

Series: God in the Midst of the Chaos

“Samson: Reluctant Saint”

Introduction: In recent months my heart has been drawn to a prayer, found in a resource called *The Book of Common Prayer*, in a section called “Prayers and Thanksgivings.” The prayer heading is: “For the Human Family,” and it goes like this (p. 815):

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in the bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sadly, phrases like arrogance and hatred, walls that separate us, and struggle and confusion, all make this prayer highly relevant, not only in the days of the judges, but in our own time. Yet also important to note is that in the midst of the chaos, the prayer calls out to the God who continues to work out his purposes for the world, that he would accomplish those purposes not only through us, but also, even, despite us!

Working out his creative purposes for the world is certainly what we see God do in and through and despite Samson. Often, Samson is held up as a mighty hero. More appropriately, I think, is Samson understood as a reluctant saint, as one who God has set apart to work through, but who seems to do everything he can to run from that call. In that regard, perhaps, Samson calls us to face our own inner struggles as fallible and flawed human beings, and turns us toward the one who, in reality, is the true and mighty hero—the Lord of heaven and earth. Last week we considered the birth of Samson, today we’ll look at his life and his death. [READ ch. 14]

I. Running from the Vow

A. If, after hearing his birth described last week, we were expecting a wonderful, godly deliverer in Samson, the three chapters that describe his life, a life filled with the pursuit of power and violence and lust and revenge, put that expectation to rest! As we’ve seen, the book of Judges take us on a downward spiral toward the people of God living as they saw fit, doing what was “right in their own eyes,” as the last verse in the book puts it (21:25). Samson, the last judge, is the most flawed character in the book. The description of his adult life begins with a junket to a Philistine city called Timnah where he sees an attractive Philistine woman. She seems right for him in his eyes and so he demands to have her: “Get her for me” he tells his parents. It’s the language of possession, observes an Australian commentator named Barry Webb. It’s the language of a man who thinks women exist for his pleasure and that he has a right to any of them he wants.

B. “Is this the boy we raised?” Samson’s parents must’ve wondered. Remember from last week that the angel who revealed to Manoah and his wife that they would be having a son, went on to tell them that their son was to be dedicated to God by means of his following a Nazarite vow from his birth to his death. It involved not cutting your hair, not drinking the fruit of the vine, and having no contact

with a dead body. It was a vow intended to help its maker draw near to God. Such a life would certainly not involve marriage to a woman with pagan practices. Nor would it involve going back to Timnah to visit a vineyard and party with 30 Philistines, or having contact with the dead carcass of a lion and (refusing to quarantine) sharing the honey he found there with his parents, making them unclean, too. Samson, it seemed, wanted nothing to do with God's hand on his life and seems to do everything he can to run away from this vow. "What's wrong with marrying a nice Jewish girl," his parents had asked him. But Samson insisted and was not to be swayed.

C. As Samson's life rolls on, things get even more chaotic (14:19-15:19) and the violence and immorality he gets involved in only increases (14:19-15:19). He kills a bunch of Philistines after they manage to answer his riddle. Out of anger toward the Philistines he abandons his wife, but when he finds she has been given to another man he seeks revenge. He captures 300 foxes, ties them together tail to tail, fastens torches to their tails, lights them all on fire, and tosses the whole lot into a field of grain, burning up fields, olive groves, and vineyards. The violence escalates with the Philistines burning up his wife and her father, followed by Samson slaughtering some more of them. Then, when his own people become tired of his actions, tie him up, and hand him over to the Philistines, Samson uses his God-given strength to burst the ropes, find the jawbone of a dead donkey (in further violation of his vow), and use it to kill a thousand more Philistines.

D. But we still have one chapter left! After having been given time to catch our breath at the end of chapter 15 with this bit of information: "Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines," chapter 16 jumps us back into the fray. It begins by describing another woman Samson uses, a Philistine prostitute in Gaza, and then his experience with a Philistine woman named Delilah. At last perhaps, we begin to feel Samson has turned a corner and found true love. But as the story of their relationship goes on, with Delilah trying to discover the secret of Samson's strength and Samson playing hard to get until he finally gives in, it seems that they are really trying to use each other. Here's a snippet of their conversation:

Delilah said to him: "How can you say 'I love you' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it.

So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said. "because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

E. Delilah, we read, is in it for the money the Philistine rulers promise her if she can discover and share with them the source of Samson's great strength. He has become such a menace that if she can turn him over to them, she'll be a national heroine for life. Samson's motives are harder to discern but it seems likely that he finally tells her the secret of his strength because this Nazirite vow had become a burden to him and having his hair cut was the last part of the vow he had yet to walk away from. Samson had never really wanted what God wanted for him. He wanted the power of God, experienced through his extraordinary strength, but not God himself. In fact, the only conversation he has with God along this whole journey is one in which he yells at God for not giving him something to drink after all of his hard work (15:18f)!

F. So, Delilah has Samson's hair cut while he's sleeping. The Philistines then seize him, Samson tries to shake himself free but cannot because, as he discovers, the LORD has left him (v. 20), and then the Philistines gouge out his eyes and throw him into prison. A bit later, when the Philistines are having a grand celebration to their god, Dagon, for seemingly delivering Samson into their hands, they call Samson out and demand he entertain them. Samson asks the servant attending him to put him close to the supporting pillars of the temple where they have all gathered, and then prays to the LORD: "Sovereign LORD, remember me just once more, and let me with one blow . . ." And what we think and hope we might hear is something like, ". . . demonstrate my repentance and bring glory to your name." But instead we hear, ". . . get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." At the very end, Samson's motives appear to be mixed, at best. While willing to die to help rid his people of the Philistine oppression, he is still thinking about himself. And yet, in his grace, God grants Samson's request:

Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus, he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

II. God's Purposes Prevail

A. These are a grisly few chapters, to be sure! It's not all that easy to know what to do with all that we read here. One of the threads that runs throughout the narrative is this: "The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him" (14:6, 19; 15:14). And this comes after we read that the Spirit had begun to "stir" in Samson as he grew up (13:24), and that God was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines (14:4). At the very least, it reveals a God who is determined to work his purposes out despite the bad choices we human beings can make, despite the ways in which we can resist or grieve or quench the Spirit who has been given to us. Fortunately, God's work and power is not contingent upon our obedience. If God only worked when people were making good choices, he wouldn't have much to do! More to the point, it would mean that we could put God in a box and limit what he was able to do by our actions. Certainly, there are times when God chooses not to work because of our disobedience. But there are also times he chooses to work in the midst of, and despite such.

B. A NT parallel might be Romans 8:28 where we read that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. This doesn't mean that everything we do is good or that circumstances always turn out for the best in our lives. It does mean that God is able to work through sinners and the flawed choices we can make, and is able to bless us in the dark and chaotic periods of our lives, as well as in the times when things are going "right." It does mean that God cannot be thwarted, that even in the midst of his persistent self-centeredness, Samson is an instrument of God's purposes, and so can we be.

So let's conclude by returning to our opening prayer. Let's pray it together, with both Samson, and ourselves, in mind:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in the bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.