

Failures and Faithfulness: Samson

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 12, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Judges 13:1-5, 24-25; 14:1-3; 15:14-17; 16:1-5, 21-30

Read Judges 13:1-5. So the life of Samson begins with a miracle and a dedication. God moves and a woman who everyone thought was unable to have children gives birth to a child, an angel visits and makes it clear that this child is special. This child is set apart for service to God and God's people. The rest of the chapter the angel comes back and underlines the special purpose of God.

Read 13:24-25. And now here is the first thing this special child does. Let's just say it's not some great act of servanthood.

Read Judges 14:1-3. So Samson ends up engaged to this Philistine woman, and the wedding is scheduled. Before the wedding, Samson makes a bet with his groomsmen, all 30 of them. He gives them a riddle that comes from something that happened to him. A little while before the wedding, Samson met and killed a young lion with his bare hands. A few days later he comes by the carcass and finds that some bees have made a honeycomb in the body, so he takes some honey out of the comb and eats it. He makes his riddle about the lion. "Out of the eater something to eat. Out of the strong something sweet." The groomsmen can't figure out the riddle, but they don't want to lose the bet so they threaten the bride. They say find out the riddle or your family gets hurt. She gives up the secret and Samson loses the bet. In retaliation, he kills 30 Philistine men and takes their clothes to pay his debt. Things escalate from there. His fiancé ditches him for one of the groomsmen. In retaliation he burns their fields with torches tied to fox tails. In retaliation, the Philistines murder his ex-wife. In retaliation, Samson kills a whole bunch more Philistines. In retaliation, the Philistines muster an army to capture Samson. The Israelites are afraid of the Philistine army so they beg Samson to surrender. Samson lets them tie him up and bring him to the enemy camp. Here's what happens.

Read Judges 15:14-17. After the jawbone battle, things seem to quiet down. But eventually Samson's wandering eye gets him in trouble again.

Read Judges 16:1-5. Well it only took Samson 5 verses to get mixed up with some very complicated women. Delilah turns out to be the most complicated though. She takes the silver and though it takes 4 tries, she wheedles the truth out of Samson. Samson tells her that if his hair is cut, he will lose his power and have the strength of an ordinary man. In the middle of the night, she cuts off his hair. The Philistines come and Samson tries to fight them but he can't, because, as the text said, the Lord had left him. Here's how the saga of Samson ends.

Read Judges 16:21-30. In this sermon series, we've been looking at Biblical characters who fail. Up till now the failures have been high-minded. Adam and Eve fail because they want independence and mastery. Moses fails because he is working at the craft of leadership and he's begun to think of himself as indispensable to God's purposes. Both these failures are related to the higher and nobler aspirations of humankind. The desire for independence and mastery. The desire for leadership excellence. These can be noble things. But now here is Samson. Do Samson's failures have to do with the high and noble aspirations of humankind? Not so much. Samson is a man who is driven by his appetites. And these appetites are not high and noble; Samson is driven by the more basic appetites: food, revenge, and women. Especially women. Samson is a man with large appetites and low self-control. He wants what he wants and when he sees what he wants, he grabs it.

This is especially strange when you consider how his life began and what he is called to. He is a young man set apart for service to God and his people. He was not put on this earth to indulge his appetites; he was given a mission to serve God, a mission given by an angel and confirmed by a miraculous birth. And not only that, he is supposed to be a Nazirite. A Nazirite was a kind of Old Testament monk, you can read about the vows of their order in Numbers 6, and if you look there you will see that their service was supposed to be full of discipline. He was supposed to practice exceptional self-denial. He was supposed to have exceptional focus and restraint. Instead, he just followed his appetites.

A Nazirite was never supposed to touch or even be in the presence of a dead body. The rule was so strict; they weren't allowed to go to family funerals. Samson pays no attention to the rule. He kills the lion on the road and touches its dead body. He uses the jawbone of a dead donkey as a weapon. And he comes into contact with all the bodies of the men he kills. He makes no effort to observe this vow.

A Nazirite wasn't supposed to eat unclean things or drink wine. Samson sees the honey in the dead carcass of the lion he killed, and without hesitation he goes over and eats it and brings some of the contaminated honey to his parents as well. Samson sees honey. Samson wants honey. Samson eats honey. It's all about the appetite. Never mind his vows.

Like all Israelites, Samson is supposed to get involved with Israelite women. Samson seems to make absolutely no effort whatsoever to stay within those bounds. Samson went down to Timnah and, behold there he saw a young Philistine woman. Mom Dad, get her for me! I want her. Samson goes to Gaza and sees a prostitute, and acts on his desire. Again, no hesitation and no sign of self-control. Samson sees the girl. He wants the girl. He goes after the girl. He puts no boundaries on his appetites.

One more failure: Samson is given a special mission to be a leader of God's people, to rally them together and free them from the Philistines. But does he do that? Is Samson a leader of Israel? Is there any point in the story where he rallies God's people together and calls them back to God?" NO. Sure he kills a lot of Philistines, but all the people he kills are killed in revenge for slights against himself. He's not fighting for the Lord; he's avenging personal grievances. He kills 30 philistines because he lost his bet. He set the fields on fire because they took away his wife. He kills all those men with the jawbone of a donkey because they're out to get him. And then when he sings his little victory song, he gives no credit to the Lord for his deliverance. That's what you're supposed to do when you win a victory over your enemies. That's what other Old Testament people do after a victory. That's what Deborah does in chapter 7 after she defeats Sisera; she sings a song of praise to the Lord. That's what David does in the Psalms. Take a look at Psalm 118, it's a Psalm of praise for the victory given in battle. "Thank you Lord! I will make an offering!" says David. Samson's victory song is all about him. He stands over the bodies of 1000 Philistines, he thumps his chest and says, "Hey world, look what I did. I am the man!" He brags like an insecure middle school boy.

It is almost too easy to point out Samson's shortcomings. His behavior is so outrageous, so extreme, you can keep him at a distance. You can look at his behavior, shake your head, and say "Samson, wow! Dude is messed up. Glad I'm not like him!" But the Bible won't let us do that. In fact, the story wants us to the opposite. The story wants us to identify with Samson. The story wants us to see ourselves in Samson.

How is that so? In the book of judges, Samson's story is clearly meant to parallel the whole story of Israel. Samson's story is Israel's story. Though Samson lived hundreds of years before the exile, the story as we have it now comes from the time of the Babylonian captivity. That's when the Holy Spirit caused these old stories of Israel to be written down and preserved. And if you were an Israelite in exile in Babylon and someone read you Samson's story, you would say, "O my goodness that's us! That's our story!"

Why would you say that? Just like Samson the nation of Israel began with a special call, a commission to be a light to the world. Just like Samson the story of Israel begins with the birth of a miraculous child to a childless couple; Abraham and Sarah. Just like Samson, Israel was set apart by God, called to obedience, and given special rules to follow. Just like Samson, Israel ignored those rules and followed her appetites over and over again. Just like Samson, Israel had an eye for foreign gods and foreign women. And just like Samson, her sins got Israel taken captive and put in chains. And in perhaps the most striking parallel of all, in II Kings 25 when Israel is taken into captivity, do you remember what they did to Zedekiah the king of Israel of that day? That's right. They put out his eyes. Samson's story is Israel's story. For an Israelite living years later in the time of the Babylonian captivity, the parallels would have been inescapable.

And it's not just Israel who is supposed to identify with Samson, we are too. Samson's story is Israel's story, but Samson's story is our story too. Like Samson we are called to a special mission in the world, to proclaim God's glory and to help set people free from their captivity. Like Samson our mission began right at the beginning of our life: in our baptism we are called to this work. Like Samson, we are given a rule of life. God tells us how to live and calls us to a disciplined life of service and sacrifice.

But just like Samson our appetites get us in trouble. Are we really any more faithful than Samson most of the time? Are we really more dedicated than him? I'm not so sure. Of course we are a little more discreet

than he is. Our sins of appetite aren't quite so flagrant and dramatic. Thankfully, most of us are not publicly consorting with prostitutes or indulging in revenge killings. We have learned to indulge our appetites in more discreet, more socially acceptable ways. We chase socially acceptable dreams of success, prosperity, and leisure.

Let's be honest about what's in our hearts. Let's look at the places where the eyes of our heart tend to rest. Let's look at our real dreams, our real hopes. We are called to be God's representatives in this world. To show his love, to witness to his salvation. We are called to love God and our neighbor with all our heart soul mind and strength. One Holy passion, filling all my frame, right? But, be honest, are our dreams about bringing God's salvation to the world? Are our hearts and minds full of the work of his kingdom, bringing his justice and his peace? Are our daydreams about making a disciple out of our unsaved neighbor and feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and housing the homeless and bringing the kingdom of God? Or are our daydreams about pleasures like having a cozy house, a stable family, a secure job, and something fun to do for the weekend? Are our dreams about the new car, the cool vacation, the remodeled kitchen?

I am ashamed to say that this cozy vision of middle class security gets more of my attention than it should. "And it came to pass that Pastor Jonker went down to Timnah, I mean 29th Street, and saw there a Tesla Model S. When he returned home he said to his wife, "Behold, I have seen a Tesla Model S at the Dealership! Now get it for me for my driveway!" Granted it's not chasing prostitutes but it's absolutely a place where appetites can take over our hearts and our imaginations. Now don't get me wrong! There's nothing wrong with owning a Tesla or any other new car. We need cars to live in this world. The issue is, where is your heart? Where is your focus? What's filling your imagination? Look carefully and honestly at the story of Samson and it's not the story of some womanizing judge who lived long ago. It's a story that caused Israel to reflect on her faithfulness, and it's a story that causes us to reflect on the state of our own hearts.

But it's not just a story that causes us to reflect on the state of our hearts, it's also a story that should cause us to think about the source of our salvation. Here's an interesting thing about Samson: he shows up in the faith hall of fame. You know the faith hall of fame, don't you? You've probably visited it. It's in Hebrews 11. In that chapter the preacher of Hebrews celebrates men and women of faith from the Old Testament. All the greats are there. Abraham. Sarah. Moses. Joseph. David. And Samson is mentioned too! This undisciplined womanizer is in the faith hall of fame?! How can that be!? He's not in there on his own merits. He's in there because of someone else, someone his life points to.

The only real moment of real faithfulness in his life comes at the end. After he has been captured and shaved, after the Philistines have put out his eyes, Samson finally invokes God. It's the first time he seeks God's face in the entire story. "Lord, restore my strength!" In his death he finally fulfills the promise the angel made to his parents that Samson would deliver Israel from the Philistines. It's not perfect though. Notice that even his last minute prayer is corrupted with self-interest. Even here Samson isn't trying to glorify the name of God or save Israel, he's looking for personal revenge. Look at verse 28!

Samson has no merit to plead. Samson is in the faith hall of fame because his life points to the faithfulness of Another. Someone else born under miraculous circumstances to a woman who should never have been pregnant, this time because she is a virgin. Someone else whose birth was announced by an angel to a woman. Someone else who was given a special mission to bring salvation to his people. Someone else who was betrayed for some pieces of silver. Someone else who was mocked and put on display. Someone else who brought salvation by stretching out his arms in a moment of apparent defeat. Someone else who overcame his enemies, this time not by raining down crumbling stone on them, this time by unleashing a river of grace and mercy and forgiveness. A river of grace so strong that it is able to catch up someone like Samson, wash him clean and lift him up into the faith hall of fame. Grace, mercy and peace.

Which is good news for all of us people who struggle with our appetites and fail. It's also really good news for all of us who really love someone who has wandered away, who seems hopelessly far from faith. Seeing God's grace catch up someone like Samson gives us hope that the river of God's love can find our loved ones too.

©Rev. Peter Jonker