared to Samson's mamma, who was childless and said:

You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. (Judges 13:3)

What a gracious thing for God to do for this woman. Then He said:

Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines. (Judges 13:4, 5)

In these two verses we see Samson's call from God. It has three parts. He has:

- A home to honor
- A God to serve
- A nation to protect

Do you see it? The angel tells this woman that she will have a son. We are not given her name but she is an Israelite, from the tribe of Dan. As an Israelite, she will know to teach her son to "honor his mother and his father." It's the fifth commandment and the first with a promise, "that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." The angel is giving Samson a home to honor.

The second part of his call is that he will have a God to serve. The angel tells Samson's mother that her boy will become a Nazirite. What's a Nazirite? A Nazirite is an Israelite who takes a vow, usually for a certain period of time, to dedicate himself to fulfill a specific assignment from God. To fulfill his vow, he needed to obey three things: not cut his hair; not even go near wine and not touch a dead body. If he

did any of those things, he had to go through a purification ritual and start his vow-fulfillment all over again.

Which leads us to the third portion of Samson's call: a nation to protect. God is calling Samson to deliver Israel from the oppressive rule of the Philistines.

So, this is Samson's call from God - A Home to Honor, A God to Serve, A Nation to Protect. I believe this fits right in with the call every man on earth is given by God. Many men know they're called to something bigger than what they're currently spending their time doing, but they can't put their finger on it. Some men make a lot of money in some very sterile, safe, office cubicle, but they're not satisfied. Why not? Because it doesn't match the desire God has placed in their hearts!

In his book, *Wild at Heart*, writer John Eldridge asks:

Can a man live all his days to keep his fingernails clean and trim? Is that what a boy dreams of? Society can't make up its mind about men. Having spent the last thirty years redefining masculinity into something more sensitive, safe, manageable and well, feminine, it now berates men for not being men.

"Where are all the real men?" is regular fare for talk shows and new books.

"You asked them to be women!" I want to say. The result is a gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world.

...If a man is ever to find out who he is and what he's here for, he's got to take that journey for himself. He's got to get his heart back. ⁱ

And what is it that drives the heart of a real man? Eldridge says it's three things that also drive the heart of God.

- A battle to fight
- A beauty to rescue
- An adventure to live

God is under attack by an enemy and He will not back down from that fight! God sees the beauty in you and He is driven to rescue you. God created this world with endless means of finding adventure. What is the whole Old Testament? Isn't it one story of adventure after another? This is the heart of God and He created man in His own imagine.

Samson's call was a good and godly call. He was perfectly suited to fulfill it - A Home to Honor, A God to Serve and A Nation to Protect. So, how did he do? Before we answer that, we need to examine...

II. Samson's Character

In chapter 14 we are given a conclusive snapshot of Samson's character. First of all, let's remember what his Nazirite vow demanded - three things:

- Don't cut your hair
- Don't go near wine, or wine ingredients
- Don't touch a dead body

In Judges 14, Samson goes to Timnah and returns and says to his parents:

"I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife." (Judges 14:2)

A Nazirite vow was a stricter obedience than the obedience expected of other Israelites. They were to obey all the laws that other Israelites obeyed PLUS these three additional laws. The clear Law of Moses was that Israelites were not to marry

“people of the land,” or people of the clans that they were supposed to be removing. Samson’s father and mother try to remind him of this. They say:

...Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife? (v.3)

What does this tell you about Samson’s character?

Those under a Nazirite vow were not to go near wine or anything related to wine, so they couldn’t eat grapes, for example. So, what’s Samson doing in a vineyard in Timnah? It’s in the vineyard that the lion attacks him and he kills it by the power of God, but why did this happen? Is it possible God sent the lion as a hint to Samson, “Hey, get out of the vineyard!” So, Samson was in the vineyard breaking his Nazirite vow. What does that tell you about his character?

Thirdly, in verse 8, Samson goes back to the vineyard “*to look at the lion’s carcass.*” He finds honey in it and eats it and brings some of the honey to his parents. And then the Scripture makes this seemingly random statement:

...But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion’s carcass. (Judges 14:9)

This detail seems meaningless to us. But it’s not! What is the author doing in these first nine verses of chapter 14? He’s showing us Samson’s character! And what kind of character is it? It’s an immature, weak character. Do you see it? This guy is a walking contradiction! He is enormously strong, physically. He can rip a lion apart with his bare hands. But his character is so weak you could knock him over with a feather. He’s a slave to his sexual desires, not a servant of God. In one trip he violates two of the three mandates of his vows – he walks through a vineyard and he touches a dead body. This guy is a Yahoo. He’s a physical beast and an ethical mouse. And as you read through the rest of his story, Samson is known more for what he has lost than what he gains:

- He loses respect for his parents
- He loses his Nazirite vows
- He loses control over his tongue
- He loses his temper (multiple times!)
- Finally, he loses even his physical strength

Seriously, there’s nothing in this man’s life for us to model. Commentator Warren Wiersbe draws this conclusion about Samson:

Samson was unpredictable and undependable because he was doubleminded... Bold before men, Samson was weak before women and couldn’t resist telling them his secrets. Empowered by the Spirit of God, he yielded his body to the appetites of the flesh. Called to declare war on the Philistines, he fraternized with the enemy and even tried to marry a Philistine woman. He fought the Lord’s battles by day and disobeyed the Lord’s commandments by night. Given the name “Samson,” which means “sunny,” he ended up in the darkness, blinded by the very enemy he was supposed to conquer. ⁱⁱ

So, is there anything positive to be learned from this man? Yes, with a little creativity and extrapolation, I think there is. So, together, let’s hear...

III. Samson’s Soliloquy.

A soliloquy is a device often used in stage plays, like those of Shakespeare, where a lone actor gives a speech in which he bares his heart, often describing his

regrets. Scripture does not supply us with a soliloquy of Samson, but if he could speak to us today, what might he say?

First, I think he'd say, "*Take your vows more seriously than I did.*" You know, I think Samson would've fit right into our 21st century culture. He was tremendously gifted, he was obviously a real "hunk," a real physical specimen, he was given great opportunities by God to have substantial impact for good in his world and he seems like he loved to have fun! He loved to tell riddles and go to parties and just have a good time. His motto seemed to be, "If it's not fun, why do it?" Doesn't that sound like the model 21st century male?

But his life was actually a very sad tragedy that ended really badly. What contributed to his downfall? First was his extremely lax attitude toward his vows. He seemed to look at his vows as only restrictions, not as protection.

What's the purpose of a good rule? I'm not talking about bad rules. I'm talking about a good rule. What's its purpose? Is it to restrict us from something? Yes, usually. But what? The purpose of a good rule is to restrict us from trouble, to restrict us from experiencing pain, to protect us from some evil. For example:

- What's the purpose of seat belts?
- What's the purpose of speed limits?
- What's the purpose of a red light?

Are these rules to restrict our freedom? No, they're to restrict us from experiencing the pain of a car accident. Likewise, what's the purpose of God's rules?

- His rules about adultery
- His rules about blasphemy
- His rules about lying

Are these to restrict our freedom? No, they're to restrict us from experiencing the pain of life outside of how He designed it. If Samson could speak to us right now from heaven, I think the first thing he would say is, "Don't play fast and loose with God's rules. He gave them to you for your protection."

Secondly, I think Samson would say, "*Beware the undisciplined life!*" Samson was undisciplined in a bunch of ways, but he was especially undisciplined in his sexuality. (Don't worry parents, I'm not going to be explicit.) With both the Philistine woman that he wanted to marry and with Delilah, we see Samson overwhelmed by a very simple strategy. Look at it with me. This strategy has three steps that will overwhelm any undisciplined person. Those steps are:

1. Entice
2. Control
3. Betray

Delilah worked this strategy like a pro. She enticed him with her beauty. She controlled him with her emotional hook-line, "*How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me?*" But wait, Delilah isn't being straight with Samson either. She isn't telling him that she's being paid to throw him under the bus! Then it says, "*...with such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.*" (Judges 16:15, 16) Like a cow to the slaughter, Samson was then set up for step three, betrayal. "*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.”
(Judges 16:19)

Now, here’s the point: these are the same three steps the enemy of God uses to neutralize you! You’ll be enticed into that website, enticed into that Facebook conversation with an old boyfriend from college, enticed into that shady business deal that seems too good to be true. And once you step into that place, the manipulation and attempts to control will begin. And before you know it, you’ll be betrayed. If Samson could speak to you now, he would say, “I speak from experience, you WILL be betrayed!” How can you avoid it? I think Samson would say, “Live a more disciplined life and stay out of enemy territory!”

Finally, if Samson is in heaven (and I believe he is), then he is much more mature and disciplined than when he was here. I’m quite sure he would want to say to you, *“Use God’s gifts for God’s glory – not your own!”* Samson’s life didn’t unravel because he was talentless or from an abusive family or because of a lack of teaching about God. He had tremendous gifts, a great home and a great spiritual education. But Samson focused all those benefits on himself! He wasn’t focused on accomplishing God’s will, but on accomplishing Samson’s will. Someone might say, “But, didn’t he “judge” the Philistines? Didn’t he kill a whole bunch of them?” Yes, but that wasn’t God’s call to Samson. God’s call to him was to “deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” (Jdg. 13:5) Samson failed at that mission. Why? Not because of a lack of gifts, but because of how he used his gifts.

Why did God give Samson such strength? To deliver Israel. How did Samson use his strength? Judges 15:11:

...“I merely did to them what they did to me.”

How are you using your gifts? Look, I’m not saying you should quit your job and go into full-time ministry. In fact, I’m saying just the opposite. I’m saying that if you’re gifted with numbers, if you’re an accountant, how are you using THAT gift? Are you using it to “cook the books,” to get around the tax codes or are you using your gift to honor God by doing what is right?

If you’re gifted as a sales person, are you using your salesmanship to talk people into buying what they don’t need or to convince them that what they need is the less expensive model? How are you using your gift? Here’s a way to think about it: When you’re using that gift of yours, what do you imagine God is saying as He looks down on you from heaven? Is He nudging Jesus and saying, “There! Right there! Did you see that? That’s what I’m talking about! That’s why I gave her that gift! She used it to make that person’s life better. Hey, Cloud of Witnesses! Are you guys paying attention over there? Did you see that? Play that back on the tape and put that up on the big screen. Everybody, hey, come on over here and look at this. This is how to use one of My gifts!” Is that what God’s saying about you?

If Samson could speak to us right here, right now, I’m pretty sure he’d say: “Hey guys, listen up. I messed up and that’s why things got so crazy for me at the end. I was blind, I was angry, I was depressed. It all unraveled because I was so very, very weak. You’ve been told how strong I was, but actually, I was a wimp. So listen, don’t follow my example. Follow Jesus. He didn’t kill any lions with his bare hands, but He fulfilled His calling. He prayed, He listened

to the Word of God and then He went out and did it. That's real strength. So, follow Him, not me. Be strong like He was." Let's pray...

ⁱ John Eldridge, *Wild At Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 7, 6

ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Available* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1994), p. 125