

THE TRIALS OF SAMSON

The striking oddity as it pertains to Samson with respect to the book of Judges is that he never appears to judge Israel. He does however go through life as a one-man wrecking crew against the Philistines right up until the very end. As the most well-renowned of all the judges and one of the most intriguing historical figures outlined in the scriptures, a man whose birth and position in life was foretold by the messenger of the Lord, Samson will go through life as an immature man-child. We love the story of his strength, but we must remember that it was not his strength, but the Lords. We must also recognize that as intriguing as he was, he may not have been responsible with the strength he was given. Just as God equipped Samson, he has equipped us, are we responsible with the gifts God has given us? Now to Samson.

As Samson came of age, he went to the Canaanite city of Timnah where he was smitten by a Philistine woman. Let it be known that the Lord has made it abundantly clear that the Jews are not to intermingle with the Philistines and foreign women, not because of their genealogy but because of the idols that they worship. His parents attempted to dissuade him, saying “surely you can find a woman here, take one of your cousins before you take a Philistine” but he was adamant and insisted that they arrange the marriage for him. During the journey to Timnah with his parents Samson comes upon a lion and does battle, defeating it easily, tearing it like one would a young goat. I don’t know how one tears a young goat but I suppose to Samson that was an easy task. During this escapade he had apparently stepped away from his parents, maybe he had gone off in the night to find a serene spot to pray, nonetheless, his parents were unaware of the exploit and he never made them privy to it either.

The arrangement of a marriage in ancient Hebrew tradition was a process that would seem odd to western culture today but is still practiced in certain circles. A man would be smitten by a woman, he would inform his parents, his parents would meet with her parents, and an arrangement would be made to exchange goods for the young lady. Once an arrangement had been made the parents and groom would return home until the bride and her parents had put the wedding and feast in order. Then the groom and his parents would return to partake in a seven-day feast/festival prior to the nuptials. After seven days of celebration vows would be exchanged and the bride and groom would consecrate their marriage. As this pertains to the lion, this event would have taken place on the way to introduce his parents to the young lady. Now, the journey from Zorah to Timnah would be approximately four miles, so only a few hours journey at that time on foot. After the lion and introduction, him and his parents will return home to gather their things in preparation for the wedding and then return to Timnah just a couple of short days later. Upon that return, Samson comes to the carcass of the lion and alas a swarm of bees had developed a hive of honey within enticing Samson to gather up a handful of honey for himself and then sharing it

with his parents who were not familiar with the lion or the location of the honey. Number one, to me it is appalling to scrape food from a carcass, two, as a Nazarite he had taken a vow not to touch anything impure such as a carcass (Num. 6:6), and number three, he shared this tainted honey with his parents without hesitation. This to me is an indication of the immaturity of Samson and his lack of awareness of the seriousness of God's law. While God did not punish him for his actions, what we have is his lack of devotion met with God's mercy and grace for not punishing him for his actions along with his lack of awareness of God's mercy and grace. Of course, from the outside looking in we have a bird's eye view of the situation, but just how often do we make questionable choices or do we blatantly disobey the Lord without recognizing his mercy?

Now to the wedding feast to the Philistine woman whose name we never get, much like the mother of Samson. We are told on a couple of occasions that the marriage to her was to secretly fulfill God's purpose but I must be honest I am unaware of that purpose other than to slay some Philistines and wreak havoc on their community which we will get to shortly. As Samson arrives to work the feast that will lead up to his nuptials, he is joined by 30 Philistine men who will help and be his groomsmen, but I get the notion that they were making a sport of Samson and so in return he gives them a riddle to answer. The stipulation being that if they solve the riddle, he must provide them with 30 linen wraps and 30 change of clothes and if they do not, they must provide him with the same. "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet". You and I know that he is talking about a lion and honey but long story short, they could not determine the answer and so they provoked his fiancé to coerce the answer from Samson leaving him in debt to them for 30 linen wraps and changes of clothes. Knowing that his bride to be gave them the answer, Samson was furious and with the Spirit of the Lord upon him went off in the distance to kill 30 Philistines and obtain their garments. After gifting them their garments he could not bring himself to wed the woman and so he went home to his father to assess his life until he decided to return and consummate the marriage when lo and behold his best man had already done so under the assumption that Samson would not return. Filled with anger he tied the tails of 300 foxes or jackals together and connected torches to them and then released them into the distance resulting in the flaming demise of three of the Philistines main crops, including grain, vineyards and groves. With anger upon anger the Philistines retaliate by setting fire to his former bride to be and her father resulting in yet another retaliation from Samson in the form of a great slaughter although we are not given the details of the battle.

How often have we lost our temper, had a lapse of integrity or let our emotions get the best of us? When that happens the best avenue of approach is to step back, breath, meditate and have a conversation with God that is sure to humble us and restore our frame of mind. I like to think that this is what Solomon did at this point. He decides to wander to the east to a valley in the land of Benjamin called Etam. Maybe he had ventured that way to proclaim the Lord, as he was a judge, however I feel that given the circumstances he had sought out solace. At this point a young Solomon had attempted to get married to a Philistine woman, been

duped and made a sport of by her friends using her as leverage, because of his anger lost his bride to be to his friend, and has been responsible for the slaying of several Philistines and three of their largest crops in the month of harvest. Surely, he knows that they will retaliate and so he has decided to go to this cleft to clear his thoughts and be alone with the Lord.

Retaliation is what the Philistines seek and they will use the Israelites to bring him in. As a thousand or more men venture into Judah, possibly somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho seeking out Solomon, they are met by a slew of Jews who are concerned with the number of Philistines. The number is so great that they believe there is an invasion at hand, only to discover that this large number of men are seeking the one judge of God. In an attempt to keep the peace and avoid bloodshed they offer to bring in Solomon. How cowardly and submissive had the Israelites become that they would have an opportunity to slay their captors and protect their judge but instead choose to appease their captors and apprehend the judge that the Lord has appointed? Sometimes oppression can become so comfortable that we no longer recognize it, much like our sin. As 3000 men of Judah approach Solomon who has sought solace at the cleft in Etam they find and begin to rebuke him. "Don't you know the Philistines are our rulers? What have you done?" It is almost as if the thought of freedom or joining along with Solomon to conquer their masters had not occurred to them. Surely the exploits of his strength and adventures had been the talk of Israel and Judah, they could have easily joined forces and conquered the Philistines within a matter of days. Instead, to avoid dispute and to ensure no animosity from their oppressors they bind Samson with two new ropes after an assurance that they will not harm him.

Scripture says that there were 3000 men of Judah and 1000 Philistines at this point so the men of Judah could have likely slayed the Philistines without ever going to bind Samson. Again, the strength of oppression on our minds can be numbing and blinding. As Samson is led to the Philistines, I ponder at what might have been going through his mind. A plan to slay the Philistines, disappointment in his fellow countrymen, prayers to the Lord for strength and guidance, bafflement at the circumstances of his life. Nonetheless, the men of Judah lead him to the Philistines and the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson and as it does the ropes fall from his hands as if they have been singed and he spots of all things the jawbone of donkey. What else could be used as a weapon? Of course, the jawbone will suffice for the man who could most likely defeat the Philistines with his bare hands. The Spirit of the Lord leads Samson as he slays all 1000 of the oppressors. It does not say how long it took and it does not give details but I can imagine that the neighborhood people had heard the commotion and had come to gawk, I can also imagine that the men of Judah looked on in amazement and likely hung their heads when the slaughter was over. It must have been difficult to look Samson in the eye after his mighty battle and their betrayal. It is at this moment that Samson names the location Ramath lehi (Jawbone Hill in the Hebrew) and calls upon the Lord to quench his thirst prompting God to split the hollow place so that water may flow. Samson quenches his thirst and names that location En Hakkor (Fountain of him that called or prayed).

The first part of the life of Samson is full of detail and drama that we don't see from the other judges. The only other judges that are devoted this kind of time are Gideon, Deborah and Ehud and while they are given detail and time it really doesn't match up to what was given to Samson, and we are only in the first stage of his life. The conclusion of chapter 15 says that Samson judged Israel for 20 years and near the beginning of this paper I stated that it seemed peculiar that he never seems to judge Israel, because there never seems to be the typical judgement that you see from the other judges. Chapter 16 will begin with his journey to Gaza and love for Delilah, so I surmise that between chapters 15 and 16 or from 15 on, the judgement of Samson is likely to have taken place. At this current period of time, I would be willing to suggest that Samson is a young man, 18-21 years of age maybe, just old enough to have gone out on his own and found a bride. So, with that said, we have a young man that has sewn his oats and taken time to come into his own and get to know the Lord and what the Lord has blessed him with. He had shown his love for ladies, his regard for foreign women, that he was willing to drink wine and his famous temper. This was not what you would expect from a divinely appointed Nazarene, but the young man needed time to grow much like the rest of us. So, while we see his growth, stumbling and setbacks we also see the Lord's patience, mercy and grace. Throughout the trials of Samson God allowed him to suffer the consequences of his actions while providing His strength and water to give him another day.