

SAMSON

Judges 13-16

The Samson Tales, as the *Interpreters Bible Commentary* identifies them, are found in the 13th through 16th chapters of the Old Testament book of Judges. Contained in these chapters is a concise account of Samson's life—from his conception and birth to his death. When you read the Samson Tales one is not left with a warm and fuzzy feeling. In fact, the Samson story is a tragic one; because Samson himself is such a tragic figure. He is one that had great potential but chose not to tap into that potential. So let's begin!

(Read Judges 13:2-25a)

When reading the account of Samson's birth one is reminded of the birth accounts of the prophet Samuel, John the Baptizer and even Jesus. We have an older childless couple. We have an angel. We have a divine pronouncement. We have a child who is to be set apart and dedicated to God's service. Specifically, Samson is to be a deliverer of his people.

The child Samson, born to Manoah and his wife, is dedicated as a Nazirite. There were three requirements of a Nazirite. They were never to consume strong drink—alcohol. They were never to cut their hair. And, Nazirites were never to have contact with the dead.

In Samson we have a child of promise, a dedicated person; one in whom God's spirit stirred. The stirring of the spirit is a good thing if one's emotions are channeled and directed; however, the stirring can be a dangerous thing if the emotions are unleashed and misapplied. This leads us to examine how Samson chose to respond to his dedication as a Nazirite and to the stirring of God's spirit.

The first recorded words of Samson are spoken to his parents, "*I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.*" Samson has been love struck by a beautiful woman—a Philistine woman. And he tells his father to arrange a marriage; which was the custom in that day. Samson's parents are appalled at his choice saying, "*Can you not find a woman among our own people that you want to take a wife from among the uncircumcised Philistines?*" At this time the Philistines ruled over the Israelites and did not recognize their God. The Philistines were hated by the Israelites. For the Israelites, circumcision was a sign of covenant relationship with God. To call one uncircumcised was a term of derision.

Since Samson's parents are unwilling to go along with his plan to marry a Philistine woman Samson takes matters into his own hands. He heads to Timnah to claim his wife. Along the way a young lion attacks him. With his bare hands Samson kills the lion—tearing it open. When he arrives in Timnah he actually

talks with this woman whose beauty has captured his heart. They decide they like each other. After some time passes Samson returns to Timnah to take her as his bride. Along the way he comes upon the lion he had killed and lo and behold a swarm of bees have built a nest within the carcass and have produced honey. Not only does Samson eat some of the honey he gathers up some for his parents.

When he arrives in Timnah he throws a wedding feast; which will last for seven days. The feast is attended by thirty Philistine men. You might think of this as a seven day long Bachelor Party. On the first day of the feast Samson gives the Philistines a riddle to solve. If they are able to solve it by the end of the feast he will give to each of them a new set of clothes; however, if they are not able to solve it, they will each give him a set of clothes. The Philistines accept Samson's proposition. Samson of course, is intending to leave the feast with thirty sets of new clothes.

The riddle is, "*Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.*" The Philistines are angry that they cannot solve the riddle. They then devise a plan. They tell Samson's wife-to-be that if she does not discover the answer to the riddle that they will burn her and her family's house. So she then goes to Samson saying, "*You do not really love me for if you did you would tell me the answer to the riddle that you have presented to my fellow countrymen.*" He tells her that he has not even told his parents. And then she begins to cry—she cries for days. Samson can take it no longer and he tells her the answer to the riddle which in turn she tells to her countrymen. They solve the riddle saying, "*What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?*" Samson then says to them, "*If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle.*"

Samson then proceeds to go to Ashkelon, another Philistine city, and kills thirty Philistines. He takes their clothes back to Timnah for the thirty guests at the feast. And then the scripture says that in "*hot anger*" Samson returns home to his father's house—abandoning his wife. Samson knows he has been deceived but assumes no personal responsibility.

After his anger cools and his passion heats up Samson decides to return to Timnah to claim his wife, only to discover that her father did not think he was coming back so he gave her in marriage to someone else. Samson is so angry that he proceeds to capture 300 foxes. He then, two-by-two, ties their tails together and places a lighted torch between them and sets them free into the grain fields of the Philistines—burning all of their crops. Revenge! Anger!

In their own revenge the Philistines kill Samson's wife and all of her family with fire. In response Samson says, "*If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged upon you, and after that I will quit.*" Samson then proceeds to start killing the people of Timnah. One against many. And then Samson hides in his

own land.

The Philistines go after him. They convince Samson's countrymen to bring him to them. Since the Philistines rule over the Israelites they are scared and they agree to do so. When they find Samson they say to him, "*What have you done to us?*" Samson replies, "*As they did to me so have I done to them.*" Quite a contrast to what we know as the Golden Rule, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*"

Samson then allows his fellow countrymen to tie him up and to deliver him to the Philistines. When in the presence of the Philistines, Samson breaks free from the ropes and then according to scripture, "*...he found a fresh jawbone of an ass (that just happened to be lying around) ...and with it he slew a thousand men.*"

After killing the thousand men Samson is thirsty—very thirsty. He then prays, "*You have granted this great deliverance by the hand of your servant; and shall I now thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?*" The story as recorded in Judges then gives God the credit for the water that is provided for Samson. And from this day forward he judges, or rules, Israel for twenty years.

Another example of his strength is found when he goes one night to visit a Philistine harlot, a prostitute. For one who hates the Philistines so much Samson seems to love their women. The men of the city hear that Samson is in town so they make plans to wait all night and then kill Samson as he is leaving the next morning. But as you might expect, Samson decides to leave at night when the men are afraid to confront him, and Samson also decides to take with him the city gates by just pulling up the posts and carrying them off. There is no question that Samson is a strong man, what is at question is how he uses his strength.

(Read Judges 16:4-21)

Samson is deceived in the same manner by his wife and by Delilah. "*If you really love me you will tell me what I am asking.*" If you really love me! I do not know which is sadder, Delilah's deceit or Samson's arrogance and stupidity. However, what I suggest that we learn is that whenever anyone tries to manipulate us with the words "*If you really love me*" run as fast as you can!

Samson's hair begins to grow back. Thousands of Philistines along with their leaders are meeting in the great hall of their god, Dagon. They have Samson brought in for entertainment. He is placed between some pillars and he prays, "*God, remember me and strengthen me, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my eyes.*" Revenge for his eyes! According to the text he uses his renewed strength to push the pillars in such a way that the entire building collapses. And it is recorded, that as the building is crumbling Samson says, "*Let me die with the Philistines.*" And he does!

Samson is a tragic figure. The tragedy of Samson's life is that he used for unworthy ends the power which God had given him and for which he had been

dedicated—to be a deliverer of his people. Samson realized that his strength came from God, yet he used it for destruction, for lust, and for revenge.

Friends, there are only two times in the Samson Tales that we read of Samson calling upon God, that we see him being aware of his dependence upon God—when he is thirsty and when he wants revenge for his eyes. Samson took his strength for granted. Samson took God for granted. What a great potential that went to waste.

Samson was dedicated as a Nazirite; yet, he kept none of the Nazirite vows. He certainly consumed strong drink as he partied. He routinely had contact with the dead—the dead he killed. And he permitted his hair to be cut. What a great potential that went to waste.

Throughout the Samson Tales, Samson's weakness, not his strength, is revealed. Nothing could have stopped Samson—he stopped himself! It was not his wife, the Philistines, or Delilah that did him in; he did himself in. Samson faced enemies stronger than the Philistines—his uncontrolled passions, and his careless disregard of the gifts that God had given to him.