

## Samson. Spanish Wells. May/June 2003

Reading : 1 Sam. 4.1-3, 10-11; 7.3-5, 9-13; Judges 13.1-5, 24-25; 14.1-7; 16.15-23, 27-30.

As the title of the book indicates, the book of Judges is concerned with the lives of a series of ancient leaders in Israel known as 'judges', of which the book mentions 10 in all. When we come to the case of Samson, there are *several unique features* which stand out – both about the man himself and the account given of his life – and these unusual features *raise interesting questions about the significance* which he had for the people of Israel of his day.

Thinking first of **the narrative**, we note :

- (1) That Samson's history is not only recorded last, but provides by far the fullest portrait of any of the judges. Although the life of Samson actually accomplished relatively little, his story is recorded in far more detail than are the stories of the other judges.
- (2) That Samson comes on the scene at a time when the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord – and were delivered by Him into the hands of the Philistines. It was nothing new, of course, for God to raise up a deliverer following a period of oppression. But what is different in this case is that the people do not first cry to God for His help – even though the Philistine oppression was both the *longest* and seemingly the *most extensive* that Israel endured. In the case of each of *the other* major judges, there was first an outcry to God begging Him to intervene and to deliver the people from their sufferings. Alone among the judges, then, Samson was *not* raised up in response to the pleading of God's people – and so marks a clear break in the cycle which runs through the rest of the book – and which is stated succinctly for us in Neh. 9.27 – 'they worked great provocations. Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them. And in the time of their trouble, *when they cried to You*, You heard from heaven. And according to Your abundant mercies, You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies'. (See Neh. 9.27-28; Psa. 106. 34-46 – note v.44.) That God took the initiative alone in the case of Samson suggests strongly that there was something that He wanted to accomplish – and possibly say – through Samson's life and experience.
- (3) That Samson's story begins with a detailed account of the prior announcement of his conception and birth (occupying no less than 23 verses in chapter 13) – an announcement made by no less a personage than the angel of the Lord Himself. This stands in marked contrast to the histories of the judges who came before him – whose births aren't even mentioned – except that in the case of Jephthah we are told that he had been born illegitimately. The histories of the other judges commence with their call to service when mature in life. Clearly then there was something about Samson's birth which was of special significance.
- (4) That Samson's story ends with a detailed account of his death. We know nothing of the circumstances of the death of any of the other judges – we are told simply that they died and were buried. Clearly then there was something about the circumstances of Samson's death which was also of special significance. And we should perhaps notice the fascinating parallel between *what happens to Samson at Gaza following his capture by the Philistines at Sorek* and *what had happened to the ark of God at Ashdod following its capture by the Philistines at the battle at Aphek*. As had been the case with the ark of God, Samson is taken captive and subsequently paraded in humiliation before Dagon as proof of Dagon's superior power. (Dagon was the Philistine god of fertility and grain – so we can understand why the Philistines weren't particularly amused when Samson set fire to their standing corn, 15.4-6.) But – as also in the case of the ark – Samson becomes the Lord's instrument of judgement on the pagan god and his worshippers – and – just as the image of Dagon was brought down by the power of God in Ashdod – so the temple of Dagon is brought down by the power of God in Gaza. (The latter story is recorded in 1 Sam. 5.1-4; where we read not only the words 'took', and 'brought', vv.1-2, as we do in Judg. 16.21, but the word 'fell' (on his face), vv. 3-4, which is the same as we find in Judg. 16.30 ('fell on Philistine lords and all the people'). The Lord wouldn't let anyone monkey around with His ark.)

Thinking now of **the man himself**, we discover that :

- (1) Samson never went to war against the enemy – nor did he attempt to rally an army in Israel to do so. Indeed, it is all too clear that Israel had no stomach whatever for a fight against the Philistines. As we have mentioned, they didn't even cry to God for deliverance – and when at one stage Samson had provoked the Philistines, his own people protested, 'Don't you know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What is this that you have done to us?', 15.11. True, *Samson* fought the Philistines – but in an altogether different way to that in which the other judges fought against their oppressors. The other judges had delivered Israel by their leadership, courage (Gideon was 'a mighty man of valour', 6.12) and force of character – and not by any personal strength and prowess. But Samson worked solely by himself. He didn't lead an army – he was an army – and he put paid to large numbers of his foes by his singular feats of strength.
- (2) Samson only 'began' to deliver Israel. And, yes, he certainly 'began' to do that – in that he proved to be a terrible – and terrifying – scourge to the Philistines – despatching not only the 30 men at *Ashkelon*, 14.19, an unquantified number in the 'hip and thigh' slaughter at *Timnath*, 15.8, and a 1,000 men at *Lehi*, 15.15, but vastly in excess of 3,000 at his death in *Gaza*, 16.27. And yet, we are told plainly that he only 'began'. That is, whereas each of the other judges accomplished a *complete* deliverance for Israel, Samson didn't. In the cases of judges like Ehud, Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah, we read that God 'subdued' Israel's enemies – Moab, Jabin (King of Canaan), Midian and the children of Ammon respectively, 3.30; 4.23; 8.28; 11.33. But Samson didn't 'subdue' the Philistines – it fell to Samuel to do that – it was following the victory which Samuel helped achieve at Mizpah that we read, 'so the Philistines were subdued', 1 Sam. 7.13. For his part, Samson was only a partial deliverer.

Taken together, these interesting features alert us to the fact that there was something mighty odd about the story of Samson –and they invite us to ask some serious questions about the significance of his life and experience.

And we'll find it is critically important that we understand where and how Samson fits into the events of his day. Which brings us to **Factsheet 2**. As you can see, the Philistine oppression lasted 40 years. This oppression began very shortly before Samson's birth – and Samson's life ran more or less parallel with the duration of that tyranny. His role as judge commenced when he was approaching 20 years of age and lasted for a further 20 years – *more or less matching the period between the battle at Aphek* recorded in 1 Samuel 4 – when Israel was roundly defeated and the ark of God captured by the Philistines – *and the battle at Mizpah* in 1 Samuel 7 – when Israel enjoyed a decisive victory over the Philistines.

You will see from the overhead that, at some time about the beginning of the Philistine oppression, *two very remarkable boys* were born in Israel – they were given the names Samson and Samuel. They were both *miracle babies*, being conceived supernaturally – for both of their mothers had previously been barren and childless, 13.2; 1 Sam. 2.56. The boys were both to be Nazarites for the whole of their lifetime – and the *public symbol* and *tangible evidence* of their consecration to God was their long hair. Before Samson was conceived, his mother-to-be was informed by God that '*no razor may be used on his head*', 13.5 – and before Samuel was conceived, his mother-to-be vowed to God that '*no razor will ever be used on his head*', 1 Sam. 1.11.

Both men are said to have 'judged' Israel, Judg.15.30; 16.31; 1 Sam. 7.6, 15-17, and both receive honourable mention in the same verse (v.32) in the inspired catalogue of faith in Hebrews 11. Both began their public work for God a short time before the disastrous battle at Aphek. But – as we have seen – Samson only '*began*' to deliver Israel from the Philistines, 13.6 – and it was left to Samuel to finish the job and to end the Philistine occupation of Israel – which he did at the battle at Mizpah, 1 Sam. 7.13. Alas, the one – Samson – later *defiled his consecration* – in that (as a result of his folly) – his hair was shaved off – and he died – blind and with no descendants of which we know – just a short time before Israel's decisive victory over the Philistines. The other – Samuel – *preserved his consecration intact* – played a key role in Israel's decisive victory and went on to live for another 40 years or so after – and we read of his descendants for many generations to come – in particular of his 17 great grandchildren – of whom at least 14 were accomplished musicians, 1 Chron. 25.1,4-6.

If we are going to grasp the significance and lesson of Samson's life, it is all-important that we remember that the key events of his life – involving both his strengths and his weaknesses – were sandwiched between the two battles which marked Israel's great defeat and Israel's great victory.

But what then is the special significance of Samson's life? At a superficial glance, it may seem to be no more than that God was determined to prove that – although His people had been defeated and His ark had been taken captive for a brief time – He was still very much in control – and retained the power to help His people and to smite His foes. And all of that was certainly and most wonderfully true. But I suggest there was a much deeper – and far more important – meaning to Samson's chequered experiences.

If we had read the whole of chapters 14 and 15, we would have discovered that Samson had a liking for riddles and rhymes, 14.14,18; 15.16, but in many ways Samson was himself a riddle – a curious mixture of great strengths and great weaknesses. I suggest that the chief significance of Samson's exploits and actions lay in that he was meant to be **a living object lesson** for his generation – that the nation's very own character and history was itself embodied (played out) in his story of mingled strength and weakness.

We noted at the outset that Samson was distinguished from the other judges in that he was raised up by God without the people having first cried out to God in their afflictions – even though these were severe. Samson's appearance on the stage was the result of the sovereign intervention of God. I believe that the Lord not only chose this particular man to be a leader in Israel – but that He deliberately made him *the unusual kind of leader* he was – working alone in the supernatural strength which God supplied, in contrast to the other judges who led armies into battle – because God meant Israel to see – and us to see – that Samson himself *provides a vivid picture* of Israel's own experience at the time. For, *on the one hand*, Samson exerted a *supernatural* power not dissimilar to that which would have been the constant experience of God's people – if – but only if – they remained true to their covenant vow to God and continued in wholehearted consecration to Him. But, *on the other hand*, when Samson defiled and compromised his consecration, he forfeited God's power and became weak as other men – and this cried out loud and clear to Israel that their supernatural strength too was entirely conditional on their consecration to the Lord.

For, in the event, Samson's failure to deliver the people completely from the oppression of the enemy – in contrast to the success of each of the earlier judges – was due to his unfaithfulness to his Nazarite vow and his resulting premature death – what a waste – what unfulfilled potential!

In precisely the same way, Israel – through their spiritual unfaithfulness to their covenant with God – had lost their power against the enemy – hence the *disastrous and humiliating defeat* at Aphek. And the outcome of that battle had demonstrated beyond doubt that there was no substitute whatever for God's presence and power. The people had then trusted in the ark of the Lord to secure victory for them but – just as with Samson – they didn't know –

didn't realise that the Lord had departed from them. And they soon found to their cost that their strength lay alone – not in the ark of the Lord – but *in the Lord of the ark!*

I suggest then that God raised up Samson to his unique kind of judgeship that he might be *a fitting picture* of a people who were *invincible* in God's strength but who were weak and wholly ineffective without it.

We need at this point to correct the popular – but false – impression that Samson was a man of outstanding physique – endowed with huge, rippling muscles. It is clear that – left to himself – Samson was no stronger than other men – which is why in chapter 16 his enemies were baffled by *the secret and source of his strength* – although they were in no doubt as to *the secret and source of his weakness*. For, although they didn't know where his strength lay – they knew something just as important – namely, where his weakness lay – in his romantic liaisons with foreign women.

Samson then certainly wasn't of giant stature and proportions – as were at least one family of the Philistines – I refer to the family of Rapha of Gath – of whom Goliath is perhaps the most famous member, 2 Sam. 21.15-22.

Make no mistake, it wasn't Samson's *build or biceps* which accounted for his exceptional strength. It was the Spirit of God – and the Spirit of God alone – who made Samson strong – from that time when the Spirit first began to 'move' (to stir, rouse, disturb) him at the end of chapter 13. From that moment on, Samson possessed superhuman strength *sufficient for most circumstances*; e.g. the 'hip and thigh' slaughter, 15.8 – transporting the gate of Gaza to the top of the mountain, 16.3 ('towards Hebron' – which 40 miles to east as crow flies – but only in that direction – destruction of gate was particularly humiliating for a city because symbolise its strength) – and demolishing the temple of Dagon, 16.30. And yet there were *occasions which called for special empowerment* – and we read that on three times the Spirit 'came upon him mightily', 14.6, 19; 15.14.

In the final analysis, it wasn't Samson's arm and fist – or jawbone of an ass – with which he defeated the Philistines. It was the power of God's Spirit alone which made him mightier than thousands of his enemies.

In exactly the same way, the tribes of Israel were no bigger or more impressive than the other nations around – far from it. They were, in almost every case, hopelessly outnumbered by their foes and far less well equipped for warfare. Indeed, in the days of Samson, Samuel and Saul, the Philistines *enjoyed an enormous advantage* over Israel in that the Philistines held a monopoly on smelting iron – and iron swords could easily slice through swords made of bronze – which were the weapons which Israel wielded.

Clearly Samson experienced *no special sensations or physical indications* to tell him that he possessed superhuman strength. *He knew he had such strength only because he used it* – hence 'he knew not that the Lord was departed from him', 16.20. He was in no doubt, however, about *the nature and source of his strength* – for having slaughtered a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass and become very thirsty – he called on the Lord, saying, '*You have given this great deliverance by the hand of your servant : and now shall I die of thirst?*', 15.18. He knew full well that his strength wasn't his own – it was supplied – and that constantly – by God.

But Samson's strength wasn't only an imparted strength – from the very beginning it had been bound up inseparably with his faithfulness to his Nazarite vow – and Samson was fully aware of this. He later confided in Delilah, 'I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother's womb – if I am shaven, then my strength will go from me – and I shall become weak like any other man', 16.17.<sup>1</sup> The outward expressions of Samson's Nazariteship – affecting his *appetite* (not eating or drinking anything which came from the vine, Num. 6.3-4), *appearance* (his long hair, Num. 6.5), and *associations* (having no contact with any human corpse, Num. 6.6-7) – were a constant – indeed a daily – reminder to him of this fact. He knew that his supernatural power was altogether conditional!

And the same held true for Israel – as Moses told the nation in Deuteronomy 28, 'It shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways', vv.1, 7.

Samson was then *a graphic picture* to the men of his day – if they had only had the eyes to see – of the strength which the people of God could – and should – have exerted in overcoming the very strongest of their foes – on condition that they adhered faithfully to their covenant vow and to their consecration to the Lord.

But Samson was *an equally graphic picture* of the weakness which the nation so often experienced through their waywardness – through their unfaithfulness to God and through their sustained intercourse with the heathen. And we note that, in Samson's case, it was his indulgence in sensual desires which proved fatal to his consecration – and so cost him *his supernatural strength, his sight, his freedom, his dignity* (grinding grain – a woman's work) *and eventually his life*. I suggest that it was in many ways fitting that a man, whose problems stemmed from the occasions when he 'saw' a Philistine woman in Timnath, 14.1, and 'saw' a Philistine prostitute in Gaza, should have his very eyes gouged out by the Philistines, 16.21.

*Samson's physical weakness was then the direct result of his moral and spiritual weakness.* And here I suggest that even the *nature* of this weakness was significant.

I hardly need to labour the point that Samson's outstanding weakness of character lay in his undisciplined affections, desires and passions. And his *repeated intrigues and intimate relationships* with the daughters of a foreign people – relationships which were contrary to God's law and against which his own parents had warned him from the outset – *served to mirror perfectly* Israel's constant tendency to fraternise with the heathen and their gods – and so to blatantly violate the terms of their covenant with God; cf. Deut. 7.1-4.

It is probably worth us noting *the link which is forged* between Samson and Israel in this very connection by the language used : one of the key symptoms of Israel's departure from God lay in the way that 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes' – a point made twice towards the end of the book, 17.6; 21.25. I suggest that it is therefore significant that the same expression occurs twice in connection with Samson's first amorous relationship with a Philistine woman – when challenged by his parents about the relationship, he responded, 'she is right in my eyes', 14.3 lit. – and later 'he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes', v.7.

And, exactly as with Samson, the people of Israel forfeit the power of the Spirit which was necessary to secure victory over their foes because they surrendered to the power of the flesh – and did what was right in their eyes.

The point is that Israel's spectacular defeat at Aphek had come about because of their departure from their covenant with God and their loss of consecration – just as Samson's later loss of strength at Sorek came about as a result of the betrayal of his vow and the loss of his consecration, 16.17-20. Sadly, Israel had put her trust in the 'ark of the covenant of the Lord', 1 Sam. 4.3, 4, but had herself departed from and violated the terms of that very covenant. Samson's subsequent regaining of his strength was to provide Israel with a *very simple object lesson*. If they – having once lost their strength because of their unfaithfulness to their covenant with God and to their consecration to Him – should turn again to Him in repentance and prayer, they too would regain their strength.

And this is exactly what happened. Prior to the next battle with the Philistines, Samuel made it clear to the people that victory would be altogether conditional on the people returning to God with all their hearts, putting away their strange gods and committing themselves to serve the Lord only, 1 Sam. 7. 3-6. And this they did – and as Samson – when his hair began to grow again – prayed to the 'Sovereign Lord', 16.28, so the people fasted and confessed, 'we have sinned against the Lord' – and they put away their Baals and their Ashtaroth.

And as in the case of Samson, their renewed consecration led to restored and regained strength – and *the ignominious defeat at Aphek was transformed into the glorious and decisive victory at Mizpah*. Two important lessons were impressed upon Israel at Mizpah. First, it was made abundantly clear to them that the conquering power was very much God's – not theirs – for 'the Lord thundered with a great thunder<sup>2</sup> on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them', 1 Sam. 7.10 – in perfect accord with the words of Samuel's mother Hannah back in chapter 2 – 'the adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder on them', v.10 – leaving Israel to engage in little more than a mopping up operation. God's people were therefore left in no doubt that day that their victory was achieved with the help – and in the power – of God – hence both the name given to the stone which Samuel set up near Mizpah to commemorate Israel's victory – Eben-ezer – 'stone of help' – and Samuel's acknowledgement, 'Hitherto (thus far) has the Lord helped us'. The second lesson which Israel learned at Mizpah was that, as Samuel forewarned them, victory would come only 'if' they put away all other gods and served the Lord alone – that victory was entirely conditional on their unreserved commitment and consecration to Him.

I hope you see now why I suggested earlier that – if we are to discover the significance and central lesson of Samson's life – it is desperately important to note that the key events of that life – demonstrating as they do both his strengths and his weaknesses – were sandwiched between the battles which marked Israel's great defeat and Israel's great victory. Samson was then a pointed object lesson for Israel. The message was plain – *power and strength come only as a result of wholehearted and complete consecration to God*.

But that message is, I suggest, *equally* true for us too – for the Christian also is spiritually effective and strong only in God's strength. It was the apostle Paul (no less) who acknowledged - 'not that we are sufficient of ourselves ... but our sufficiency is from God', 2 Cor. 3.5. And, *although God's love is entirely unconditional – His power isn't!* The circumstances of Samson's life cry out to us as well that *the unreserved surrender – the wholehearted consecration of all that we have and are – of our time, energies and all else – are the essential prerequisite of spiritual power and usefulness in the service of God*. Ouch! And ouch again!

In 1896 a young man from Ohio named Judson Van DeVenter struggled for some time between developing his talents in the field of art and going into full-time evangelistic work. "at last", he wrote, "the pivotal hour of my life came - and I surrendered all. I became an evangelist - and I discovered down deep in my soul a talent hitherto unknown to me". Judson referred to the ability to write and to sing sacred songs. It was at that time that he penned the words of the now famous hymn :

All to Jesus, I surrender;  
All had to him I freely give;  
I will ever love and serve him,  
In his presence daily live.

All to Jesus, I surrender;  
Humbly at his feet I bow,  
Worldly pleasures all forsaken;  
Take me, Jesus, take me now.

I surrender all, I surrender all,  
All to thee, my blessed Saviour,  
I surrender all.

And that is, I suppose, what wholehearted consecration is all about!

I want us each to spend a few moments in silent prayer - and let God do what he wants in us - and then I will close the meeting. The let us be clear what this is all about :

Not an extra 10 minutes - or an hour spent in prayer and Bible reading - but all my time surrendered to him.

Not an extra \$10 – Or \$1,000 each week in the offering – but all my money surrendered to him.

It is about my thought life – all of it. It is about a mind which is holy - a mind fed by it that which is pure, clean and wholesome.

It is about everything I am and have.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Jael, who lured a foreign general to his death, here a foreign woman, Delilah, lures the greatest of Israel's warriors to his death.

<sup>2</sup> 'Noise' lit. Same word as 1 Sam. 4.6 – 'when the Philistines heard the noise of the great {mighty} shout, they said, 'What means the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews?'. Is it was the 'noise' which God made – and not that which man made – which secured victory for His people.

## Samson - unique features

### *The narrative*

- Samson's history provides by far the fullest portrait of any of the judges.
- Samson wasn't raised up in response to the pleading of God's people.
- Samson's story begins with a detailed account of the announcement of his conception and birth.
- Samson's story ends with a detailed account of his death.

### *The man*

- Samson never attempted to raise an army. He worked solely by himself.
- Samson only 'began' to deliver Israel.

## Sheet 2

### Samson and the key events of his day

Philistine oppression	Decisive Battles	Eli	Samuel	Samson
		Born		
		<i>58 years</i>		
		Begins to judge		
		<i>20 years</i>		
Begins (1)			Born (7)	<b>Born (9)</b>
<i>20 years</i>		<i>20 years</i>	<i>20 years</i>	<i>18-19 years</i>
				<b>Begins work (10)</b>
	Aphek (4)	Dies (6)		
<i>20 years</i> (2)			<i>20 years</i>	<i>20 years</i> (11)
				<b>Dies (12)</b>
Ends (3)	Mizpah (5)			
			<i>40 years</i>	
			Dies (8)	

#### References :

- (1) Judg. 13.1; (2) 1 Sam. 7.2; (3) 1 Sam. 7.13-14;  
 (4) 1 Sam. 4.1-11; (5) 1 Sam. 7.3-14; (6) 1 Sam. 4.15, 18;  
 (7) 1 Sam. 1.20; (8) 1 Sam. 25.1; (9) Judg. 13.24;  
 (10) Judg. 13.5, 25; (11) Judg. 15.20; 16.31; (12) Judg. 16.30.

## Samson and Christ. Spanish Wells. May/June 2003

<b>Samson</b>	<b>Christ</b>
Announced by angel to mother, Judg. 13.3-24	Announced by angel to mother, Luke 1.26-38
Saviour, Neh. 9.27 (LXX = soter)	Saviour
'He will begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines', 13.5	'He will save His people from their sins', Matt. 1.21
'He grew and the Lord blessed him', 13.24	'The child grew and became strong ... and Jesus grew', Luke 2.40, 52
'The Spirit of the Lord began to stir him', 13.25	Luke 4
People recognised as one who was one with others and yet was different	
Set apart for God and concerned things of God	
Parents were confused by behaviour and action – because didn't 'know', 14.4	Parents were confused by behaviour and action – because didn't 'know', Luke 2.48-50
Question arose, 'Who is this man, that he can do such things – even such works of power are done by his hands'; cf 16.5	Question arose, 'Who is this man, that He can do such things – even such works of power are done by His hands', Mark 6.2
Lived by principle, 'what others have done to me, I will do to them', 15.11 (cf. v.10 – tit for tat)	Lived by principle, 'do to others what you would that they do to you', Matt.7.12
Delivered into hands of gentiles by his own people, 15.12	Delivered into hands of gentiles by His own people, Matt. 27.2.
Broke cords which bound him and struck down his enemies, 15.14-15	Allowed Himself to be taken away, and submitted Himself to them,
High point of his life was his death – accomplished most then	High point of His life was His death – accomplished most then
Died in bad company - among his foes	Died in bad company – between two malefactors
Samson died with God's enemies	Christ died for God's enemies
Was a flawed deliverer	Was perfect in every way
Was a man of faith, Heb. 11.32	Was the author and finisher of faith, 12.2