

Trouble at the Barbershop

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Date: 29 September 2002

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[0 : 00] Well, you can imagine the publicity. Introducing in the near corner, representing Israel, Samson, the world's strongest man, able to tear lions apart in his bare hands, able to tear down the city gates of Gaza and carry them all the way to Hebron, able to kill a thousand Philistines with just the jawbone of an ass.

And no doubt, as the Samson show hit the road, the arena would be full of hysterical screaming girls, screaming for the long-haired heartthrob, a sort of early prototype of someone like Arnold Schwarzenegger, I guess, the sort of James Dean star, the rebellious without much of a cause, the pin-up boy who lived life in the fast lane.

And you can see or imagine the glossy magazines carrying the latest gossip about this great star and hero called Samson.

The headline, Wedding of the Century Fiasco. Samson's controversial wedding to a Philistine woman fails, tricked by his wife into revealing the secret of his riddle.

And on his wedding night, he leaves her in hot anger and kills 30 of her kinsfolk in revenge. Read all about it in chapter 14 of the book of Judges.

[1 : 29] Then later, Samson returns to his wife. Again, it would be headline news, I'm sure, in Israel. But the father of his wife refuses him entry. And the angry young man, Samson, burns the harvest and kills many in revenge.

Read all about that in chapter 15, verses 1 to 8 in the book of Judges. And then later again, the headlines again. Samson seen entering a prostitute's house, just like with Hugh Grant a few years ago.

The Philistine paparazzi that fail to see him leave during the night as they're camped around the house. Read all about that at the beginning of chapter 16 in the book of Judges.

And then later still, you can imagine the headline, Samson quoted, This time it's for real. The man with the blind spot for women in love at last, but deceived by Delilah, who's only in it, it seems, for the money that she can get from the Philistine lords when she reveals the secret of his strength to them.

Read all about that in chapter 16, verses 4 to 17, immediately before the reading that we've just read. And then you can imagine another headline, exclusive pictures of Samson's new haircut.

[2 : 50] And you can imagine that the hairdressers report a surge in business as all the men of Israel want to model themselves on the new haircut of Samson, just like England does with David Beckham's look and so on.

Read all about that in the second half of Judges chapter 16. Now, of course, it wouldn't just be the headlines and the photographers. The magazine's psychoanalysts would have a field day.

The agony aunts would have a field day with Samson. Samson's turbulent life due to the burden of his mother's vow, that sort of material. And then they would report that the mother of Samson reported an angel's visit before the birth of her child.

She'd been barren, and now this is a miracle birth. And the father, Manoah, would acknowledge that he took more time to be convinced that this was a special birth and that the angel was an angel.

And he was sure, in fact, that he would die, having realised that it was, in fact, an angel that he'd seen. Though no doubt, I guess, he was pleased at the money he'd have to save on haircuts, because the vow of the mother of Samson was that he would not shave his head, what's called a Nazarite vow.

[3 : 59] Read all about that in chapter 13 of the book of Judges. And no doubt the journalists would claim a scoop at the time of Samson's conception and birth, and later on in his life, as he turned out to be such a rebellious and odd adult, his mother saying, he's not a saviour, he's just a naughty boy.

The physical strongman, you see, Samson, is in fact the moral weakling. Well, Samson is the last in the line of judges, certainly the most colourful character.

He'd be on all the newspapers, magazines, news reports and so on if he was alive today. And indeed, since Samson's life, over 3,000 years ago, he's been the subject of films, a poem by Milton, an opera by Samson, music by others as well.

But of all the judges in the book of Judges, he is the most faithless, fallen and foolish of all. Israel's cycle of rebellion resumed after Jephthah, whom we looked at last week at the end of chapters 11 and 12.

In retribution for Israel's idolatry and sin, chapter 13 begins by saying that God handed them over to the rule of the Philistines. It's the pattern we see time and again in the book of Judges.

[5 : 22] Israel commits idolatry, rebellion against God. In retaliation, God hands them over to their enemies, an appropriate judgment as we saw two weeks ago when the pattern was described in chapter 2.

But unlike before, where each time Israel cries out eventually in its distress, here they don't. Not even after 18 years, as we saw last week, it took Israel to cry out when the Ammonites oppressed them.

Here Israel is silent. No cries to God. That's how far down the cycle they've come. They're not even now crying out to God for help as they're oppressed by the Philistine enemies.

Israel's plunging to new depths, you see. And their spiritual lethargy and rebellion means that they don't even come to the point of crying out in repentance or even just crying out for help.

How far from God has Israel wandered in this book? And where in the past God raises up a judge, sometimes with a bit of delay from their cries, here he causes one to be born.

[6 : 30] So God clearly is not about an immediate solution to the problem of the Philistines. Because after all, Samson's an adult when eventually the events of his adult life are described.

So there's quite a period of delay in God's mind before Samson will actually do anything against the Philistines. It's a miraculous birth to a barren woman. Not the only time that happens, of course, in the Bible.

And associated with his birth is the Nazarite vow, where his hair is not to be cut, he's not to touch a corpse, and not to drink any alcohol or strong drink.

And the descriptions of Nazarite vows come earlier in the Bible, in Numbers chapter 6. So we expect great things. Probably of all the judges, the build-up to Samson makes us expect great things.

Every judge has failed preceding him. Now for the first time a judge is caused to be born, and a vow is associated with him. So I think we, the reader, are meant to think, now at last will come the judge, who will properly and finally and fully deliver and rescue the people of God from their enemies and their idolatry.

[7 : 47] But why does God bother? Now, Israel is rebellious, Israel is idolatrous, Israel has no sense of guilt, no repentance, not even a cry for help. Why doesn't God just wash his hands of the whole tawdry lot of them and be done with them once and for all?

And yet God doesn't. Persistently in this book of Judges, when Israel keeps on going after idols and rebels against God, even sometimes when they've got a judge who delivers them, God stays with his people.

He doesn't give up or abandon his people, no matter how rebellious they are. No sin is too deep, no rebellion is too far for God, a God of grace abounding to the chief of sinners, as he does to Israel in this book.

And ironically, the rescuer that God raises up or causes to be born is in many respects the chief of sinners in the midst of a sinful nation.

Samson's first seen dating the enemy, an uncircumcised Philistine woman, at the beginning of chapter 14. The emphasis is placed on the fact that she's a foreigner, three times at the beginning of that chapter.

[9 : 05] She's an uncircumcised woman, a Philistine woman, clearly from the enemy, clearly a bad thing to do. The first act of Samson's a bad thing. He ought not to be dating the enemy, intermarrying with others.

And yet somehow, behind this rebellious act, lies the hand of God directing the affairs. Chapter 14, verse 4 says, that Samson's mother and father did not know that this was from the Lord.

Maybe even Samson didn't know that either. For the Lord was seeking a pretext to act against the Philistines. And at that time, the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

It never condones Samson's immorality or his rebellion. It's not saying that it's the right thing for him to somehow play around with or intermarry with Philistine women. But nonetheless, God's hand is behind even the immoral events and actions of Samson.

And the debacle with his wife, because it doesn't last beyond the wedding night in chapter 14, leads to Philistine losses. Samson has an arrogant riddle.

[10 : 15] You may remember or know the story where he says, out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet, referring to the fact that out of the corpse of the lion that he'd earlier killed, he found honey and he ate the honey.

It's a riddle that no one could have solved. It's an arrogant riddle. It was to avoid paying his due costs at the wedding that Samson as the groom or as the groom ought to have paid the suits of clothes for his groomsmen.

That was the protocol of those days. And so in order to somehow avoid paying his due costs, he has this stupid riddle, which in the end his wife tricks out of him.

And so he seeks revenge. In chapter 14, verse 19, we read that the spirit of the Lord rushed on him and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed 30 men of the town, took their spoil and gave the festal garments to those who'd explained the riddle.

In hot anger, he went back to his father's house. So 30 men of Ashkelon, a Philistine city, are killed in retaliation for his wife, telling others his riddle.

[11 : 21] And then in chapter 15, in verses 4 and 5, Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took some torches and he turned the foxes tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails.

And when he'd set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and burned up the shocks and the standing grain as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

That's in retaliation to his father-in-law for not letting him have his wife back. And then a bit later on in chapter 15, verse 7 and 8, we read here, Samson saying, If this is what you do, I swear I'll not stop until I've taken revenge on you.

And he struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etan. That's in retaliation for the Philistines killing his wife. And then a bit later on again in chapter 15, verse 15 this time, he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down, took it, and with it he killed a thousand men.

Now that's not the sort of person you want to meet in a dark alley at night. And yet, throughout all those revengeful attacks by Samson against Philistines, which are purely motivated, it seems, by personal revenge, the Spirit of the Lord is giving him power and strength.

[12 : 41] So in chapter 14, verse 6, the Spirit of the Lord rushed on him and he tore the lion apart. Chapter 14, verse 19, when he kills 30 men at Ashkelon, it's the Spirit of the Lord that comes upon him.

And then when he kills a thousand with the jawbone of an ass, again, it's the Spirit of the Lord that comes upon him. Because even though Samson is perhaps vengeful and not acting in really good ways, it is God attacking the Philistines that lies behind this story.

It's God fighting for his people, even though they're spiritually lethargic and rebellious and idolatrous and do not deserve God to fight for them. Nonetheless, it is God fighting for his people.

The people of Judah actually hand over Samson to the Philistines. They don't want him. They don't want any part of him. It shows that they're resigned to Philistine rule.

They've given in, in effect. They're spiritual wimps. They're clearly oppressed by the enemy. Faith in Yahweh's been all but abandoned, it seems, in the land. And they've basically given up.

[13 : 46] And so even the person whom God has raised up, they hand him over to the enemy in chapter 15, verses 11 and 12. They've lost confidence in Yahweh. Their spiritual lethargy and compromise is in the end deathly.

But God steps in. Well, the last part of Samson's story, chapter 16, repeats the pattern of chapters 14 and 15.

It's a woman problem that leads to the defeat of the Philistines. You'd think that Samson might learn, but he doesn't. It's 20 years after chapter 15. We're told at the end of chapter 15 that Samson judged Israel in the days of the Philistines, 20 years.

But now the pattern recurs. Samson is smitten with Delilah. And we might well say, why, why, why Delilah?

Like the first wife, she nags, she persists to try and wheedle out of him, not the answer to a riddle, but the secret for his strength. And she pesters him to get the secret.

[14 : 53] Now it's hard to know whether Samson really understood the secret of his strength being tied up with his hair. Possibly he did. Long hair, of course, was the result of a Nazarite vow.

But he'd already broken that vow by touching the corpse of a lion, at least, and by his intermarriage and other compromising actions, probably. It's unsure whether he ever really attributed the strength that he had to God and the Spirit of God coming upon him or not.

We're not sure. But in the end, as Samson buckles under the pestering, nagging wife Delilah, foolish, fallen, faithless Samson is shorn and taken captive.

And as we heard in the reading at the end of chapter 16, his eyes, which lusted after women, are now gouged out and he becomes a slave imprisoned in Gaza, one of the key cities of the Philistines, the same city Gaza as we hear so often in the news today.

In effect, what's happened to Samson is a paradigm of what has happened to the nation as a whole. The nation as a whole is rebellious and they are now, in effect, oppressed into, in effect, slavery to the Philistine rule over the nation.

[16 : 09] Samson is just no better than any other Israelite. He's in prison, literally, in a Philistine prison in Gaza. and there he's mocked. He's the object of mirth and laughter.

He's regarded as a plaything for entertainment. Verse 25 says, when the Philistines' hearts were merry, they said, call Samson and let him entertain us.

That is, they're wanting to just poke fun at him. The now blind man, once the superhero of Israel, weak who once was strong. And in the context of this festival of the Philistines where they're gathering around and clearly drinking themselves silly, making themselves merry, at least, they're boasting that their gods are triumphant.

Verses 23 and 24, the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon and to rejoice for they said, our God has given Samson our enemy into our hand.

And when the people saw him, they praised their God for they said, our God has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country who's killed many of us. Now it doesn't pay to laugh at God and that's what the Philistines are doing.

[17 : 25] He who laughs last, laughs best and in this story God laughs last. The mirth of the Philistines, the glee of the people of Gaza is about to end.

And throughout this whole story you see, God's actually, I think, been laughing at the Philistines. See, they're boasting that their God's triumphant. He's defeated the Israelites, he's defeated Samson, he's brought their hero into their midst as a slave.

The God Dagon, they're boasting in him and in his victory. But all throughout, I think, in the odd things that Samson does, without condoning his immorality, God's poking fun at the Philistines.

after all, what a funny way to spoil the Philistines' harvest than tying foxtails together with torches and letting them loose in the field of grain about to be harvested.

And really, it doesn't say much for the Philistines that a man can, with a jawbone of an ass, a donkey, a stupid animal, kill a thousand of them. You see, the power of God coming on Samson brings him victory, but at the same time, I think God is mocking the Philistines by defeating them at the hands of someone so unlikely and in such unlikely ways.

[18 : 40] And now, of course, at the end of chapter 16, the climax of the Samson story, we come, I think, to the final laugh, so to speak, before the curtain closes on all these events.

Samson, as usual, is motivated by revenge. He never seems to have a noble thought to bring victory in God's name. Remember, Jephthah, he wanted to bring victory in God's name. Gideon was compromised for the Lord and for Gideon, but Samson just wants revenge.

There's a personal selfishness and a personal pride about him that is not particularly pleasant that motivates his calls for revenge against the Philistines. So, he says in his prayer to God in verse 28, Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge, I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.

No sense of the honour of God's name here, no sort of, come on God, you're the real God, not Dagon, strengthen me so that I can show that you are good, none of that. It's just personal revenge for two eyes, that's all.

That's the sort of judge that God's raised up, ironically, to bring victory. But of course, God in the end is not on about revenge for Samson.

[19 : 57] God is on about his own name and he tolerates no rivals and he bristles when other gods are praised, especially when they're praised by his own people, but even when they're praised by pagans like the Philistines.

God doesn't like that. He doesn't like people worshipping any other god but him, whatever their background, cultural, ethnic, racial, whatever. And he sees when he is scorned by anyone of any place.

And his people seem indifferent to him but God's not indifferent when the enemies of God mock him, in effect, and praise their own God. So Samson's final act of entertainment brings the house down, literally.

He's allowed to put his hands against the pillars and then as a result of his prayers strengthened it seems by God. He pushes the pillars over and brings down the temple, killing more Philistines than he'd ever killed in his life but himself as well.

In one sense, a suicide act. It's significant that the place that's destroyed is the temple of Dagon. See, it's not just killing people that matters.

[21 : 11] It's that the house of Dagon comes down, subdued by the power of God. You see, in the end, it's God versus other gods that's her story here. That's the issue of the actions of Samson.

For the man of God, Samson, born by miraculous birth, despised, rejected, mocked by his own people and others, stretches out his arms to deliver God's people and at the cost of his own life and God has the final laugh.

There's very little about Samson that's commendable. Physical strong man but moral weakling, selfish eye for women, motivated purely, it seems, by revenge, dishonouring of vows, dishonouring of his Israelite heritage as well.

But Samson is fully a reflection of how low Israel as a people had come. Unrepentant, idolatrous, immoral, spiritually lethargic, resigned to foreign idolatrous rule, faithless and fallen.

But thank God that he didn't give up on his people then, no matter how low they had stooped. And thank God that he doesn't give up on his people now, no matter how low we might stoop as well.

[22 : 41] Thank God that he acts to save, extending his grace to sinners who do not deserve the salvation God brings. And thank God that he sent, in the end, the perfect judge, rescuer, or saviour, who also was despised and rejected and mocked, even by his own people.

But by whose outstretched arms procured a lasting salvation for the people of God, and at such a vast cost. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen.