

Samson: The Imperfect Savior

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Summary

Samson is the “imperfect savior” *not* because he saved God's people despite his flaws and imperfections but because, given the opportunity to deliver God's people, he didn't deliver. In this way he reminds us of and points ahead to Jesus, who did God's will in delivering his people. He also serves as a wake-up call to us, to set aside our idolatry so we can be set apart for God.

Introduction to Samson and Judges 13-16

Samson is the worst judge. He is the last judge in this book and, when he selected his first wife based on how she looked to him (“She's the right one for me”), began the cycle whereby everyone did what was right in their own eyes (14:3; 17:6; 21:25). As things spiraled downward, out of control, and into chaos, Samson came as a judge who didn't even deliver himself, much less Israel.

Yet, Samson figured into God's plan by virtue of becoming God's agent against the Philistines (14:4). The Philistine oppression provided the context for Samson's story. The Philistines were apparently one among several tribes who were left behind in the land to test the Israelites who did not face battles in Canaan (3:3).

God worked his plan out mysteriously, possibly even without Samson's knowledge (14:4). The larger mystery is that God even bothered. When he raised up Samson, he did so from scratch, influencing Samson's parents even before he was born to set him apart under a nazirite vow to be consecrated specially to God. (You can read more about the nazirite vow in Numbers 6:1-21.) But God was on his own—the people weren't even crying out for a deliverer like in the past. It was almost as if they had been comfortable living under a foreign ruler, much like they had to be coaxed out of Egypt by Moses. So it was left for God to deliver his people without their even wanting to be delivered.

But Samson was no Moses. Despite being described in one verse as having “led” (15:20) Israel for twenty years, he did no leading of any kind, except perhaps as a motivational leader, if Israel could be said to draw strength from the ways Samson showed up the Philistines. Rather, Samson is a follower—of his own desires and urges, which got him into trouble on many occasions and ultimately led to his temple-destruction and demise.

Judges describes Samson as one who will only “begin” (13:5) to deliver Israel. This is true. Any deliverance that came as a result of Samson's work was not directly attributable to him. He really only led himself and any leading he did of the people appears to be incidental to him exacting revenge. Everything fell apart after the Israelites him (read chs 17-21 for a very dark and grim depiction of Israelite history and human nature) and when the next judge appeared, Samuel, he was also under a nazirite vow and had to deal with the Philistine threat because Samson didn't take care of it. In short, Samuel had to clean up Samson's mess (see 1 Samuel 4-7).

One final interesting note is that Samson's story is less about him than about the women in his life (as evidenced by his unnamed mother, often referred to as “the woman,” and the references to his wives and the prostitute, although his second “wife” is named). This contrast symbolizes how women affected Samson—he did not follow the positive example of his mother and was tricked time and again by his two wives and almost captured when he spent the night with a prostitute.

Chapter 13—Samson's birth narrative; the faithful example of his mother; the Spirit of the LORD “begins to stir him”

The birth story is completely one-quarter of the Samson story and is focused on the faith of his parents, especially that of his mother, and their fear of God. The promise is only that Samson will “begin to deliver” Israel (13:5). Note that this promise did not come by the hopes or desires of his parents but by the promise of the angel. Samson possibly “began” to fulfill this prophecy, but if so, not until the end of his story when he killed more Philistines in his own death than he had while he was alive (16:30). Tragically, the value of Samson's life appears to be measured by how many he killed.

Ultimately, Samson's “beginning” does not find true fulfillment until the coming of Jesus. Israel was delivered to the Philistines for forty years, reminiscent of the wilderness wandering for forty years. Instead of being delivered by God (via Samson) through it, they fell apart. Samson was supposed to be special, set apart under the nazirite vow, but never lived up to his potential. The specialness of Samson is evident in that only a few others in the bible receive a birth narrative account like this—Ishmael (Gen 16:7-16); Isaac (Gen 17:16-21; 18:10-15); John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25, 57-66); and Jesus (Luke 1:26-45; 2:1-7). Instead of simply appointing a deliverer, God worked to raise one from nothing. Sadly, Samson didn't go along with the plan.

In this section, at the very end, the first occurrence of “the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power” comes into play. But the phrase appears to be used somewhat ambiguously. The Spirit, somewhat innocuously, enabled Samson to destroy a lion, but later when the Spirit came upon Samson it enabled Samson to accomplish God's work but not in a way that “delivered” Israel; it merely inflicted damage to the Philistines (see 14:19 and 15:14; cf. 14:4). However, at the end of his life, when Samson brought down the temple to Dagon on himself and the Philistines, despite his prayer to God, there is no mention of the Spirit of the LORD.

Chapter 14—Samson marries a Philistine woman; kills a lion; tricks the Philistines and is then tricked himself; kills thirty men in an act of revenge

Although Samson's story began in chapter 13 with his parents, he doesn't make a physical appearance until chapter 14. Suddenly, the grown Samson had a liking for forbidden things: he went down to the land of the Philistines and found a Philistine woman to marry. Despite his parents objections, he instructed his father to arrange the marriage, stating, “She's the right one for me.” This note precedes a pattern that will finish out Judges whereby “everyone did as they saw fit” (see 17:6; 21:25). This phrase is literally the last sentence in Judges! And it's Samson who began it using it!

Even though God was seeking to gain a foothold through all this (14:4), the fact remains that Samson “began” to lead the people in doing whatever pleased them personally. He selected his wife based on what was good to him regardless of his nazirite vow. Samson's foreign wives are a symbol of Israel's idolatry towards God in these times.

On the way to Timnah to marry his bride, Samson encountered a lion that he destroyed with the help of God. This carcass, which also served as food for him on a later occasion (his interaction with the carcass likely broke his nazirite vow), became the source of a riddle he told to his thirty companions. This scene begins the depiction in Judges of Samson as a one-upper of the Philistines, tricking them even as they try to trick him.

Foolishly, Samson gave the answer to his riddle to his wife, who had been extorted by the Philistines (14:15). Samson was furious that his riddle had been deciphered, blamed it on his wife, and in a brutal act of revenge slaughtered thirty men to obtain the garments he needed to provide his thirty companions. Mysteriously, the Spirit of the LORD enabled him to do this, likely because of the damage inflicted to the Philistines.

Chapter 15—Samson's marital problems; he destroys the economy of the Philistines as revenge; is turned over by his own people to the Philistines; slaughters a thousand men to get away

In 15:1 Samson returned “later” to visit his wife. “Burning with anger” (14:19) after being betrayed by her he had gone home. After cooling off, he decided to pay a visit to his “wife's room” (15:2). But when he arrived he discovered that his marriage had been annulled and his wife had been given to another!

Samson decided he had a “right” to get even and set out to “really harm them” (15:3). His act of revenge this time destroyed the economy of the Philistines when he burned up their crops. As a result of this, Samson's wife and father-in-law were burned by the Philistines, thus fulfilling a promise they had made earlier (14:15). Samson became furious over this and “slaughtered” many of them (15:8).

The Philistines decided to capture Samson to bring him to justice. This was easy for them as the people of Judah were furious with Samson for going against their Philistine rulers. The people would rather be subject to foreign rulers than take a stand for God! And in this case, when Samson could have challenged them on that point as their judge, he didn't. He merely secured a promise from them that they wouldn't kill him themselves (15:12). When they came to arrest Samson, the Spirit of the LORD came upon Samson and he killed a thousand of them with a donkey's jawbone.

He was thirsty after all this “hard work” so he selfishly cried out to God, mimicking the sincere cries to God by oppressed Israelites (see, for example, 6:7). Rather than delivering Israel, Samson wanted God to deliver *him* from his thirst. God answered his prayer by opening a source of water for him and he was refreshed. The chapter concludes by noting that Samson “led” Israel. Whatever this entailed, it did not include delivering Israel from the Philistine rule (15:20).

Chapter 16—Samson is almost captured; falls in love with Delilah; is tricked by Delilah and captured; kills more Philistines in his death than while he was alive

Samson was nearly undone by his desires when he was almost captured because he spent the night with a prostitute. But continuing his theme of one-upping the Philistines, as they waited for the morning to kill him (16:2), Samson got up in the dark and left the city, taking the city gates with him!

Some time later he met another Philistine woman (Delilah), loved her, and began some kind of relationship with her (presumably a marriage). Just like with his previous wife, the Philistines created an arrangement with her for her to betray Samson. Specifically, she was supposed to find out the source of Samson's strength. Eventually Samson broke, although it took four times for him to finally tell her that the source of his strength was his nazirite vow and that his hair had never been cut. Ironically, despite clearly having been the punchline of a joke, Samson did not figure out what his wife was up to.

Armed with this information the Philistines are able to subdue Samson, gouge his eyes out, and take him prisoner. Samson's bondage in this scene is symbolic of the bondage Israel was under as a result of their idolatry with foreign gods. In another ironic turn of events, the Philistines consider Samson to have been “delivered” (16:23) to them by Dagon in the same way Israel was delivered to the Philistines at the beginning of the Samson story (13:1; 16:23-24). Tragically, the only deliverance in this story occurred when Samson was given to his enemies; he was not able to deliver Israel out of their subjugation to the Philistines.

But Samson got revenge. As his hair began to grow back, he remembered God, and as a final act of revenge prayed to God to give him strength “just once more” (16:28). He did not pray for strength to deliver Israel, however, but to “get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes” (16:28). The text does not tell us whether God answered his prayer, and it is silent on whether the Spirit of the LORD came upon him. But in his last act he took out the support pillars in the temple, bringing the temple down upon itself and on all those who were inside. He killed many more Philistines in his death, even more than during his whole life (16:30).

Summary

Samson was a comedic-tragic figure, focused on enjoying life, satisfying his desires, and getting revenge. He never lived up to his potential. In this way he is like those who are like the seed scattered on rocky places (Mark 4:1-20; esp. v. 5-6, 16-17). They started well but didn't end well. Samson had everything going for him—God had prepared him from before his birth to be a great leader to deliver his people. But Samson couldn't overcome his weaknesses. He is a wake-up call to us to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and to set aside any idols we have so we can be set apart for God.