

The story of Samson is famous for its potent mix of sex, violence, death and power – exactly what we would expect in a contemporary action movie like James Bond. But if we read the story as part of the whole narrative of the book of Judges, we will find it to be perplexing and probably disturbing. As Israel's spiritual condition grows worse and worse, the scene seems to be set for a great judge, perhaps the greatest of all. And chapter 13, with its announcement of the miraculous birth of a boy who would “begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (13:5), prepares us for a wonderful, powerful deliverer. Instead, we find by far the most flawed character in the book of Judges: a violent, impulsive, sexually addicted, emotionally immature and selfish man. Most disturbing of all, the Spirit of God seems to anoint and use his fits of sulking, pride and temper.

As we come to chapter 14, happily, we have the reader's advantage – we are in on all the 4 secrets floating around the chapter: the secret of God's purpose, the secret of the slaying of the lion, the secret of the honey and the secret of the riddle.

1. The Secret of God's Purpose (vv.1-4)

Samson is now a grown man, stirred by the Spirit of the Lord (13:25). But at the start of chapter 14 – and throughout the rest of his life – he will be stirred by a much more worldly impulse. Samson had been to Timnah. He had seen a girl. Literally, the Hebrew says, “A woman I have seen in Timnah” – the emphasis is on “woman”. Samson was determined. His father must arrange for the marriage. Father and mother were shattered. They had lived in the hope of his birth – and now this. They explode, “Isn't there any girl in all Israel who could please you, that you have to go off to Philistia to find a wife? Samson, that girl's a pagan!” Samson looks Manoah in the eye, and his words come out deliberately through clenched teeth: “Get her for me”. His reason? “She's the right one for me” (literally, “For she is right in my eyes”.) You can imagine the grief and despair Samson's parents were feeling that evening. But the writer provides an aside in verse 4: “His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines”. God is after an opportunity for striking the Philistines – he seeks grounds for instigating a quarrel with them.

Here would have been real comfort for Samson's parents had they known. They didn't realize, they couldn't see that God was “seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines”. This does not mean that they were wrong to object to Samson's desires and action. Nor does it mean that Samson's desires were virtuous or that his pig-headedness was right. What it means is that neither Samson's foolishness nor his stubbornness was going to prevent God from accomplishing his purpose. God can and will use the sinfulness or stupidity of his servants as the camouflage for bringing his secret will to pass – to achieve his secret purpose.

Ehud Avriel took 3 months (1947-48) looking for a ship to transport some of his purchases to Palestine. At last he was able to hire the “Nora”, a tramp steamer. To all eyes his shipment consisted of Italian onions – 600 tons of them. British customs agents would not likely sniff around that cargo for too long! Which was the very idea – 600 tons of Italian onions covered

(Judges 14:1-20; Matthew 26:31-35)

the real cargo, a shipment of Czech rifles Avriel had purchased for the Haganah, Israel's army.

This verse 4 can and should hold out some hope for us as God's people. Frequently, all we can see are the onions of a situation. Our sin or the smell of disappointment or failure seems to dominate the scene. But perhaps that is only the cover for God's secret work. Perhaps our greatest comfort is hidden in what we don't know or can't see! Perhaps it is "from the Lord", who has his own saving design to work either through or in spite of our sin or disappointment or failure. Many Christian parents have stood in the sandals of Manoah and his wife. They have, though realizing their own sinful inadequacies, faithfully taught, prayed for, disciplined, and loved a son or a daughter only to see that child wilfully turn from the way of the Lord. How devastating! Yet no one should forget verse 4: "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord". What we don't know may yet prove to be our deepest comfort.

2. The Sign of God's Strength (vv.5-9)

Next we go by the vineyards of Timnah and see Samson deal with the threat of a young lion. Verse 6 clearly indicates that Samson was alone when the lion attacked. God clearly protects his servant here, for Samson's life was obviously in danger. Is this episode merely included so that we will have the needed background for Samson's later riddle? No, the incident is important in its own right. The lion comes roaring toward Samson and the Spirit comes rushing upon him, and, in the Spirit's strength, the lion could just as well have been a young goat, so easily did Samson tear it apart. Samson's strength comes from the Spirit of God. The mangled lion is meant as God's sign to Samson. It shows him what God can and will do through him. It should show him that the God who makes him able to tear up lions can also empower him to terrorize Philistines.

We must not ignore such previews. David argued that if God made him able to protect his father's sheep from attacks by lions and bears, he would also have the courage and skill to defeat the great warrior of the Philistines, Goliath (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Mark suggests in his gospel that if the disciples had understood Jesus' feeding of the five thousand they would not have been astounded at his walking on the water of the lake (Mark 6:51-52). We need to notice this pattern in God's ways. He will, by some smaller instance of deliverance or provision, show you just how adequate or sufficient he is so that you will be encouraged and prepared to rely on him in future and possibly more demanding circumstances.

3. He Weakness of the Lord's Servant (vv.10-18)

In vv.10-18 the weakness of the Lord's servant, his chosen deliverer, appears. Here is a hint of what is to come. We have just seen his strength in vv.5-9 and, immediately we are faced with his weakness. Samson as bridegroom held a special feast in Timnah which lasted for 7 days. Of course, we already know about the lion and the bees and the honey – and so we can enjoy the Philistines' sweating on losing the bet. No wonder we enjoy the story – we are in on the secret.

Since the Philistines have generously provided 30 companions for the groom (probably charged with protecting the wedding party against gate-crashers), Samson proposes some additional entertainment. "Let me tell you a riddle" (v.12a) and let us make a bet. In our day

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and age, the equivalent stakes would be 30 sets of underwear and 30 new suits. If the Philistines win, each of them gets a new outfit but, if they lose, Samson has an instant wardrobe of clothes. The Philistines are game and Samson announces his riddle: “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet” (v.14) For a while the 30 companions don’t mind playing with the challenge of the riddle but, after 3 days of futility, they become frustrated, edgy and irritable. And so, on the fourth day, “they said to Samson’s wife, ‘Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father’s household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?’ ” (v.15). There is not a little pressure on the bride! She turns on the waterworks and the “you-don’t-love me” act over several days until finally, on the seventh day, Samson finally caved in under her desperate cajoling. As expected, his telling her is quickly followed by her “explaining the riddle” to her fellow Philistines. Just before the deadline, they go to Samson and reveal the secret of the riddle: “What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?” (v.18a) But Samson is no fool, he knows that his wife must have spilled the beans. She is the talking heifer! Since heifers were not used for ploughing, Samson is accusing the 30 companions of unfairness (v. 18b).

Since many of us have heard Samson’s whole story before, we cannot help seeing the present episode as a foreshadowing of Samson’s telling a far more sacred secret to Delilah in chapter 16. The occasion of his failure was the same in both cases: “she pressured him” (14:17, 16:16). Already in chapter 14 we see a worrying weakness in the Lord’s strong servant – he cannot think rationally and say “No” when under pressure from a beautiful woman. The point should not be lost on any of us, as disciples of our Lord Jesus. Awareness of our weakness is the beginning of safety. Peter, like Samson, discovered that the hard way. He often spoke out rashly before he thought carefully – “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Matthew 26:33). That very night, before the rooster crowed, he disowned Christ three times. If we know our weakness, whether it be pornography, over-indulgence in food or shopping or addiction to social media or whatever it may be, we are forewarned and can take action to keep out of harm’s way.

4. The Beginning of God’s Deliverance (vv.19-20)

The final verses of the chapter describe the beginning of God’s deliverance. Samson goes down to Ashkelon, one of the five principal cities of the Philistines and in his anger strikes down 30 Philistine men stripped them of their clothes and goes and gives them to those men who had explained the riddle. He strikes down the 30 Philistines, not from a desire to save Israel, but to get even and pay his debts. But, in all this, God is at work. The text insists that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power “and so he” went down to Ashkelon (and) struck down thirty men”. The Spirit who previously gave him power to tear up lions now gives him power to strike down Philistines. Here was the occasion the Lord was seeking in v. 4. Here is the climax of the story, for even God’s secret is coming into the open. What we are dealing with is not Samson’s temper but the Spirit’s power. God is giving Samson superhuman strength – the one thing he needs (other than his own character flaws) for him to cause the division between Israel and the Philistines which God’s people, though they don’t recognize it, desperately need. God is starting to save his people by divorcing them from their marriage to their idols and to the world around them.

(Judges 14:1-20; Matthew 26:31-35)

You might think, “If the Lord is saving Israel, what difference can 30 Philistines make?” God promised only that Samson would begin to save Israel from the Philistines (v.5). Here in Ashkelon is the beginning of that beginning. We must not despise it. I have seen the principle operating in the personal situations of God’s people. For example, a family receives a huge blow with the sudden death of a spouse or a child. The spouse remaining or the parents of the child are left reeling from grief and plod on in confusion. As weeks and months (and even years) go by, God doesn’t close up the gaping wound or take away that dull ache. But the spouse or parents can frequently testify to a small providence or a timely provision, which, though very small, points to God’s ongoing care. God’s true people always treasure even the smallest of his deliverances and help.

Finally we might ask how can God use such flawed people – people like Samson – to get his work done? Shouldn’t he only work with people who are good, godly men and women? Shouldn’t he only use the people who have the right theology and the right behaviour? The problem with that is that it puts God in a box. It would mean he is limited by humans, and is only able to work when people are being good and making godly choices. It would mean that he works in response to good works, waiting for people to help him to save. David Jackman in his commentary on Judges describes how the book of Judges “shoots holes through all of that”. He says “It is above all a book about grace, undeserved mercy, as is the whole Bible.That is not to play down theological accuracy or to pretend it doesn’t matter how we behave.(We will still suffer from our sins). But we can rejoice that God is also in the business of using our failures as the foundations for his success. Let us never imagine that we have God taped, or that we know how he will work, or when”. The amazing truth is that God works through sinners, and through sinful situations. He keeps his promises to bless his people in the dark and disastrous periods of our lives, as well as through the times when things are going “right”. Not even our own sin will stop him saving us, or using us. Mysteriously, often unseen, and usually far beyond our understanding, God works through the free (and very often flawed) choices his people make. Indeed we have the assurance that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Amen

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