

“Partners in faith: Samson”

Judges 16:26-30

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We need more leaders like Samson. Israel was caught up in a terrible cycle of defeat, despair, and deliverance. The Book of Judges has enough twists and turns to make your head spin. The colorful cast of characters captivates our interest. We are just six verses into Judges when the Israelites, intent on claiming their place in the Promised Land, cut off the thumbs and big toes of a Canaanite ruler named Adoni-Bezek. Instead of complaining about the cruelty of the Israelites, the vanquished bad guy says, “Hey, I cut off the thumbs and big toes of 70 other kings...I guess I got what was coming.” Alright, so Judges is going to be that kind of a book. Judges is a book where violence begets violence. Judges is a book set in a lawless environment that would make the wild west blush.

Not long after one bad guy’s thumbs and toes are lopped off, we read of a left-handed champion delivering Israel by driving his sword deep into the bulging belly of another oppressive enemy. The bad guys’ belly is so big his gut swallows the sword, and he dies an awkward and embarrassing death in the privacy of his privy. Yes, Judges has bathroom humor and graphic violence. Rash decisions rule in Judges, none more so than the brashness of Jephthah, who vowed to the Lord that if he was given victory in battle, “Whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph belongs to the Lord...I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” Whatever comes out of his house is not a whatever, it is a whoever, and the whoever is his very own daughter, dancing with a tambourine to celebrate her father’s victory. Brokenhearted, her father celebrates his victory by keeping his unfortunate vow. When I say Judges has enough twists and turns to make your head spin, I also mean it has enough violence and bloodshed to make your stomach turn. Judges is not for the faint of heart. Israel is under attack by vicious and cruel enemies, and they will take relief in any form it comes.

Any form it comes, including Samson. But maybe I am selling Samson short. Maybe Samson isn't just another crude figure in a book with a cast resembling back-alley brawlers. Maybe Samson is the leader par excellence in the book of Judges. Samson is set apart from the beginning to be a special ruler for the people. Israel is suffering yet another long drought of leadership, forty years this time...forty years. That's how long Israel suffered before God raised up Samson. Forty years is how long they wandered in the desert. Remember how after just a few days the people wanted to give up during the dog days of the desert. After forty years, I guarantee you Israel was ready for anyone who would stand up and take on the bad guys. It turns out Samson wasn't just anyone.

The birth of Samson is set against the backdrop of God's blessing. An angel appeared to a couple who were childless, a couple who were convinced they would always be childless. Into their barrenness the angel promised a child. The child they were promised would be no ordinary child. This child would be the one to begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of their dreaded enemies, the Philistines. As a sign that the child was set apart for greatness, the couple were commanded to raise their son as a Nazirite. In Numbers 6 you can read about the vow of those who are to be a Nazirite. The Nazirite is set apart for the Lord. As a sign of being set apart for the Lord the Nazirite vow included drinking no fermented drink and not cutting your hair. Listener alert! Pay attention to that part about not cutting the hair. It plays a central role in the saga of Samson. After his birth we read, "Samson grew and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him..." (Judges 13:24, 25)

For the people of Israel, Samson's life might well have seemed like a carnival ride or a trip to the circus. The antics of this long-haired leader are marked by daring deeds, deeds that are reckless but pretty darn entertaining. Remember Israel had been under the thumb of the Philistines for forty years when Samson stepped up. Forty years! For forty years they had been kicked in the teeth and been subject to ridicule and shame. Forty years! Now they have a hero who is going to stand tall and show the Philistines Israel has a backbone...and providing some

well-deserved comic relief to a people who have languished for four decades as the butt of every joke, Samson shows Israel has a funny bone. A backbone and a funny bone. Both are on full display with Samson.

Samson's tale really is a cross between a circus and a carnival. His first act of power is displayed when we find out Samson is a Lion Tamer...and then some. Samson is headed off to Philistine territory because he has fallen in love with a beautiful young Philistine woman...but wait, I thought the Philistines were the enemies. They are. Samson's parents try to tell him the same thing. Couldn't you find a nice young Jewish girl? No, not Samson. Samson's life reminds us not every circus takes place under the big top. Samson's every waking moment has the atmosphere of a circus. Back to the Lion Tamer. On his way to his first wedding...yeah, get used to it. Nothing is conventional with Samson. On his way to his first wedding, he encounters a lion. The lion comes toward him roaring. Israel has been hiding and running scared of Philistines for forty years. A lion comes toward Samson roaring and Samson does not run. Samson does not cower in fear. Samson does not cry for help. Samson grabs that lion and tears it apart with his bare hands. You tell that story to a people who have been quaking in their boots and hiding from their own shadows and I guarantee they will sit up straight and pay full attention. We have that kind of a leader. Strong. Brave. Bold. Fearless. I can't wait until he meets the Philistines. Samson will show them you don't mess with Israel.

You don't have to wait long for Samson to meet the Philistines. Surprisingly, Samson does not meet the Philistines on the battlefield. He meets them at a wedding banquet. It is his own wedding banquet. Ignoring his parents' advice, Samson insists on doing things his way, and he marries the beautiful Philistine woman. The whole wedding party sits down to seven days of feasting and celebrating. When the party is in full swing, Samson issues a challenge. As part of the protocol for this big celebration Samson has been given thirty companions. We are led to believe all thirty of his companions are Philistines. They are his attendants at the wedding feast. Instead of ripping these Philistines apart like he did with the lion, Samson poses a riddle to them. The riddle is wrapped in a wager. If the Philistines solve the riddle, Samson will give

the thirty attendants thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. But if the Philistines cannot solve the riddle, they have to deliver to Samson the same prize.

The riddle is related to the lion so recently dismembered. Upon returning to the carcass of the vanquished lion, Samson found the carcass was home to a swarm of bees, who have conveniently made some honey inside the lion's carcass. Samson scoops up a handful of honey and even shares a bit with his parents who are traveling with him to the wedding. Samson now shows he is not just the barker at the carnival and not just the ringmaster of the circus, Samson is also familiar with those old Batman shows. Putting on his Riddler outfit he says to his thirty wedding companions, "Riddle me this. Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." That's the riddle, fellows. You have seven days to solve it. The clock is ticking.

A circus and a carnival are both examples of controlled chaos. Lion tamers and wild rollercoaster rides can all spin out of control in a hurry. Samson's little riddle spins out of control. By day four the wedding attendants are not just frustrated, they are on the verge of a violent response. They say to Samson's beautiful Philistine bride, "Either get your husband to tell us the answer, or we are going to burn you and your father's house to death." The circus theme and the carnival atmosphere cannot hide that these are desperate times for the Israelites, and the Philistines are not a well-mannered opponent. The Philistines play for keeps. Under threat from the thirty companions, Samson's beautiful Philistine wife throws herself at him, sobbing. Tell me the answer she pleads. Day after day she begs him for the answer. He finally gives in to her incessant pleas and tells her the answer. She immediately runs and tells the thirty companions, and in no time at all they are mocking Samson with the answer. "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" And by the way big boy, you owe us thirty garments and thirty sets of clothes. Pay the piper. Samson is livid. He has been betrayed by his wife. Burning with anger he finds thirty Philistines, strikes them down, strips them of their clothes and settles the score.

Happy to see someone who knows how to stick it to the enemy, you can just imagine Israel saying, “We need more leaders like Samson.” This hunk of a hero spits in the eye of the Philistines. Samson shines as a beacon declaring you cannot push Israel around. Not on my watch, says Samson. Chapter 16 in Judges tells of the aftermath of the wedding debacle. Samson is rejected by his would-be wife and her father. In anger he catches 300 foxes, ties their tails together in pairs, puts a torch on each pair of foxes, lights the torches, lets the foxes loose in the grainfields of the Philistines, and as his anger burns so do the fields of the dreaded enemies. That serves for justice in the book of Judges.

After the fiasco with the foxes, the Philistines come looking for Samson and find that he is hiding in a cave in a town belonging to the people of Judah. Samson is hiding among friends, but when the friends, the people of that town in Judah, are threatened by the Philistines that unless they turn over Samson they will suffer great harm, the people of the town of Judah are all too willing to hand over their hero. Some kind of thanks Samson receives. Samson agrees to be handed over. His own people bind him up with two new ropes and put him before the Philistines. Just when you think Samson’s goose is cooked, he flexes those big, huge biceps and breaks the ropes. The bindings all fall to the ground. Conveniently, there is a fresh jawbone of a donkey nearby. Samson grabs that jawbone and strikes down one thousand Philistines. And then he takes a victory lap. Samson is not shy about singing his own praise. If you are looking for humility and modesty, Samson is not your man. But if you have been beat down for forty years, you are tempted to join the parade as Samson saunters and sings, “With a donkey’s jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey’s jawbone, I have killed a thousand men.” And you get the impression the people of Israel watched their defender destroy their enemies and they all nodded at each other with satisfaction. “We need more leaders like Samson.”

But every circus eventually folds up the tent. Every carnival packs up the rides and heads out of town. Samson’s circus and carnival show come to an end one day. He falls in love with another woman...Delilah. The Philistines bargain with Delilah to find out the secret of Samson’s

strength. Somehow the relationship between Samson and Delilah is touted as a love story. Maybe so, but what a strange love story. Every night Delilah says in a sweet, sexy, and seductive voice, “Hey big fella, tell me how you got to be so strong.” Macho man says, “If anyone ties me with seven bowstrings that have not been dried, I’ll become as weak as any other man.” Delilah blows Samson an air kiss and says in a sultry voice, “I’m going to freshen up. Stay right where you are. I’ll be right back.” Delilah slips away and tells his secret, the Philistines pounce on him and instead of being as weak as any man, Samson snaps the bowstrings like they were silly string.

Delilah is undaunted...although deeply offended. “You lied to me. You made a fool of me. Now get serious. How can you be tied?” Exulting in his latest escapade, Samson baits the trap a second time. Use new ropes...then I’ll be weak.” Delilah whispers the secret to the bad guys, but when they come after Samson, he snaps those ropes right off. Delilah tries again. Samson gives a big wink to all of listening to this fascinating tale and says, “Weave the seven braids of my hair into the fabric of a loom and tighten it with a pin. Then I’ll be weak.” The words have barely left his mouth when he is attacked, he pulls the pin and the loom, and once again, he drops the boom. Delilah is both indignant and incessant. She keeps nagging him. Tell me the truth. Samson relents and says the secret is his hair. It’s never been cut. If it’s cut, so is my strength. Way back at his birth, we remember this is the truth. His strength is linked to the vow that was made that he would be a Nazirite. A razor was never to touch his head. That night a razor touches his head, the vow is broken, his strength vanishes, the enemies attack, they beat him up and gouge out his eyes and the fallen hero is carted off and imprisoned.

Just when you thought the circus and carnival were wrapped up and the show is over, Samson has one more act. It is a glorious ending, as endings that end in death go. Samson is brought out, beaten and bowed down, blinded by his enemies, and after all the trouble he caused the Philistines they want to have a big time mocking the man who was once so mighty. They bring Samson into the temple of their false god Dagon. They want to praise their god for their victory. Everyone was in

high spirits as they called, “Bring out Samson to entertain us.” Without realizing they were courting disaster in the court of their god, they put Samson between two pillars. The two pillars support the temple. Grasping in his blindness Samson finds those two pillars and places his hands on them. Since his defeat, the defeat caused by cutting his hair, that hair has grown back. Praying to God... Samson doesn't do much praying to God in the many chapters he is with us in Judges, but now, humbled by defeat, recognizing his mortality, perhaps regretting his pride, Samson prays. “Please God, strengthen me just once more.” God hears his prayers. With all his might Samson pushes against the pillars, the pillars fall, the temple is destroyed. The temple falls on all those who gathered to mock him. As the curtain falls on the Samson's remarkable life we are left with this satisfying conclusion. “Thus, he killed many more when he died than while he lived.” Rolling up the scroll, I imagine many an Israelite, many an Israelite who endured forty years of suffering and humiliation saying, “We need more leaders like Samson.”

I wonder how many Jewish families had Samson themed birthday parties for their kids. They might have had a pinata in the shape of a lion. When that pinata burst, just like the honey that was discovered by Samson, all kinds of sweet treats would fall to the ground for happy children to scoop up. You could have one of those cut-out figures with a hole for you to stick your head in and take a picture. Samson, muscles rippling, biceps and abdomens, flexing, a big square jaw, and that long, fabulous flowing Fabio hair. What kid could resist poking their head through that cut-out and pretending they had the strength of Samson. And for the big finale all the kids would gather inside a flimsily constructed temple. With each kid holding fast to a pillar of that temple on the count of three they would all give a huge push. Celebrating the fall of the temple they would depart with a donkey's jawbone as a party favor. Lesson to your children, who have watched as the Philistines spend forty years being the big bad bully on the playground, “We need more leaders like Samson.”

Maybe so. We certainly are drawn in our society to strong leaders. Sometimes brash and arrogant leaders. Outsized personalities attract a lot of followers. Heroes of old are named Hercules and Thor, Paul

Bunyan and Andre the Giant. We even still get attracted to long hair and muscles...can anyone say, "Hulk Hogan." After forty years of getting sand kicked in your face by the bullies, who can blame Israel for saying, "We need more leaders like Samson."

The problem is for hundreds of years, for centuries, Israel kept clamoring after those kinds of leaders. Give us a king. The king they get is Saul. Of course! They get Saul as the king because he stands a full head taller than anyone else. When the strong kings of Israel fail as leaders, they all turn to the Egyptians, or the Assyrians. We are weak. We need strength. Give us another Samson type leader. Send us an army. Horses, swords, chariots. We want to be strong.

God gave Israel their fill of strong leaders. Time and time again the people found out how empty things are with strong leaders. Admittedly, a strong leader can do good, and sometimes they did. But Israel kept ending up in the same mess. Instead of drawing close to God, instead of being faithful to God, instead of serving God, instead of living out the commands and fulfilling the covenant of loving God and loving their neighbor, Israel's history continued to read like an entertainment report from the latest carnival or circus.

I struggle to know what it is we are supposed to learn from Samson. I love the story. I enjoy the story. But what does it all mean? I don't know.

What I do know is this. One day God showed up in person. When God showed up in person, God did not choose to stick his head through a cut out of Samson, strong and handsome, cocky and conceited. No, God showed up in a dramatically different way. God came to lead us. God came in person to lead us. He led us by being a servant. The devil tried to get Jesus to stick his head through the carnival boards. "Here's one, turning stones into bread. Poke your head through this and people will love it. Or this one, making a spectacular fall from the highest point of the temple...poke your head through here...people are thrilled by a high wire act. Or how about this, a king on the biggest throne...poke your head through that, enjoy all the privilege that comes with being a

king.” Jesus didn’t poke his head through any of those carnival and circus cut-outs.

When Jesus poked his head into our world, he did it by reaching out and touching a leper, by lifting up a lame man, by wiping the tears of a weeping woman, by wrapping a towel around his own waist and washing the feet of his disciples. About the only thing Jesus and Samson have in common is how they died. Samson placed his hands on the pillars of the temple and pressed with all his might, bringing down that temple. When Jesus died, he stretched his arms out and placed them firmly against the pillars of despair, the pillars of sin, the pillars of loneliness, the pillars of brokenness, the pillars of sadness, the pillars of all that is evil and cruel in this world, the pillars of the devil and his devastating darkness, the pillars of death. Jesus stretched out his arms against those pillars. Jesus pressed with all his might against those pillars. And those pillars came crashing to the ground. Every single one of them. When Jesus stretched out his arms and died on the cross, every pillar, every dividing wall of hostility came crashing to the ground. That is the cut-out Jesus chose. Jesus poked his head out through the cross. And it wasn’t strength that won the victory. It was love. It was sacrificial love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” And in the end, his death brought hope and healing to a broken world.