

Samson – a Flawed Man of Faith

Samson is an unusual Bible character, who divides opinion on how to understand his behaviour. He is included in Hebrews 11, the chapter which lists many great men and women of faith. However, his story contains details which seem to contradict the view of Samson as a faithful man.

This paradox is actually true of many people who pleased God. We can gain great encouragement from Samson, seeing that despite our flaws, we too can inherit God's promises, as Samson surely will.

A Special Role

An angel was sent from God to tell Samson's parents about him before he was born.

For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5).

Being a Nazarite was being set apart to commit one's life to God. This would be central to Samson's spiritual successes and failures.

Interestingly, Samson was not to bring about a total deliverance from the hands of the Philistines but he was to begin that noble work, a work that continued under the leadership of Samuel the prophet (1 Samuel 7:3–14) and King David (2 Samuel 3:18). The victories of these great men were

only partly to do with their own endeavours. None of them could have achieved anything without God. Samson had to learn this lesson the hard way, but only after he had experienced notable victories.

As Samson grew up, *'...the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judges 13:24–25).*

This power of God gave Samson extraordinary strength and he used it to start saving Israel and to kill many Philistines.

Controversy

These successes were brought about in highly unorthodox ways. For example, Samson looked for a Philistine wife, which would ordinarily be unacceptable for a Jew. However, on this occasion we read:

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 (Judges 14:4).

Perhaps this would allow him to infiltrate the enemy ranks, or perhaps it was to initiate the flashpoint which would come next.

On the way to meet this woman, Samson came across the vineyards of Timnah. It is surely significant that we read of a Nazarite encountering a vineyard, as he was prohibited from drinking wine or other alcohol, or

eating anything produced from grapes. Despite this enormous temptation, there is no evidence to suggest that he ate or drank anything prohibited.

The Sweet Riddle

However, Samson then confronted a lion, which ended up providing a temptation which was too strong to resist.

The spirit of God enabled Samson to kill the lion, using that miraculous strength. Bizarrely, honey could later be found in the carcass. As this sweet delight could only be obtained by touching a dead body, which was most definitely unclean for Israelites to touch (see Leviticus 11:27) it does seem that eating the honey was not a good thing for Samson to do. Perhaps this explains why, after sharing it with his parents, Samson *'did not tell them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion'* (Judges 14:9).

This encounter with the lion would have further significance in Samson's life as it provided the material for his famous riddle:

Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet (v14).

This passage raises many questions: What was the point of this interaction? Was humiliating the Philistines with a riddle part of the plan to save Israel? Perhaps this was an arrogant display which showed that Samson had become distracted from his mission.

Attacking the Philistines

Whatever one decides regarding the riddle, the spirit of God was still upon Samson. He was able to fulfil the wager he made about the riddle in



dramatically violent fashion. His opponents solved the riddle by threatening his wife, forcing her to make him tell her the answer. In response, Samson killed thirty Philistines and gave the thirty changes of clothes to them.

Following this minor victory over Israel's persecutors, Samson's Philistinian wife was given to his friend; understandably, he was furious. In an elaborate attack on the Philistines' economy, Samson's unorthodox behaviour continued:

Then Samson went and caught three hundred foxes; and he took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set the torches on fire, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up both the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves (Judges 15:4-5).

The Philistines blamed Samson's wife and her father for bringing about such a disaster and burned them alive. This provoked Samson even more, so that in revenge he *'attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter'* (v8).

Although Samson was killing many Philistines, it ultimately appeared to make the situation worse. In an act of cowardice, the Israelites handed their

champion over to their Philistine rulers (verses 12–15).

In characteristically paradoxical fashion, Samson used his God-given strength to complete an even more impressive victory, killing a thousand men with the fresh jawbone of a donkey. On the one hand, touching the jawbone was unclean for an Israelite to do (see Leviticus 11:26). On the other hand, what an extraordinary triumph God brought about by Samson! It echoes the words of Joshua:

One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the LORD your God is He Who fights for you, as He promised you (Joshua 23:10).

After his victory celebration, Samson recognised that it was God who was responsible for his triumph:

You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant (Judges 15:18).

More Conflicting Actions

The contradictory actions of Samson continued:

Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her (Judges 16:1).

However, the local people tried to take him prisoner, which led to him taking remarkable action:

Samson lay low till midnight; then he arose at midnight, took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two gateposts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron (v3).

This seems to be a partial fulfilment of one of the promises to Abraham: “*your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies*” (Genesis 22:17).

Samson’s next love was for another woman called Delilah. This was entirely disastrous and led to him being well and truly humbled.

Firstly, Delilah was willing to betray him in exchange for money. How could Samson love such a woman?

We all make foolish decisions in life and frequently fail to learn from our mistakes. Comfortingly, Samson – a man recorded in the faith chapter – was no different from us.

Yet again, a woman was to entice or entrap Samson, and again he gave in when he was pressed. By giving in to Delilah’s pleading, he revealed that, spiritually speaking, he was indeed as weak as any other man.

Really Weak

It was only after Samson’s hair was cut off that “*the LORD had departed from him*” (Judges 16:20).

This is very important to bear in mind. Even after the incident of the harlot and the other possible indiscretions described above, God was still with Samson until this failure.

We can take comfort from this. Like Samson, our actions can sometimes be inconsistent: on the same day we can perform acts of goodness and acts of wickedness, but God will still be with us, if we stay with Him.

His patience is not infinite however, and He will ‘depart from us’ if we stray too far from His ways, or deny His sovereign power and will, as Samson did in allowing his hair to be cut.

It would appear that Samson struggled with temptation when he saw it,



take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!” (v28).

God heard his prayer:

Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his life (v30).

Like Jesus?

as most men and women do. It was therefore an appropriate punishment that his eyes were gouged out and he was brought to Gaza, the very place where he saw the harlot.

The Philistines were jubilant with his capture, describing Samson as *“the destroyer of our land, and the one who multiplied our dead” (Judges 16:24).*

Such a description means that Samson’s victories were significant successes in the life of this unorthodox leader.

Samson’s confidence in his own strength to resist temptation and so to win battles against the Philistines was his downfall. Being forced to be a grinder in a Philistine prison was what was required to humble him and for him to remember that it was God who had been the source of his strength. The time in prison also allowed his hair to grow again (Judges 16:22), the outward sign of his dedication to God.

The Philistines then brought Samson out of prison to mock him in their temple of idol worship:

Then Samson called to the LORD, saying, “O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow

This final victorious act of self-sacrifice is where Samson can justifiably be seen as a parallel to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus did many wonderful works in his life but it was his sacrificial death which achieved the greatest victory: the conquest of sin and death. In the same way, Samson killed great numbers of the Philistines in his life, but far more in his death.

We can identify with Samson’s experience of serving God. Sometimes we can be inconsistent; sometimes we can give in to our selfish desires; from time to time we can forget that it is God who is the source of all strength.

When this happens, let us remember that we can return to our God in humble prayer and be forgiven, as Samson was. God has a plan for us, and He will not leave us, if we do not leave Him:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

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