

The keynote of chapters 13-16 of the book of Judges, the account of the life of the final judge, Samson, is found in verse 5 of chapter 13: "and he will begin the deliverance (the salvation) of Israel from the hands of the Philistines". That salvation or deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines follows a pattern in chapters 14-16. In every episode the Philistines seem to reach a solution to their problem, only to see that solution dissolve because of something that Samson does (usually in the power of the Spirit of the Lord). Each episode is structured around these two basic elements - a Philistine success followed by a disaster caused by Samson. Thus, last time, in chapter 14, we saw the 30 Philistine groomsmen discovering the secret of the riddle (by getting Samson's bride-to-be to pressure him to reveal it to her) and so winning the bet only to find that, to fulfil his obligations under the wager, Samson strikes down 30 Philistine men in Ashkelon and takes their clothes to give to the 30 groomsmen.

1. The Humour of God's Salvation

Chapter 15 particularly, but indeed all of chapters 14-16, depicts the humour of God's salvation. A thoughtful review of the episodes recorded in chapters 14 and 15 indicates that they are a biting satire against the Philistines. In chapter 14, the 30 groomsmen triumphantly answer Samson's riddle - they win the bet but they end up losing 30 fellow citizens so that Samson can pay the bet. As we begin chapter 15, everything seems peaceful in Timnah. With Samson back home in Zorah, his bride-to-be is given in marriage to one of the 30 groomsmen. That peaceful solution ends up costing the Philistines much of their grain, grape and olive harvest as Samson sets the flaming foxes among them. Later in chapter 15, the Philistines are certain they have their enemy, Samson, at their mercy, as he is handed over bound with 2 new ropes by his fellow Israelites from Judah - until suddenly they find Samson beating sense into their heads with the jawbone of a donkey. The story is full of subtle but powerful irony, humour at its best. Every move the Philistines make, though temporarily successful, proves - due to Samson - disastrous. He plays with them. Even in his downfall, as we will see in chapter 16 next time, he will make the Philistines appear as bungling fools. In general, the theme of the episodes may be summarized as "the stupidity of the Philistines".

Some people may think that it is irreverent to find such humour in the Bible. If there is humour, they would suppose that it must be confined to the way the story is told - surely, the humour has nothing to do with the theological thrust of the text. But I'm not sure that is correct. It seems to me that the Bible uses humour when it has a very sober point to make. The humour is not only human but also divine. The Philistines are the enemies of God's people. Here their stupidity is held up for ridicule. Here they are made the laughing stock of Israel. Why? To show us the great danger of being an enemy of the Lord's people (even of his sinful people, because that's what the Israelites were in Samson's day - spiritually very much in decline). For the Lord makes fools of those who seek to ruin and crush his people. O, the awesome fearfulness of Israel's God. He toys with his enemies - and Israel's enemies - and makes his people able to laugh at them.

Perhaps this Philistine principle, this syndrome of solution followed by disaster or failure, was operating in March 1941. No sooner had Adolf Hitler concluded the necessary agreements with Yugoslavia for making that nation usable to the Nazi cause than a coup overthrew that government and established a new regime in Belgrade, the capital. The new government was willing to sign a nonaggression pact with the Nazis but clearly would not accept mere puppet status. In any event, the coup in Belgrade threw Hitler into a rage. He acted decisively and hastily. Yugoslavia would be destroyed militarily and as a nation. Goering's bombers were to level Belgrade. And they did. For 3 days and nights they scanned the capital city at rooftop level (for Belgrade had no anti-aircraft guns), wiping out 17,000 civilians, wounding many, many more and leaving the city a pile of rubble. Hitler called it "Operation Punishment". Nothing succeeds like success - and power.

Or was it a case of “the stupidity of the Philistines”? Some have argued that the Fuhrer’s decision to crush Yugoslavia was the “most catastrophic single decision in Hitler’s career”. Why? Because in order to stomp on Yugoslavia Hitler had to delay his projected attack on Russia for 4-5 weeks. Later the deep snow and frigid Russian winter hit Hitler’s forces 3 or 4 weeks short of what the Nazi generals said they needed for final victory in the Soviet Union. Napoleon could have told him that Russian winters may be more deadly than Russian weapons. Hitler’s very success contained his disaster. His solution prepared his failure. Did the true King, the real Fuhrer, sit enthroned in heaven laughing (Psalm 2:4)?

2. The Lethargy of God’s People

A story can be both humorous and tragic. Certainly the Samson narrative has its touches of tragedy. Samson’s getting even with the Philistines after his bride-to-be is given to one of his groomsmen - by setting a fox fire - moved the Philistines to burn up his wife and her father. The Philistines fought fire with fire. That obviously enraged Samson to take his revenge (vv.7-8). Yet there is a still deeper tragedy within Israel for the writer goes on to give us a blunt and clear portrayal of the lethargy, the apathy, of God’s people in vv.9-13. In retaliation for Samson’s vicious attack and slaughter of many of their men, the Philistines gather their forces and threaten the town of Lehi located somewhere in western Judah. “Why attack us?” complain the men of Judah. The Philistines have come to take Samson prisoner so they can take their revenge on him. And so a small army of Judah’s men go down to confront Samson where he is staying in a cave in the rock of Etam. Their opening question to Samson says it all: “Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us?” What sad, sad words. Here is a people that have accepted their bondage under the Philistines, who see deliverance as a threat to peace, who look upon God’s enemies as their rightful lords. Israel has become a people who can forsake the Lord their God almost without a thought but who would not think of being faithless to the Philistines! What a pitiful question. The men of Judah berate Samson. What does he think he is doing? Doesn’t he realize that his petulant outbursts are endangering Judah’s safety?

Samson is quite casual and relaxed about the whole affair. He was simply paying the Philistines back for what they had done to him. He can’t help it if the Philistines overreact. The men of Judah make it clear that they have come to tie him up and hand him over to the Philistines. Samson offers no resistance - he only extracts an oath from them that they will not kill him themselves. They willingly agree to that. But it is ironical isn’t it? They basically say, “Oh, no, Samson, we don’t want to kill you - we only want to bind you and give you to the Philistines so that they can kill you”. The great tribe of Judah, which in Judges Chapter 1 had fought battle after battle against Canaanites and Perizzites, has now become a bunch of spineless wimps. They regard the Philistines as their rulers and Samson as their enemy. They don’t even want to be God’s free people - they don’t even see that as a possibility.

It is always a dark and tragic day in the history of the Lord’s people when they are content to allow his enemies to hold sway. Something is truly wrong with us when we no longer despise our true enemies. Such enmity is the gift of God. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, God declared that he was imposing enmity between the Serpent’s seed and the woman’s seed. He said to Satan, the Serpent: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). This divisiveness, this hostility came from the Lord God himself. The Creator God refused to walk away from Eden, giving up on unfaithful human beings. No, he is the stubborn God who will set all creation ablaze with holy war in order to have a seed, an offspring, and a people for himself. That’s why redemption is an act of violence. That’s why Jesus came on a mission of violent destruction. As the apostle John writes in his first letter, “He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). That’s why the Psalms contain passages like verses 19-22 of Psalm 139 where David says, “If only you

would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies". Whether it is the evil and sin within us or some form of it outside us God does not call us to negotiate with sin and evil but to wage war on them, to nurse a holy hatred toward them in all their different forms.

3. The Sustenance of God's Servant

The climax of chapter 15 comes in vv.14-20, where we see the sustenance of God's servant. As Samson approaches Lehi, seemingly helpless since he is bound with two new ropes, the Philistines come to take him "shouting" - no doubt a belligerent shout of victory. But they did not consider the Spirit of the Lord - they hadn't learnt the lesson! The Spirit rushed on Samson, who snapped his ropes as if they were flax on fire, grabbed a nearby jawbone of a donkey and began making piles of Philistines. Note the text says it was a "fresh" jawbone which would have its teeth intact and so be a mean weapon. The Hebrew words for "ass/donkey" and "heap/pile" are spelled the same, but it is difficult to reproduce the word-play of v.16 in English translation. Moffatt's translation catches the flavour of it: "With the jawbone of an ass I have piled them in a mass!" What better name for the place than Jawbone Hill (the meaning of "Ramath Lehi")?

But now Samson is desperate. He is so weakened by thirst that he calls to the Lord for help. This is the first time we read of Samson explicitly seeking God: "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Here we have Samson dependent on the Lord. Here is the saviour/judge confessing that he needs to be saved. We have been repeatedly told, twice in chapter 14 and again in chapter 15, that Samson's power comes from the Spirit of the Lord. This picture confirms that Samson is anything but self-sufficient. And in response to Samson's cry, God split open "the hollow place" (perhaps a hollowed out depression in the rock formation) and made water flow out of it. Surely this reminds us of God's provision for Israel on a number of occasions on their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:8,11). The God who brings his people out of Egypt will surely fill every lesser need they have. Samson had to rename the place Caller's Spring ("En Hakkore"). How often do we as God's servants have to be reminded that our endurance does not come from our own adrenaline or effort but from God's refreshing grace.

4. Gift-giving and Fruit-growing

Samson is gifted by the Spirit of God in a remarkable way - killing 1,000 men with a donkey's jawbone is no mean feat! But if Samson has God's Spirit, shouldn't we see him growing in holiness? How can he be so empowered by the Spirit, and yet show no patience, humility or self-control?

The Bible has always made a distinction that many believers are unaware of. It is possible to have the gifts of the Spirit, yet lack the fruit of the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, Paul tells us that "gifts" of the Spirit are skills for doing - abilities for serving and helping people and building up the church, the body of Christ, though they can be used for other ends, too. But in Galatians 5:22-23, Paul tells us that the "fruit" of the Spirit is character traits of being - qualities such as peace, patience, gentleness and self-control. Then in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul tells us that it is possible to have gifts (or skills) of teaching and speaking and generous, sacrificial giving - and yet lack the fruit of love, without which gifts are worth "nothing".

So we will at times in Scripture come across men and women - like Samson - who have great gifts, but seem very shallow in holiness and Christlike character. And 1 Corinthians 13 warns us that we should beware of this in ourselves, too. The gifts of the Holy Spirit can operate in us, even mightily, and we can be helping people and leading ministries - yet our inner personal lives can still be a complete wreck. Some people who are most

vigorous and effective in teaching, pastoral care and leadership are, in their private lives, giving in to temptation, discouragement, anger and fear. What can we do about it?

First, we can recognize the biblical distinction between gifts and fruit. Many people look at their gifts as a self-justifying “proof” that they are fine spiritually. “I am exercising ministry and serving God’s people. Surely God is pleased with me”, they say. But we must not mistake the operation of gifts for the growth of fruit. The fruit is the “proof” of spiritual growth. Second, our prayer life, rather than our service and ministry, is the best indicator of spiritual health. Is prayer consistent, warm, enjoyable? Are you not only talking to God but also listening and learning? Or, like Samson in v.18, do you only pray as a last resort, and only for yourself and your own desires? Third, we must avoid “Lone Ranger” Christianity. Intimate fellowship is a vital means of ensuring the integrity of our inner and outer lives. Samson is notable for his aloneness. Not only does he not take any advice, but he never works with others, or builds teams. He is a one-man band. That is a prescription for focusing on outward impressiveness while suffering from internal disintegration - since no one is close enough to see our spiritual lives, or to encourage and challenge us about it.

God is more concerned with who we are than what we do. His purpose for each of us is that we be “conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). He has given us the Holy Spirit that we might grow more and more in Christlike character, in Christian maturity. And so Paul writes to the Corinthian church and to us here at Canterbury: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Amen

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