

The Book of Judges

Lesson 23 - Chapter 16

Samson must be one of the most ironic characters in the entire bible. It's hard to know what to make of him, and allegorizing who he was and what he did into a wide array of sermons and topical discussions has proved to be irresistible to Rabbis and Pastors alike.

There is a fine line between recognizing and applying a biblically defined God-pattern to a situation, versus twisting the meaning of a bible passage into something that attempts to prove our point. The key to know which you are hearing is context. If the context of the application is the same as the context of the original scriptural pattern, then the application is probably being properly applied; if not, it should be discounted as ear-tickling words of persuasion. Whether listening to me or any other bible teacher, that standard should always be kept in mind.

Thus I think (and hope) that what I'm about to say to you falls within the former rather than the latter category, and it is this: Samson presents us with a wonderful picture of the church in general and individual Believers specifically. Samson's pattern of being a walking, talking irony is the same pattern of any follower of Yeshua; each of us (from the least to the most pious among us) is a living irony.

The Apostle Paul spoke about this strange condition of the Believer at length but summed it up in one of the most desperate, frustrated, passionate moments of his life when he made a bold admission not only about his personal spiritual condition but also about the mysteries of his relationship with God and how they seem to play out in his life.

READ ROMANS 7: 11- 24

I really try to avoid reading that passage more than I have to (and I mean that) because it hits home too hard; it reminds me of the stark reality of my life, and my walk with the Lord. And it's not the pretty picture that we hope for or is so often preached. My only comfort is that all followers of Christ live lives of irony (the same irony I live, and Samson lived, and Paul lived). We are saved by God's grace, yet we have done nothing to merit it and only seldom do we ever behave like it or see that grace in action through our deeds. We have the Spirit of God living in us not because we have earned it but only because He declared us clean and holy enough to be His earthy temples, yet our corrupted flesh remains just as corrupt as before our salvation and our evil inclinations remain fully operational. We have a Holy and divine text at our fingertips that explains who God is and what His will is for us, as well as a Holy guide who literally lives within us, and yet we choose (more often than not) to ignore all that, look elsewhere for validation and do what pleases us at the moment. We usually know it's wrong when we do it and that it is sin, but we do it anyway so insistent is our natural rebellious

instinct.

Even worse, we detect and recognize God-induced urgings deep inside of us that tell us there are things that we are TO DO, and ways we are TO BE, that are part of our purpose for being created and for having been elected and saved in the first place; but we often contemplate those divine unctions, mull them over and wrestle with them, and discard them in favor of personal comfort and convenience and familiarity.

In the end, this was Samson. In the end, Paul recognized it was also himself. And in the end it is you and I as the church of Messiah Yeshua.

As we begin to study the nearly universally known story of Samson and Delilah in Judges chapter 16, this week will be much more sermon than history. And even at that I won't be able to do more than scratch the surface of all there is to learn from our God by means of the story of Samson about who we are in Him, and what we should expect in our relationship with Him, and how our lives will generally play out as physical creatures in these frail and unreliable temporary vessels that we call bodies.

I want you to watch for something as I read to you this chapter that too many have labeled as a simple Hebrew children's tale (which it certainly is not). And it is this: there is a decided distinction between faith and faithfulness. Faith is an act of the intellect interacting with the spirit. Hindus have faith. Muslims have faith. Even atheists have faith. What separates the faith we read about in the Holy Scriptures from all other kinds is that it is an act of our intellect with a HOLY spirit, and it is at the divine will of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that it even happens within us. The source and object of our faith is everything. By itself and unrealized, however, faith is passive. Regardless of whatever kind of faith it may be (even the truly holy kind) until faith is put to work it is dormant. James, brother of Jesus, calls it a "dead faith".

Faith in action transforms to faithfulness. Faith is knowing, but faithfulness is doing. So it is not only possible, but from my personal experience (and from the many examples given in the bible) I'd say it is typical that one can have faith but NOT be at all faithful. Faith in the right thing will indeed save us for unimaginable joy and peace in the next world; but our lack of faithfulness will bring us nothing but misery, confusion and destruction in the present world.

Let's read Judges 16 from the beginning so as to get the whole story.

READ JUDGES 16 all

We covered the first few verses of this chapter last week and in a nutshell it was this: Samson's sexual passions again overcame him and he journeyed from his home in the territory of Judah (the village of Tzorah) to the Philistine stronghold of Gaza. And when he arrived he immediately engaged the services of a Philistine prostitute. The townspeople heard he was there and plotted to kill him in the morning (undoubtedly in the vicinity of the city gates where he was sure to leave).

Something in Samson alerted him to the impending danger and so he got up and headed out

at midnight, but he took a little souvenir with him when he left: Gaza's city gates. That there is no mention of the Spirit of God overcoming him at that moment causes me to conclude that Samson acted using his own innate strength to pick up these gates made of wood and iron, and carry them off on his shoulders. Samson was an extremely strong man even without the occasional special anointing of God with super-natural ability. So perhaps one way we can recognize a direct impulse from God upon Samson to do a certain action (as opposed to Samson just doing his own thing) was when we read that the Ruach HaKodesh came upon him. Yet we must not lose sight that Samson was created for the purpose of causing discord between Israel and the Philistines and to undo all the efforts on both sides to affect a peaceful co-existence. What we can see, however, is that in general God merely allowed Samson's own fleshy desires and evil inclinations to but operate in a way such that Samson's actions advanced God's agenda. In fact, it is my opinion that this rather mysterious but standard operating procedure of the Lord is at work more than any other in the lives of humans.

Well, after throwing the gates off of a hillside on the road to Hebron, Samson returned home; but verse 4 tells us that in some undefined amount of time later Samson came back to Philistine territory for the same reason he always seemed to come: women. Philistine women. While the 4-chapter block that forms the story of Samson is certainly not a comprehensive history of Samson's life and deeds, it apparently is representative; and what is represented is that every documented event about Samson has to do with his love/hate relationship with the pagan world; love of pagan (Philistine) women, and hate of pagan (Philistine) people in general. This is another of the many ironies of Samson and his behavior and thought processes. But isn't it the same with Messiah's church?

Don't we want to (on the one hand) be different and separated from the world, yet on the other we do all we can to cozy up to it and even hang on to it with all of our might? We want the unbelievers to see us as different, but not TOO different such that we're seen as oddballs or intolerant or offensive. There are things about the world that we like, and things that we hate. And even the parts we like (or even love) aren't necessarily godly in any way; basically these worldly things call to us like sugar to flies, and are so important to us that we cannot imagine giving them up. And more often than not it is these worldly things that regularly trip us up and cause us pain and keep us from turning our faith into faithfulness to the Lord. Oh, we can resist for long periods of time when we really put our mind to it; but eventually our memories fade and we're back for another try at somehow rationalizing and harmonizing our fleshy wants and desires with the ways of Heaven (at least until God deals with that particular difficult portion of our lives).

Samson has fallen in love with the devastatingly seductive Delilah who lived in the Sorek Valley in the territory of the Philistines, only a short distance from the village of Timnah where his aborted attempt at marriage to another Philistine girl occurred. Some like to point to Delilah's name as her destiny (as is often the case with ancient names). But there is no consensus as to the meaning of Delilah. Some say it means weak, others say it simply means hair, still others say delicate or even uprooted. There are a few who claim that it had to be a Philistine name because she was a Philistine. It is quite likely that Delilah was not her real given name, but was rather a title or nickname given to her (by Hebrews) well after the Samson affair (a very common occurrence in the bible). And without doubt it is a derogatory

title.

Delilah was a worshipper of the god Dagan and fully loyal to the Philistines. Samson's affair with Delilah had apparently become fairly well known and the kings of the 5 main Philistine cities decided that this might represent an opportunity to finally do something about this one-man wrecking crew that had spoiled their hope of peace with Israel (on their terms of course) for almost 20 years. These Philistine kings were smart and pragmatic men, and they figured that since no amount of force had ever worked to subdue Samson that the only remaining avenue was deception and trickery. By now Samson's insatiable desire for beautiful Philistine girls was common knowledge and so what better bait for a trap than the latest female form who captured Samson's lustful eye. So they go to Delilah and tell her that they need to know the secret of Samson's strength. It was obvious to them that the source of Samson's power was magical and so it would take a magical solution to deprive him of his great strength. They recognize that size and muscle alone cannot possibly allow for Samson's seeming invulnerability. So they offer Delilah 1100 pieces of silver EACH if Delilah can pry from Samson the omen or symbol or means of his other worldly strength. With 5500 pieces of silver at stake (truly a king's ransom) Delilah enthusiastically undertook the task, thus revealing her cold and calculating nature.

So one day Delilah casually asks Samson the \$64,000 question and the much too self-confident Samson toys with her. Undoubtedly Delilah approached the subject carefully and at just the right moment so as not to appear too eager or conspiring. But Samson liked playing games, so he approached her inquiry as a game not realizing the deadly wager that awaited the eventual winner. Samson being Samson, he invents a lie and tells her that the magical power that can defeat him is that if 7 fresh bowstrings are used to tie him up, he'll be as weak as any normal man. She tells this story to her benefactors and they supply the 7 bowstrings and she binds him with them. But she is a clever woman and was not particularly convinced that Samson was being honest with her, so she had some men waiting in a nearby room to assist her. As a test she shouted out, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you". Samson reacted instantly and the bowstrings snapped like they were but single pieces of wheat straw.

Now understand that Delilah was not naive; the possibility that 7 bowstrings were the secret was plausible because the number 7 was seen as a magical number in that era. Further a fresh bowstring was quite strong. Bowstrings in that age were usually made from the tendon of an animal; and the fresher the tendon the stronger they were until they dried out and broke rather easily. No normal human could have been bound with 7 fresh bowstrings and simply break them at will.

Not to be deterred as so great a prize awaited, Delilah pesters Samson again to divulge the magic formula. Samson, recalling the incident many years earlier at 'Eitam Rock when the 3000 men of Judah came to arrest and bind him, and turn him over to the Philistines, told Delilah that by using new rope (moist rope that had not been weakened by use) that would do the trick. Samson is playing with fire but is too blinded with his passion and arrogance to see it so he tells Delilah to have him bound with new ropes and he'd be as weak as normal men. She ties him up and then yells, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you". He again instantly reacted by breaking the ropes like they were but thread.

Delilah is nothing if not persistent; now she starts with the angle of telling Samson he's been lying to her and making fun of her all along. In other words, he's starting to hurt her feelings. Men, we all know that at that point we're in trouble. The "hurting the feelings" thing is like staring into the headlight of an oncoming train and we either jump aside or get run over. So Samson moves beyond the total nonsense and tells her a partial truth (is there any doubt that Delilah is just a couple more moves of the chess pieces before it's checkmate?)

He tells her to weave his hair into 7 braids, and then weave the 7 braids (while still attached to his head) into the cloth of a loom. There's that number 7 again, which for a pagan like Delilah made all kinds of sense. The loom was a large cloth-making device that was affixed to the ground. Certainly if what he was saying this time was true, if the weaving of his hair into the loom took away his strength, then he would be trapped (caught like a Ram by his horns in a thicket) and left helplessly attached to this heavy weaving machine. So Delilah does it and obviously Samson allows it.

Now I don't know about you but I think Samson must have been one dumb guy if he wasn't catching on to Delilah's intentions by now. I mean, love is grand and everything, but just how far was he willing to go before he called a halt to what was bound to lead to his capture and destruction? How could he not recognize Delilah's true intentions that would belie her hypocrisy? Women, I'm almost afraid to tell you, but men can be that blinded by a seductive female. In the same way that we regularly hear of women striking up a romance with a male inmate that is behind bars for life for some of the most heinous crimes, and even marrying him over the phone or through the mail, and knowing that she'll never likely see him except through steel bars (that one still baffles me), she will profess her love and go on totally dedicated to this deadbeat for years with an irrational and dangerous liaison.

But men are just as bad. Young men especially are suckers for outward beauty and sexy flirtations (older men can be as well but ought to know better). Even though there are major red flags in that kind of relationship we'll still pursue it because the launch sequence has been started and we don't know how to stop it. Sex is maybe the most powerful force there is between humans. If Samson had a family friend who was a girl, or maybe had a sister, she would have immediately seen through Delilah's insincerity. But Samson didn't seem to have any of those; he wanted sex and not too much else from a woman. Thus we don't ever read of Samson having any friendships with Hebrew women because the Laws of Moses don't stand for illicit sexual relationships among God's people.

Well with his hair now thoroughly woven into the loom (and the goofy Samson delighting in it all), Delilah again tests the situation with the same results. That does it. Now she raises the ante and began (as it says in verse 16) nagging him **every day** and pressing him until it bothered him to death. He had already partly divulged the truth (in that his hair had something to do with it), but apparently sensing it was either fish or cut bait, the truth comes spilling out of his mouth. It is his hair, he says, that is the source of his strength and this is because he is a **nazir**. Thus since his birth his hair has never been cut (that is all part of the Nazarite vow). Cut his hair and his strength is gone. Delilah instinctively knew this was it; so there would be no more tests. She sends for the 5 Philistine kings to come and observe as she springs the trap on their archenemy, Samson. Besides, she wanted payment on the spot and so we read in

verse 18 that they brought the money with them.

Likely a little time passes and once again Samson convinces himself that he's got this all under control. She lulls him to sleep, head in her lap, and then signals for a barber to come in. His hair was still braided into 7 locks so cutting them off would have been rather quick. As he awakens she starts to do something that will give some assurance to everyone who is present that his strength has truly left him. When that proves to be the case she says the words to spring the trap, "Samson, the Philistines have come for you". He is now helpless in the grasp of a few Philistine soldiers.

He doesn't recognize his weakened condition at first and thinks to himself; I'll merely shake these men right off of me like dust and be free (just as he's always done). But it was over; his Nazarite hair was gone and with it his amazing strength.

There are so many valuable lessons and principles here that we'll only cover a couple of the most important ones today. First, let's talk about the hair. Why did losing his long hair end his strength? It was because he had lost the final symbol of his set-apart and unique relationship with Yehoveh. I said symbol because the existence of his hair itself was not magical nor did it carry some kind of mystical or cosmic connection to the Lord per se. Just like Levitical sacrifices, whereby the blood of bulls and goats carried no inherent power in it but rather it was the DOING of these rituals in accordance with God's instructions that was at issue, it was the same with Samson's hair. It was a matter of obedience to God for Samson to keep his long hair. When a man sinned, confessed it to God, and brought his sacrifice of atonement (with a contrite heart) to the altar it was all about obedience, not magical power. A *nazir* had precise God-ordained observances written down in the Torah that he was to follow: eat no grape products, don't touch a human corpse, and don't cut your hair. Don't observe these and the Nazarite vow is broken. Let me put that another way: break the terms of the vow and the person is no longer a Nazarite. The special and set-apart relationship with God is dissolved and with it whatever power or special anointing that comes from it.

Symbols, whether God-ordained or man designed, are tricky things. Men have a tendency to misuse both. But in neither case do symbols contain any inherent power. Yet when God ordains a specific purpose for a symbol, it is to be employed (and employed precisely as instructed). Even with God-ordained symbols men can falsely impute special power to them, which was never intended. A great example of this was the pole with the bronze serpent on it that Moses erected out in the wilderness to stop a plague of poisonous snakebites. The pole was kept, transported into the Promised Land, and for hundreds of years it was wrongly used as an object of worship. The pole was created as a divine tool meant as a one-time only solution to save Israel from the consequences of a serious rebellion against Yehoveh; but it worked so well that the Israelites (on their own) decided that it must have special power that they could call upon, as they needed it, indefinitely.

Once we impute power to them, symbols become idols (whether we acknowledge it or not). A Menorah is a God-ordained and authorized symbol; but it has no power. A Star of David is a man created symbol and it has no power. The Ark of the Covenant is a God-ordained symbol and it has no power. A cross is a man created symbol and it has no power. But I have

personally witnessed each of these symbols being looked upon by some as though they were inherently holy, inherently full of power, and worth fighting and dying over. What happens is that without our really thinking about it, we have emotionally or intellectually transferred some amount (or even most of) our trust to the symbol instead of maintaining it exclusively in the invisible God of Israel.

Symbols are dangerous things and we tend to take them very lightly. The problem is that when we have put even a little trust in a symbol, if we lose that symbol or are kept apart from it for some reason, we can lose faith.

When Samson's hair was severed from his head, God departed from him. God was his strength, although I'm not so sure Samson understood that at first. Understand the situation: the Lord had imbued Samson with such amazing strength that no one could have forcibly taken the symbol of his Nazarite relationship with God from him (a symbol that God ordained and He wanted it to be used). But Samson toyed with it; he used that divine symbol of uncut hair as part of a dangerous and frivolous game with a girl who was essentially a whore and working for the enemy. And he thus allowed his long hair (as a symbol of his faithfulness) to slip away from him because he had devalued it so much.

Believers, take this to heart. We cannot ignore or misuse the God-ordained symbols of our expected faithfulness to the God of Israel and assume that the power that He has given us to make a difference on this earth will remain with us. We cannot possibly deliver the Good News to people who need it, be healed of our diseases, and expect Him to listen to our prayers and supplications if we back away from the things He considers vital, important, and central to our relationship with Him. There are two symbols that the Lord has given us to abide in as ongoing displays of our faith in Him: the Sabbath and confessing with our mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord (yes, Baptism is a sign but it is meant as a one-time ceremony).

CJB Exodus 31:12 ADONAI said to Moshe, 13 "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'You are to observe my *Shabbats*; for this is a sign between me and you through all your generations; so that you will know that I am ADONAI, who sets you apart for me. 14 Therefore you are to keep my *Shabbat*, because it is set apart for you. Everyone who treats it as ordinary must be put to death; for whoever does any work on it is to be cut off from his people. 15 On six days work will get done; but the seventh day is *Shabbat*, for complete rest, set apart for ADONAI. Whoever does any work on the day of *Shabbat* must be put to death. 16 The people of Isra'el are to keep the *Shabbat*, to observe *Shabbat* through all their generations as a perpetual covenant. 17 It is a sign between me and the people of Isra'el forever; for in six days ADONAI made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day he stopped working and rested."

And Jesus makes the following connection regarding Himself when He says in Luke 6:

CJB Luke 6:5 "The Son of Man," he concluded, "is Lord of *Shabbat*."

BTW: do not think that I said that together these two symbols bring us salvation. Only trust in Yeshua as Messiah can do that and maintain it. But observing Sabbath and confessing Christ

openly are acts of faithfulness that are fully expected of all Believers.

So did God departing from Samson mean that (in modern Christian-eze) Samson had lost his salvation (even if was an OT kind of salvation)? Samson's loss of his hair as the chief symbol of his special relationship with God **did not mean** that Samson was spiritually cut-off from YHWH and destined for the Place of Torments that we now call Hell. So we come full circle back to what we discussed at the beginning of today's lesson: the critical difference between faith and faithfulness. By all accounts Samson's faith remained; it was his faithfulness that he left abandoned. Samson didn't stop believing in the God of Israel, he didn't even adopt other gods (so far as we're aware); he just stopped being obedient. In fact we kind of watch as over time he gave in to his baser instincts; he touched dead bodies, used prostitutes, preferred the company of pagans, and murdered out of personal anger and revenge. The result was a state of spiritual weakness in him that led to his physical weakness; he now (with the loss of his Nazarite symbol, his hair) had no more power or strength than any pagan man. It is the same for Believers.

I'm not going to get into a debate today about the issue of "can a man lose his salvation". I've spoken on it on many occasions. Rather the point here is that a Believer who backs away from his special relationship with God by means of disobedience gets weaker and weaker spiritually. He is more easily influenced by the world because he is less protected by God. He is less blessed by God and more connected to earthly treasures. There is almost no temptation that he can withstand any more since his nearness to God has evaporated. I can tell you from personal experience that a man can lose all faithfulness, and thus all power and nearness to the Lord, but still have faith and remain saved. That was my condition a few decades ago. I was a Believer. I never stopped believing in God, I never renounced or denied Yeshua HaMashiach in my heart or to anyone. But I did stop being obedient. I did stop paying any attention to God whatsoever. I did stop living the new life afforded me by Messiah. I did start to pooh-pooh certain aspects of the Holy Scripture because they made no sense to me anymore. I didn't pray, I didn't worship, I didn't study or apply the Word of God and I was about as useless of a disciple as can be imagined. I went from destruction to destruction in my personal life. From tragedy to tragedy and from rebellion to rebellion I moved. I had faith, but was not faithful and the result was obvious even though I was oblivious to the process. So that one day, when everything finally fell to pieces, I knew instantly what I had done. I confessed all to God, and vowed to relearn how to be faithful. My life began to change, and in time buds for future fruit began to form. But the process of returning to faithfulness was long and painful; and it didn't affect only me.

No man can measure your faith; but faithfulness is usually pretty apparent. And while the first thing that happens when we're saved is the acquisition of faith, the next step is faithfulness. Allow me to give you an analogy that was used in the bible; human birth.

When we're born, and are but hours or a few days old, we're pretty useless little creatures. Certainly we're loved, and we have value in God's eyes. Our mere existence brings joy to our mother and father. But the Torah didn't even recognize a newborn as qualified to be part of Israel (or to be called a person) until a full cycle of the moon had passed. Basically, as an infant, all we can do is receive and use up resources. Of course no one is supposed to stay in

that condition. We're supposed to grow, mature, learn, give back, become a useful part of society, and then begin the cycle again by bringing forth new infants.

Coming to faith in Yeshua is like that, and thus the bible calls it being born again. When at first we believe, we are pretty helpless and useless to the Kingdom of God. All we can do is receive. We have great value in the Father's eyes and we are loved by Our Savior. Those who may have led us to the Lord have joy in us. But we are NOT to remain in that infant state; we are expected to grow, mature, learn, give back, and become a useful part of the Believer's community so that we can play a role in bringing forth new reborn people. Our rebirth is from faith. The growth, maturity, learning, giving back, and usefulness that ought to come in time are from, and display, our faithfulness. End the faithfulness and our usefulness ends along with it.

Samson was taken into custody and his eyes were gouged out. Here is yet another irony in this story of ironies; his eyes were the instruments of his unfaithfulness; his eyes were the portals of his lust. He always did what was right in his own eyes we're told; and now God's harsh justice and greatest mercy demanded that those fleshly eyes be blinded to the things of the world in order that Samson could finally see the Lord.

We'll finish this chapter the next time we meet.