

Samson and the Philistines

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[0 : 00] Well, he sits in the cafeteria and an enormous slice of bun and its contents are just shoved into his mouth. He hears a noise. It's a gunshot.

An expletive is uttered from a mouthful of food and the remnants are left on the table and Dirty Harry exits the cafeteria. A gun is drawn from his belt. While continuing to chew his food, he calls upon the bank robber to halt.

The bank robber shoots and misses. Dirty Harry fires back and doesn't. The robber collapses. Accomplices follow. They meet similar fates. Screams follow from onlookers.

With food still in his mouth, it's amazing, after this period of time, Harry looks in disgust at the blood on his trousers. He coolly walks back past carrying onlookers toward the wounded first robber.

That robber lies wounded outside the bank and within easy reach of his shotgun. Harry walks up and he stands near the man and he surveys the scene. He looks at the robber looking at the gun.

[1 : 02] Aha, he says. I know what you're thinking. Did I fire six shots or only five? Then he says. Well, to tell you the truth, you know, in all excitement, I kind of lost track myself.

But being that this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in all the world and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question. Do you feel lucky?

The glint then comes from his eyes and he says, well, do you, punk? It's one of those famous lines of movie history in the last 30 years.

Anyway, the camera then pans, you might remember, toward the trembling hand of the robber and then it shifts to his eyes. Then the barrel of the .44 Magnum. And Dirty Harry realises that the robber has chosen the better part.

And so he grabs the shotgun and he walks off. And the robber yells out to him. Hey! It's a really plaintive cry from a strained, inquiring face.

[2 : 00] He says, I've got to know. So Dirty Harry turns back. He walks back to the robber. He raises the gun. He cocks it. He points it toward the head of the robber.

And the robber gasps in horror. And Dirty Harry fires. There's no bullet, though. And so he laughs. He turns and he walks away. And the robber curses him as sirens announce the arrival of the rest of the police.

Now, friends, Dirty Harry represents, I think, a common figure in literature and movies. You might recognise him. Where from? By the way, we might call this breed of heroes the punishers.

He's not like Robin Hood. He's not like the other noble crooks throughout history or in literature. No. He's somewhat like the Count of Monte Cristo from Dumas.

He is a figure who enacts justice and vengeance with scant regard for propriety and the technicalities of law. These figures in our, in modern cinema or in semi-modern cinema can be played by, you might recognise them.

[3 : 08] Clint Eastwood. Sylvester Stallone. Charles Bronson. Charles Bronson. Bruce Willis. And a host of others. They are still being produced today. And these punishers, I think, tap into a deep desire.

It is a desire for justice. It is a desire for justice. For payback. Even rough justice if it is necessary. These heroes are sometimes noble but often erratic.

And I'm not lording them before you because they are loose cannons. They thrive and are excused when battling an audience who sees them battling a shared enemy.

Friends, I want you to understand this because I want you to understand a bit about Samson. I think Samson is a figure like that in Israel's history. You see, in our last few Bible talks from Judges, we have met one of Israel's most despised enemies.

Not a thug robbing a bank. But the Philistines. You need to understand that in biblical history, they are the threat from the unknown.

[4 : 13] They were a very technologically advanced nation. They were able. They were cunning. They were religiously different. They were the other. And Israelites feared them.

They were on the edges of Israel's boundary, constantly making incursions. They were feared by the Israelites. But Samson had no such fear.

And that's part of the reason, I think, why we like him to some extent. He's a rogue. We know he's not good. But somehow we love him.

And he's been lorded all the way through history. Samson had no such fear. He infiltrated. He had quirks, idiosyncrasies, a strange propensity for riddles.

He had the feel of a wild man, a bandit, a lawless one. He looked wild with his dreadlocks. But there was something endearing about him. He even had a flaw that was taboo.

[5 : 12] And at the same time, a weakness. He had this strange fascination for the women of the enemy. Friends, this is Samson. Samson the punisher. And I want you to bear that in mind as we look at this story today.

Because we see him in full flight here. Flip back to chapter 13. Open your Bibles. Very important to have them open. Flip back to chapter 13. We start off in verse 1.

With the Lord delivering Israel into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years. Then we're introduced to the wife of Manoah from the tribe of Dan. His wife is barren.

However, an angel visits her and promises her a male child. He is to be a Nazarite from birth. That is, he's to be a dedicated man, a set-aside man. The angel particularly mentions that his head is never to be touched by a razor.

Also in verse 5. She is told that he will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Manoah's wife reports this news to her husband in verse 6. However, she fails to mention the explicit instructions of the angel.

[6 : 14] There is no reference to shaving. There is no reference to delivering Israel from the Philistines. There is no reference to him being a Nazarite. And let me tell you friends, I do not think that Samson is aware of those things either.

In other words, Manoah's wife fails to communicate what is most important about her son's destiny to her husband. And I think probably to her son as well. Manoah responds by asking the messenger to visit again.

But I want you to notice something, you see. He explicitly asks about the boy's work. What he is to do. The angel merely repeats what Manoah's wife had said.

The angel doesn't tell him either. The angel fails to report the two critical items of no shaving and delivering Israel. We begin to wonder if perhaps God is hiding his intentions.

And whether Manoah's wife does not tell Samson as well. Maybe God is going to work through Samson without Samson even knowing God's intentions for him.

[7 : 16] Anyway, by the end of chapter 13, we're told that the Lord's spirit begins to stir in Samson. Now, given the normal pattern of the Lord's spirit, we therefore expect that he will begin to engage with the Philistines in some military endeavor.

That's what normally goes on in the book of Judges, doesn't it? But no, what happens when the Lord's spirit stirs up Samson? Well, we hear in chapter 14 that Samson goes down to Timnah and seeks a wife from the Philistines.

It's not what we expect. Then the narrator tells us something bizarre in verse 4. He tells us that this was from the Lord. That is him going down to seek a wife from the Philistines in Timnah.

The Lord was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines, we're told. And we think, well, hang on, what's going on here? This is not normal pattern. Somehow and for some reason, he is going to use Samson's proposed marriage to confront the Philistines.

Anyway, the marriage ceremony certainly does provoke disturbed relationships with the Philistines. At the end of chapter 14, there has been a significant fallout between Samson and the Philistines.

[8 : 19] Samson kills a few Philistines and pillages their clothes in order to fulfill a foolish promise he made to the Philistines. He returns home to his father's home without his Philistine wife. So at the beginning of chapter 15, we see, sorry, beginning of chapter 13, we see a miraculous birth and a great promise of a deliverer.

We expect something special. However, by the end of chapter 14, we're scratching our heads and wondering what on earth is going on. We have a country strong man who is overly interested in Philistine women, not Israelite women, but prohibited Philistine women.

He has a propensity for playing games and making up riddles. He seems somewhat adolescent and immature. He likes doing what is right in his own eyes. His choice of a wife was exactly that, that which was right in his own eyes.

He forces his decisions upon others. He treats his dedication as a Nazarite carelessly. He looks like a hot headed lout.

And we find ourselves scratching our heads and wondering what on earth is going on here? Can God use a man like this? And that brings us to our chapter for today. Let's take a quick run through it together.

[9 : 29] First thing we're told is verse one is that some time has passed. It is later on. And it is the time of the wheat harvest. Now Samson goes off to visit his wife. He takes a gift, perhaps by way of an offering.

Moreover, we're told that he intends to go to his wife's room. That probably means he intends to go and consummate his marriage. But look at the end of verse one. The father says not on your life, as it were.

He prohibits him. He explains that he'd given the daughter to one of Samson's wedding companions. He then offers his other daughter by way of conciliation and says she's more attractive anyway.

Samson's frustration, though, erupts. His anger bursts forth. He will get even and he'll harm the Philistines. In verse four, we're told that Samson goes out and he devises a plan to use a multitude of foxes with torches attached to their tails.

It is bizarre, isn't it? I mean, you would never think of doing this, would you? But let me tell you, it's very effective. His fiery temper gives rise to the use of fire as a weapon.

[10 : 33] And the results are enormous. Look at verse five. The shocks and the standing grain are burnt up. So are the vineyards and olive groves. Now, let me tell you the ramifications of this.

We need to remember that this is an agrarian society. Grains, vineyards, olive groves are the economic and dietary staples of ancient Palestine.

No grain, no vineyards, no olives means no food means no trade. It is potent what he's done. Samson has stripped the Philistines bare economically.

And they are angry. Look at verse six. They ask who the culprit is. Samson's legitimate claim to being the culprit is acknowledged. It's Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law.

And his wife had been given to his companion. And that brings us to the second half of verse six. Have a look at it. This time, some movement comes from the Philistines. They go up this time.

[11 : 30] There's a deep irony in what happens, you see. After all, Samson's wife, do you remember way back in chapter 13? This was about three weeks ago. So Samson's wife gave Samson's, or chapter 14, gave Samson's riddle away.

Do you remember why? To avoid being burnt up with her whole family. Now, her father's actions have led to her and her father being burnt to death.

Revenge is now piling upon revenge. The Philistines obtained the solution to the wedding riddle from Samson's wife. The result, Samson killed 30 Philistines to pay the debt.

The Philistine father then gives Samson's wife to another man. The result is Samson burns the Philistine fields and the Philistines themselves enact revenge on the father and Samson's wife with fire.

But things don't stop there. Look at verse seven. Samson says, since you have acted like this, I swear that I won't stop till I get my revenge on you. And sure enough, he does. Look at verse eight. We're told that he attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them.

[12 : 32] Literally, it says, he smote them leg upon thigh, a great slaughter. Samson's attempt to find a partner has ended where?

In aloneness. Can you see it? End of verse eight. He goes down and stays on his own in a cave in the rock of Etam. Now, let's now move to the next stage.

Samson may be alone, but his actions have had a much broader ramification. He is from the tribe of Dan, a relatively minor tribe.

However, the Philistines decide that they'll express their anger, not towards Dan, but towards another tribe, a major tribe, the tribe of Judah. They go up and they camp in Judah and the Judahites are worried.

They inquire as to why the Philistines have come against them. And the Philistines are very clear about it. They've come to take Samson prisoner. So three thousand men of Judah go off at the bidding of the Philistines to apprehend one rogue Danite in a cave.

[13 : 34] But look at what they say to Samson in the second half of verse 11. It's a picture of a tribe. Now, you've got to remember about Judah. Do you remember about Judah? Who they're meant to be the tribe from which the leaders of Israel will come.

OK, they're meant to be that tribe. Israel is meant to have the Lord as their ruler. But look at what they say to Samson. Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us, not God, but the Philistines.

And so they charged Samson with guilt. Earlier, the Philistines said they wanted to do what Samson did to them. Now Samson responds to the men of Judah saying, oh, it's just doing what they did to me. Friends, it's the world out of control.

Can you see the cycle going on here? People doing what is right in their own eyes, no matter who they are. Betrayals, revenge. And God apparently sidelined by his own people.

Anyway, Samson caves in to the Judahites in verse 13. He agrees that they can bind him and that they can hand him over to the Philistines. He just asks that they do not kill him themselves.

[14 : 36] And in anticipation of what will happen to him with Delilah in the very next chapter, which we'll get to next week, they bind him with two new strong ropes. Now, with all of that, we come to verse 14.

The men of Judah are leading Samson toward the Philistines. They're approaching a place called Lehi. The Philistines apparently can taste retribution and revenge. And so they shout out in battle.

But their shout is meant by the rousing of the Lord. Look at verse 14. The spirit of the Lord comes powerfully on Samson. The ropes of his arms became like charred flax and the bindings dropped from his hands.

In a possible further breach of his Nazarite obligations, Samson takes apart a corpse, a fresh jawbone of a donkey. It's not a weapon I'd think of naturally.

But nevertheless, he takes it. And with that, he strikes down a thousand men. Then he celebrates with another riddle that is full of wordplay. Let me read it to you. He says, with a donkey's jawbone, a heap, two heaps.

[15 : 42] With a donkey's jawbone, I've killed a thousand men. We've seen victory songs before in Israel's history. Do you remember the word? How do victory songs normally work if Israel is going to sing and thank?

They're going to thank God, aren't they? That's normally what they do. Usually the victory songs of Israel are full of God. Just think of Deborah back in chapter four and five. But despite the initiative of the spirit of the Lord here, he gets no mention on the lips of Samson.

Samson does not speak of the Lord here. It's full of himself. We get Samson at the center of things. In verse 17, he throws away the jawbone and the place of victory is called Ramath Lahey, or if you want a contemporary translation, Jawbone Hill.

Then we meet a small but positive glimpse of Samson. Look at verse 18. It's only he's thirsty. And the presentation of him throughout the story has been that of a wild man, a self-made man, willful, scheming, strong, independent.

However, without the spirit of the Lord, he cannot have victory. And without God, he cannot even live. Without water that God supplies, he cannot live.

[16 : 54] It's not one of the great prayers of the Bible, this one. But here Samson cries out to the Lord. He puts himself in right perspective. He is the Lord's servant. He recognized the Lord as the giver of victory.

You have given your servant this great victory. And he recognizes the enemies, the enemies of God's people. He calls them the uncircumcised. And the Lord opens up this hollow place in Lahey and Samson is allowed to live.

And the spring is called En Hakore, which means Caller's Spring. Now, Samson may have been able to kill a thousand Philistines, but he cannot do it without God's spirit.

And like Israel in the wilderness, he can't even save his own life in the desert without some help from God. But now look at the chapter's end, friends. See if you can spot the difference.

Remember back to the references, the other references about Judges. Do you remember, as we've worked through the book of Judges, there's been a standard phrase that is used. Let me remind you by just giving you some of them.

[17 : 56] Listen to the general pattern when you're speaking about Judges. Look at the reference to Samson here.

It is unique. See if you can spot the difference. Verse 20. Our writer tells us, Samson led Israel for 20 years in the days of the Philistines.

Did you hear the difference? It's all in the end. The Philistines remain. The overlords remain. Samson led Israel for 20 years in the days of the Philistines.

And they're not got rid of. We were told right at the beginning of this story that Samson would begin to deliver Israel. He had lead in the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines.

But he has only scratched the surface here. We wait for another to complete the job and it won't happen until the books of Samuel. So, friends, there's the story. Now, before we try and tie all of this up, let's reflect on the participants here.

[19 : 08] Let's go through them just one by one. How would you summarize Samson? Well, it's not really that positive, is it? What is right in Samson's eyes is what is right in Samson's eyes. He is driven by self-interest. He is driven by what works for him. His lusts, his interests, his needs, his will, his desire for revenge. Even his prayer at the end has just little hints of self-interest.

And what about the Philistines? What do you think about them? Well, they're much the same. The father of Samson's wife is fickle and self-interested and without honor. The Philistines, like Samson, are bent on revenge.

They want what works for them. What about the men of Judah? Well, like all of Israel, they'll gladly forsake the Lord at the drop of a hat, but would never think of being faithless to the Philistines.

Did you notice that? They're willing to just be faithless to God, but not the Philistines. They simply want what is good in their own eyes.

[20 : 10] They are spineless like all of Israel. They are no different from the Philistines. But what about the other participant? What about the Lord? Well, this story has told us of his involvement right from the beginning.

It is he who delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years. Chapter 13, verse 1. It is he who sends a messenger to a barren woman. It is he who raises up Samson to begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.

It is he who blesses Samson and begins to stir his spirit in him. It is he who sought to use Samson's sinful actions to confront the Philistines. Chapter 14, verse 4. It is he who causes his spirit to come powerfully on Samson to overcome the lion.

It is him who enables him to defeat the men of Ashkelon in chapter 14. It is he who gives Samson the ability to free himself from his bindings and defeat the Philistines in our chapter.

It is he who keeps Samson alive with water in verse 19. Friends, God is very active here. But friends, I want you to notice all of this. And I wanted to lead into the way I want to finish today.

[21 : 16] I want to reflect on what I call the terror and beauty of the story of Samson. The terror and beauty. You see, this man Samson is the last of the great judges.

And what have we found so far in him? First of all, I want you to notice that there is no hint in this story that Samson has any knowledge about his God-appointed role.

There is no evidence, I think, that he understood himself to be Israel's deliverer. There is no indication that his mother passed on any of the angels' message to either husband or son. Moreover, there is no evidence in the text that Samson saw himself in this light.

Instead, what have we found him to be? He is a man motivated by personal vengeance, isn't he? What we have found with him is a lusty, disobedient, self-centered, willful, strong man.

I don't think he is a nice man in the end. He is someone who somehow, though, is on the side of God. Even though he be unaware, even if he is attracted to Philistine women, he is against the Philistines, even as God is.

[22 : 22] Now, we cannot condone the way he goes about it, just like we cannot condone Dirty Harry and his ways of doing things. But nevertheless, he does deal with the Philistine problem.

God does use him. So what's the terror in this passage? The terror is Samson himself in all his humanness. You see, Samson is just all too human, isn't he?

He is not a man to be like in his humanness. But if that's the terror of this passage, what's the beauty of this passage? The beauty is that somehow he's God's man doing God's job.

At his best, he's a man who knows he's God's servant and can name himself as that. At his best, he can cast himself upon God's help. Friends, this mix of terror and beauty doesn't stop there.

Think about it for a moment. This mix of terror and beauty can come in different proportions, but it is the story of the Bible, isn't it? And it's the story of our lives in the end too, isn't it?

[23 : 27] Think about it. Think about the most wicked deed that has ever been inflicted on any person in any location in time in human history. Think about the death of God's own son, the most wicked deed in human history.

Humans who take God's deliverer, God's son, and hang him naked on a cross outside of God's city.

An act of supreme terror by humans against God. And yet in that event, the greatest beauty is enacted. In that event, the salvation of the world is made possible.

Listen to Peter in his very first sermon as a Christian in Acts 2. He ponders this very enigma as he says these things. He turns to the Israelites gathered on Pentecost Day.

And he says, fellow Israelites, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth, a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

[24 : 36] So he says, look, think about Jesus. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. Can you hear this? God handed his own son over to the rulers of Israel.

And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to a cross. You, God's people, Israelites, handed him over and nailed him to a cross.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. I wonder if you can hear this, you see.

A man from God who comes to the people of God according to the plan of God, an act of great beauty for the salvation of humanity. But they, the humans, put him to death by nailing him to a cross, an act of great terror.

And then God vindicates him and causes him to be the agent and means of salvation. But it doesn't stop there when you think about it, does it? The Apostle Paul ponders the very same thing. He wonders about himself.

[25 : 46] The worst of sinners, as he calls himself. The persecutor of the people of God. A terrorizer of the people of God. And yet, he says, God confronted him, turned him, and appointed him as apostle to the Gentiles.

He reflects on this in the epistles to Timothy. Through this chief of sinners comes an act of great beauty.

Friends, this ability of God to allow terror and beauty to mingle for good is our only hope. God is not responsible for the terror.

But he can craft from terror great beauty. You see, this ability of God to allow terror and beauty to mingle for good is our only hope in the end.

For underneath it all, Samson is Israel. And Israel is us. And left on our own, we face the terror that waits for our sin. But friends, God can make new worlds.

[26 : 51] He can create beauty where there once was terror. He can mold new things. This is an enormous comfort. It is something to cling to.

It is something to hang on to. Because if God can do this with a Samson, if he can do this on the cross, he can craft incredible things in our lives as well.

And friends, without God, we can do nothing. Let's pray. Father, we thank you.

Father, thank you for this comfort.

Father, we thank you for this.

[28 : 04] In Jesus' name. Amen.