

Judges 13-16: Samson's Hair

Samson's Hair

I have never heard a sermon from the pulpit about the virtues of Samson. They avoid him like the plague. The library is full of books about biblical characters, but few about Samson.

If you are like me you grew up with an inaccurate view of Samson. We can find his story in Judges 13-16. I remember Samson as a cartoon character with big muscles and long hair who "smited" the Philistines. I used to get Samson confused with Hercules and Atlas, two other mythological strong men. Even in Sunday School they told me that Samson was quite the hero who was tricked by the seductive Delilah into having his hair cut with the result that the second his hair was cut he became a weakling. You could not help but associate his strength with his hair. Upon further review and a careful reading of the passage we find that the truth is far from the popular representation. I also saw an old movie on TV about Samson starring Victor Mature from 1949. I guarantee there is very little resemblance to the truth from that Hollywood movie. The fact is that Samson is hard to like. The nicest thing you can say about Samson is that he is an anti-hero like James Bond who works for the good guys, but is incredibly self indulgent.

The Nazirite Vow

The first bit of information we need concerns why Samson had such long hair and why he was not supposed to cut it. The answer can be found in Judges 13:5. Israel had done great evil in the sight of the Lord so God had disciplined Israel by allowing repeated invasions by the Philistines for 40 years. It was God's plan to give Israel some relief by raising up a deliverer who would "begin" to deliver Israel from the Philistines(13:5). God would fully deliver Israel from the Philistines years later by the hands of King David. The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's barren wife, and told her that she would conceive and give birth to a son. This son would be dedicated to the Lord by a Nazirite Vow for life. Sure enough, she gave birth to a son and named him Samson. Samson was special, he was a miracle birth, and according to the instruction of the angel he would take a vow to be holy to the Lord. At his birth we are told he was created for a purpose beyond himself and his own desires.

If you are like me you are wondering what the heck is a Nazirite Vow? It can be found in Numbers 6:1-8. The Lord gave instructions to Moses to tell the sons of Israel that when a person is going to dedicate themselves to the Lord for a prescribed period of time (in Samson's case for life), they should take a special vow called a Nazirite vow. Nazirite means a person willing to abstain. There were four parts of the vow. The first and most important was to be separate from the world and be holy to the Lord. Next, they would abstain from drinking alcohol. Number three, and important to Samson's story, was no razor shall ever cut their hair, he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long. I think this was primarily to visually separate them and help people, as well as themselves, to remember the vow. Lastly they would not go near to a dead person.

Typically, a person would take this vow for a specific period of time to perform some specific task. Case in point was the Apostle Paul in Acts 18:18, he took this vow in Corinth to do some task, and then he cut his hair when it was over, also the men in Jerusalem in Acts 21: 23-24 were completing the vow and cutting their hair. This was the norm, but a few characters like Samuel and Samson were dedicated this way for life. This explains why Samson's hair had never been cut---it had nothing to do with giving him strength.

Then Where Did His Awesome Strength Come From ?

God raised Samson and gave him strength for the purpose that he should "begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines". He needed to be strong because he would get absolutely no help from his countrymen. The sons of Israel had given up and accepted that the Philistines would rule over them. In fact in Judges 15:11, a delegation of Israel came to Samson to ask him to give up and stop fighting because, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?" The clearest way to understand Samson's great strength was that before each fight the text says, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily" so that he was able to do great feats of strength. The answer then is that God was just using Samson as a vehicle to kick some Philistine booty. Samson's great feats of strength were actually being done by the Lord.

People think Samson lost his strength when Delilah cut his hair, but that is not exactly accurate. First of all his strength did not come from his hair, it came from God. In Judges 16:20, the text says he lost his strength when the Lord departed from him. Even Samson did not believe his strength came from his hair because in 16:20 he knew his hair was gone, but it says he did not know the Lord had departed from him and that he had lost his strength, until the Philistines grabbed him. Samson fully expected to rise up and knock out the Philistines with super-human strength just as God had enabled him before. Later, after he was brought out of prison to amuse the Philistines, Samson did not pray for his hair, but he prayed to the Lord to strengthen him just one more time so he could do some damage to the Philistines. (Judges 16:28)

Why Did He lose His Strength or Why Did God Depart ?

It always bothered me that he could be so stupid as to give up his secret to Delilah. He must have known something was amiss in 16:9 and 12 when she tried to turn him over to the bad guys. What happened was that he was just continuing his life of sin, and breaking his vow to God. Remember the Nazirite Vow? Here is where it is most important to the story. Samson had lived a pattern of breaking all four parts of the vow. He was supposed to be holy yet against his parents he married a pagan idol worshipper, and don't forget all his liaisons with harlots. He vowed not to drink alcohol yet at the wedding it says "Samson made a feast there". The word for feast literally means a drinking contest. He was not supposed to have contact with dead bodies yet he was knee deep in them. Now finally he very casually allows Delilah to cut his hair, thus breaking all parts of his vow. Samson had so much success and so many victories, he took God for granted—he was desensitized to sin and presumed upon God's blessings. After his hair was cut off he fully expected to still have his supernatural strength, but God had had enough.

The Uniqueness of Samson's Story

What separates Samson's story from the stories of the other deliverers in the book of Judges is that God only "began" to deliver Israel during Samson's life. The other Judges drove the enemy out and Israel was given a period of peace. Take the story of Gideon for example. After Gideon drove the Midianites out of Israel, they had peace for 40 years. Samson, on the other hand, never drove the Philistines out, and they never had peace during his life.

The difference was that in all the previous stories in Judges, the sons of Israel had cried out to God for help. They confessed their sins, and promised to repent. Review what Israel said in Judges 10:10, "We have sinned against Thee, for indeed we have forsaken our God and served Baal", then in v15, "We have sinned, do to us whatever seems good to Thee, only please deliver us this day. So they put away the foreign gods and served only the Lord". During Samson's life Israel never cried out to the Lord, never confessed, and never repented. Therefore God only restrained the enemy, He beat them back, and put fear into them in order to insure Israel's survival.

Why were they so beaten down and willing to serve the Philistines? About 1090 BC, they had foolishly taken the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines, and God had allowed them to suffer a terrible defeat, and the enemy had taken the Ark of the Covenant. This totally demoralized Israel into a mood of capitulation, and co-existence at any cost. No one wanted to stand up for God against the Philistines, but God had a plan. What God did was to stir things up and set the stage for later deliverance. Samson restrained them for 20 years, then King Saul fought them for 40 years, then King David fully defeated them and brought peace back to Israel (2 Samuel 8:1). Samson was a product of his times---a reluctant anti-hero that God used in spite of himself.

Conclusion

The obvious application for us is that God desires for us to approach Him with all contrition and to cry out for help. We need to confess our sins and repent if we expect God to bless us in this life. God desires to use each and every one of us if we will just humbly approach Him in this way.

We want to believe in and follow great heroes, but the example in this story reveals who the only real hero is---the Lord God Almighty. God overruled the lusts of Samson by bringing good out of evil. Out of every lustful, prideful, revengeful thing

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Samson did, God brought about good. In the same way God used a broken man like Gideon, we see a strong man like Samson broken and used by God. As Proverbs 16:4 says, "The Lord has made everything for His own purpose."

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