

Judges 14-16
August 25, 2019

Have you ever heard the term “fly over state” before? Well if you haven’t, you are living in one. It’s a place that other people don’t think is exciting, but you have to cross over it to get to the place you actually want to be. Much like how there are fly over states, I think there are fly over passages of the Bible. Similar to how most of the fly over states are located in the Midwest, I think most of these “fly over books” in the Bible are located in the Old Testament. Sure, you might read Obadiah, but we all know you’re counting every page until you get to the story of Jonah and the whale, like how a person driving through Terre Haute counts down every mile until they get to Chicago.

I, however, love the Old Testament. I enjoy studying the Old Testament way more than the New Testament. Admittedly, this has nothing to do with theology though. There is just a lot of really wacky stuff in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament we read accounts of these epic battles, there are magnificent descriptions of monstrous beasts, weird symbolism can be found on every page, and it seems like everyone gets to have these strange visions and encounters with God that seem more like a Grateful Dead music video than a passage of the Bible.

In fact, my favorite book in the Bible is Ezekiel, simply because of all of the weird things you read in that book. A book that I like almost as much as Ezekiel is the book of Judges. I think that Judges is the most underrated book of the entire bible. I mean everyone loves the disciples, and they should, but never mention the Judges. We like the disciples so much because they were simply ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and in a lot of ways that is exactly what the Judges were.

Of course, one of the Judges stands out more than others. It is the original superhero, or anti-hero depending on how you look at it, Samson. We remember Samson mostly because of his muscles, but I like Samson because in my opinion he is the most unapologetically human character of the Bible. In fact, he kind of reminds of a movie character Will Smith plays.

In this movie, Will Smith plays an unlikely superhero named John Hancock. Far from your average, ordinary, everyday superhero, Hancock is a misunderstood maleficent who causes more collateral damage than the criminals he’s trying to stop. Unlike other fictional superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman or Captain America who instinctively understand that with great power comes great responsibility, Hancock is a reckless, irresponsible, inebriated jerk who disappoints and disenchants the citizens he is supposed to be protecting.

In other words, he’s a lot like Samson. Samson was the original superhero. Blessed with ridiculous super-human strength, Samson was chosen by God as one of his divinely appointed judges and commissioned to save his people from the oppression of the Philistines. Like Hancock, however, Samson’s weakness seemed to overshadow his strengths. Samson was a childish, womanizing brute and why God chose him is

somewhat of a mystery to me. But he did. And somehow, somehow Samson managed to get his name listed among the greatest heroes of all time.

Once again, Samson's story is set during the period of the judges and, once again, "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years" (Judges 13:1). Israel certainly didn't merit the Lord's mercy, but God granted it anyway. He appointed a new leader and judge over Israel whose life was full of contradictions and character flaws. In fact, when we are first introduced to Samson, he is in the midst of a terrifying Rampage

Samson's super-strength first manifested as he and his parents were walking through the vineyards of a neighboring town known as Timnah.

"Suddenly," the Bible says, "a young lion came roaring toward Samson! The Spirit of the LORD entered Samson with great power, and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. For him it was as easy as tearing apart a young goat" (Judges 14:5-6).

This is an example of why I like the Old Testament. They compare tearing apart a lion to tearing apart a Goat as if anyone can relate to that.

I have a feeling that this Animal Channel encounter came as a surprise to even Samson himself because he kept it from his parents, who apparently ran for dear life when they first caught a glimpse of their feline friend and failed to witness the massacre that followed. However, this experience also gave Samson his first taste of power and that power went straight to his head.

When they finally reached Timnah, it turns out that Samson was actually there to meet and marry a girl. A Philistine girl to precise. While showboating in front of her friends at the reception, Samson said to them, "Let me tell you a riddle. If you solve my riddle during these seven days of the celebration, I will give you thirty fine linen robes and thirty sets of festive clothing. But if you can't solve it, then you must give me thirty fine linen robes and thirty sets of festive clothing" (Judges 14:12-13). Well, Samson tells them the riddle and several days go by. As the Philistines grow more and more puzzled by his conundrum, they decide to threaten his blushing bride and convince her to tell them the answer. She coaxes it out of her trusting husband and reports back to the Philistines. So, before sunset on the last day of the feast, they find Samson and give him the answer to his little brainteaser. Immediately Samson knew that his wife had betrayed him, so he storms out of the celebration fuming with rage. And, the Bible says,

"He went to the city of Ashkelon, killed thirty men, took their clothing, and gave it to the young men who had told him the answer to his riddle. But he was furious about it and abandoned his wife and went back home to live with his father and mother" (vs. 19).

Several months later, not realizing that the wife he abandoned had decided to instead marry the best man from their wedding, Samson traveled back to Timnah to talk to his ex-wife. When her father told Samson that she was married to his friend, he again set out to wreak havoc on the Philistines. "So, Samson went out and caught three hundred foxes. He took two foxes at a time, tied their tails together, and then tied a torch to the

tails of each pair of foxes. After he lit the torches, he let the foxes loose in the grain fields of the Philistines so that he burned up their standing grain, the piles of grain, their vineyards, and their olive trees” (Judges 15:4-5). In retaliation the Philistines killed his ex-wife and her father and Samson vowed, “Since you’ve acted like this, I won’t stop until I get my revenge!” (vs. 7). Then the Bible says, “So he attacked the Philistines with great fury and killed many of them” (vs. 8).

Far from heroic, Samson was more like a vicious, violent villain, motivated solely by his own childish, selfish ambitions. But keep in mind that God had been working through Samson all along, even if Samson himself didn’t realize it. Because of Samson, the Philistines were forced to live in fear unable to oppress or harass the children of Israel. Despite his glaring failure as a human being, God was still able to work around Samson’s infinite imperfections and bring peace to the people of Israel for twenty years. If there is any lesson in here for us it is that God will ultimately accomplish his will whether we cooperate or not.

Now, fast-forward those twenty years and we find Samson in the midst of a torrid Romance

The Bible says, “Sometime later Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Sorek” (Judges 16:4). The story of Samson and Delilah has inspired the imaginations of numerous of artists, writers and composers over the centuries and was even made into feature film starring Elizabeth Hurly back in 1996.

Although the Bible never comes right out and says it, most scholars agree that Delilah was probably a temple prostitute. For that matter the Bible never identifies her as a Philistine, but based on her dealings with them, as we will see, she undoubtedly was. Samson’s love (or at least lust) for Delilah kept him coming back to the Philistine city of Sorek to spend the night with her. Samson’s presence, however, never went unnoticed and his frequent visits to Delilah’s house were no exception.

Soon, five Philistine kings, the heads of the entire Philistine nation, went personally to talk with Delilah and demanded that she discovered the secret of Samson’s strength. In other words, they wanted to know what his Kryptonite was, how they could subdue him and rob him of his great strength. Each one of the Philistine rulers offered to pay Delilah eleven hundred pieces of silver if she would entice him to tell her his secret. To put add perspective, that’s more than two hundred times what Judas was paid to betray Jesus.

She, of course, agreed. The next time Samson came to visit, Delilah begged him to tell her his secret. “Please tell me, Samson, why you are so strong,” she pleaded. “I don’t think anyone could ever capture you!” (vs. 6).

Samson tells her, “If I were tied up with seven new bowstrings that have not yet been dried, I would become as weak as anyone else” (vs. 7). The irony being that undried bow strings are incredibly weak and could even be snapped by a normal guy just tugging on them too hard.

Later that night, after Samson had fallen asleep, she tied him up just as he had said and then called out, "Samson! The Philistines are here!" But without a moment's hesitation Samson snapped the seven cords like little more than tissue paper. He lied to her to keep her happy, not realizing that she would actually try it. Yet, now knowing that Delilah was trying to discover his secret, he continued seeing her.

Have you ever had a relationship like that? You know someone is bad for you, but you keep seeing them anyway. At the very least I know you've seen one. Samson must have thought that his willpower was stronger than her seductive powers. He was invulnerable and he thought that made him invincible. But he was wrong.

Two more times Delilah begged for his secret and two more times he lied. Then, finally, on the fourth attempt Delilah played the best card she had. "How can you say you love me when you don't confide in me?" she whined (vs. 15). She nagged him every day, the Bible says, until Samson couldn't stand it any longer. He may have been the one with super-strength, but Delilah was very familiar with the power of persuasion and Samson finally caved in. "My hair has never been cut," he confessed, "for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as anyone else" (vs. 17).

Let me explain this a little. A Nazerite was someone who had taken an oath to God that was usually temporary. While the person was under oath, they would not cut their hair or drink wine, or even visit vineyards nor would they eat grapes.

When Samson was born his parents made a promise to God, they dedicated their son to him and as a sign of that promise, Samson would never cut his hair. See most people were only a Nazerite for a short period of time, but Samson was to live his whole life that way.

It's not that his hair was actually the source of his strength, but that his long hair represented his vow to God that he was set apart. For all his failings, his greatest weakness seems to have been women. He always picked the wrong ones. Had he just stopped coming to visit Delilah he would have kept his hair and his strength, but he kept going back. For all his physical might, he lacked the moral strength to do the right thing. And he would pay dearly for it. After revealing his secret, Samson would experience a torturous retribution.

That night, as Samson slept, Delilah held him in her lap while the Philistines quietly shaved his head. This time when Delilah shouted, Samson sprang to his feet ready to fight, but without his legendary strength. The Bible says, "He didn't realize the LORD had left him" (vs. 20). Now, the Philistines didn't want to kill Samson; rather, they wanted to capture him, humiliate him, make a spectacle and symbol out of him.

Without his mighty strength, the Philistines easily subdued him, tied him up and gouged out his eyes. They bound him with bronze chains and put him to work grinding grain in the prison, only allowing him out when they needed some evening entertainment.

It's almost as if Paul had Samson specifically in mind when he wrote, "All these things happened to them as examples, as object lessons to us, to warn us against doing the same things; they were written down so that we could read about them and learn from them in these last days as the world nears its end" (1 Corinthians 10:11). So, "If you think you are strong, you should be careful not to fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The tragic tale of Samson's life is a sad reminder of the price of sin. Samson was an arrogant, immoral, and irresponsible leader. His life was in many ways a waste. He was the leader of the people of Israel for twenty years, yet he accomplished far more in his death than he had with his entire life. If he had only sought God, how differently things would have turned out.

But, locked away in a Philistine prison, Samson sorrowfully grinds the grain of his enemies. Round and round he pushes the heavy wheel that grinds the wheat. It's a mindless job and he's blind now, so there is nothing for him to see. Alone in his dirty cell, however, Samson has lots of time to think, to reflect on his life and his relationship with God. But even in the darkness of his prison cell, a ray of hope breaks through. The Bible says, "But before long, his hair began to grow back" (vs. 22). Again, His power was not in his hair but in what his hair symbolized - his dedication to God. If Samson renewed that dedication, then perhaps God might restore his power.

With that glimmer of hope, Samson finally experiences a timely repentance. What amazing grace Samson discovered in that prison. He didn't deserve a second chance; he'd already had dozens of chances. But in spite of his continual sin and failure, the Spirit of God was with Samson in that prison, not to empower him as before but to lead him to repentance and a heart of faith.

One day the Philistine tyrants declared a great festival to celebrate the capture of Samson. The people made sacrifices to their god, Dagon their idol of fertility and crops, and gave him credit for Samson's incarceration. Not realizing the change that was taking place within Samson nor noticing that his hair was growing back, they called for Samson to be brought out for their entertainment. The Philistine temple was filled to capacity, brimming with more than three thousand pagan men and women who all shouted and jeered when Samson came out on stage. Under the roar of the crowd, Samson whispered a simple prayer of faith. "Sovereign Lord, remember me again. O God, please strengthen me just one more time" (vs. 28).

With that said, Samson asked one of his fellow servants to position him between the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Cloaked in darkness, yet able to feel the grainy sandstone pillars with the palms of his hands, he braced himself between them and then, as if still a part of his prayer, Samson sighed, "Let me die with the Philistines" (vs. 30). God not only heard his prayer but granted his request. As Samson pressed with all his might against the supporting pillars, the whole place began to crack and pop until finally the whole roof collapsed, crushing everyone inside and utterly destroying Israel's enemy.

As far as I can tell, this was Samson's first and only act of faith. But that was enough. In the eleventh hour, Samson made the decision that it is better to die for God, than to live

for himself. It was just one prayer and one act of faith after a lifetime of gluttony, gambling and gross immorality, but that's all it took.

We're told that Samson did not finish the job of delivering Israel from Philistine oppression; that was accomplished under the prophet Samuel and King David. We can only speculate on what Samson might have done had he more carefully followed his calling.

Will our lives amount to anything? Will we make a difference in the lives of others? Is there hope for us when we go astray? Like Samson, God can bring us back and use us, in spite of our weakness. This is the heart of the Gospel message, a promise of grace, reconciliation and restoration. When we fully surrender to the Lord we can look back on our days with fond memories and few regrets. The lesson that Samson teaches us is one found throughout the entire Bible. The beauty of Grace is that it makes life unfair.

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