

INTRODUCTION:

When we think of superheroes it is hard not to think of Superman!

- George Reeves was one of the original actors who played Superman on TV, and yet we know that his fame brought with it a certain level of risk.
- Every time he wore his Superman outfit out in public, people would kick him in the shins, punch him in his back with their fists, and would assault him in various ways.
- They were not really being mean, but they were eager to prove just how strong the Man of Steel really was.
- I have read that on one afternoon in Detroit in 1953, Reeves was making an appearance in a department store, when a young fan pulled out his father's loaded .45 caliber Army Colt and pointed it directly at Reeves' chest.
- Amazingly, Mr. Reeves talked the young man into putting it down as he assured the young man that Superman could withstand the shot, but he said that, **"...when bullets bounce off my chest, they might hurt you and the others around here."**

I think we would agree that the suit is what set Mr. Reeves apart.

- In fact, if he had walked into that department store wearing a normal business suit, he might have been surrounded by his fans, but they probably would not have hit him and certainly would not have pointed a gun at him.
- It was the suit that made him different.
- We know, however (and I hope I do not ruin anybody's day here), that Superman is fiction.
- The visitor from another planet does not really exist, except on TV, in the movies, and in the comic books.

Many, many years ago, however, there was a real Superman—born in a small village known as Zorah.

- He might not have been faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but he probably could have bent steel in his bare hands.
- And he was different, not because he wore blue tights, but because of his long hair.

In the New Testament, Samson is referred to in **Hebrews 11**, in what is often referred to as the Great Hall of Faith.

- It's not a physical place, but it is a list of great heroes of the faith such as Joseph and Moses, along with a number of others.
- We can look at these great heroes in **Hebrews 11**, and we understand why they are honored in such a way, but when we come to Samson, those of us who actually know something about this man may ask ourselves, **"How in the world did Samson end up being honored like this? Certainly there must be some kind of mistake!"**
- At the very least, we can safely say that Samson is a rather complicated Bible character.
- He is both strong and weak at the same time.
- He is a leader as well as a great embarrassment for God's people. He is both a saint and a sinner.
- In many ways, Samson leaves us with more questions than answers.
- This morning I would like for us to look at the challenge of Samson's life as we try to learn something about God and God's plans for our lives even today.
- This morning we will study the first part of his life, and Lord willing we will conclude next Sunday by looking at what we can learn from Samson's eventual downfall.

The story of Samson's life actually starts in the book of **Judges—Judges 13**.

- The time of the judges spans about 400 years—from the death of Joshua until the time of Saul, the first king.
- The key verse in the whole book of **Judges** is the last verse in the whole book—**Judges 21:25**, ***“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”***
- Recently, I chose to read through the book of **Judges** and as I did so, I looked for key phrases like, ***“the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.”***
- And usually within a chapter or two that phrase is followed by this, ***“the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel...”***
- As I looked at these positive and negative statements about the sons of Israel, I penciled in a little happy face or sad face.
- Well, by the time we get to Samson in this line of judges, there were about as many sad times as there were happy times for the Israelites.
- God's people had been on a roller coaster—they were faithful to God, then they did evil and their enemies came in, then they cried out to God and God sent a judge to deliver them from their enemies, and they were faithful again—and this happened over and over again.

Samson, though, is rather strange, because he does not appear to be a very good person.

- The Bible does not say anything about Samson's great leadership.
- But rather, Samson is spiritually weak, he gives into temptation—immorality, anger, and revenge.
- In fact, in many ways Samson is a lot like the nation of Israel doing whatever was right in his own eyes.

Sometimes the only way we can understand someone's strengths is to compare them to someone even worse.

- I am reminded of the old story about a very sinful man who died—everybody in town knew how bad this man was.
- But the man's brother came to the local preacher and said, **“I would like you to perform the funeral for my brother, and I want you to refer to him as a saint in your message.”**
- The preacher said, **“Your brother was the lyingest, cheatingest, vilest man I have ever known! There is no way I can call him a saint.”**
- The brother replied, **“If you call him a saint, I will donate \$25,000 to the building fund at your church.”**
- The preacher started to see things differently, so he agreed to do it.
- The next day the funeral service was held, and everyone was wondering what the preacher would say.
- The preacher stood up and said, **“The deceased was the vilest, cheatingest, lyingest, most reprobate man in town, as you all know—but compared to his brother, this man was a saint!”**

And so again, sometimes the only way we can say something nice about someone is to compare them to those who are worse, and I would say that as bad as Samson was, he was still better than a lot of people in the nation of Israel at that time.

- Samson, then, is someone we can understand.
- Samson is like a lot of us—not perfect, but God was still able to use him in spite of (and sometimes because of) his imperfection.
- This morning, then, I would like for us to do a quick overview of three defining moments in Samson's life, and then I would like for us to close with some very practical lessons from the first part of Samson's wasted life.

I. First of all, we notice from the Scriptures that **SAMSON’S LIFE HAD A VERY INTERESTING BEGINNING—HE GOT OFF TO A GOOD START.**

We read about Samson’s arrival in **Judges 13.**

- Let’s read together from **Judges 13:1-5...**

1 Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years.

2 There was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had borne no children.

3 Then the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son.

4 "Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing.

5 "For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

Back up in **verse 1**, we notice something rather unusual.

- If you look at **verse 1** very carefully, you might notice that the people never cried out to God for help.
- With nearly all of the other judges, the people hit rock-bottom and then begged God for deliverance from their enemies.
- But in the case of Samson, the people appear to be so deep in sin that they no longer even know enough to cry out and ask God for help.
- There is no national repentance—there is no cry to God for help.
- And so God needs to shake things up a little bit.
- God then decides to send a deliverer even though they haven’t asked for it.
- We find in **verse 1** that the Lord had delivered them (because of their sin) into the hands of the Philistines for forty years—that’s a long time.

Many of us here this morning are not yet 40 years old, so for a lot of us, that would be a lifetime of oppression.

- God, then, sends an angel to appear to a woman who had not been able to have a child.
- The angel tells this woman that she will have a son and that he will be a Nazirite—set apart as holy to God “**from the womb.**”
- The rules are given—he will not be allowed to drink wine, he will not be allowed to eat or touch anything unclean, and no razor will ever be allowed to touch his head.
- It is this long hair that would later appear to give him his great power—almost like Superman and his cape.
- With this background, we might think that Samson would end up being a great leader.
- And yet in the following chapters, we find that Samson ends up basically as the Mike Tyson of the ancient world—a very powerful, threatening, out-of-control, and self-centered man.

Nevertheless, at the end of **verse 5**, we find that this child, “**...shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.**”

- Notice: He will not actually deliver the people, but he will “**begin**” to deliver the people.
- Samson will get the ball rolling.
- In **verse 24**, we find that the woman gives birth to a son and named him Samson, “**...and the child grew up and the Lord blessed him.**”

- We find, then, that Samson got off to a very good start—dedicated to God from before the time of his birth.
- As far as I can tell, there are only two others in the Bible who got off to a similar start—the prophet Samuel and John the Baptist (the great prophet who prepared the way for the coming of God’s Son).
- Samson, then, has some amazing potential.
- And yet almost right away we run into trouble, because in **Judges 14** we are introduced to Samson’s very turbulent life.

II. It all starts going bad as **SAMSON IS LUSTFULLY ATTRACTED TO AND MARRIES A BEAUTIFUL PHILISTINE.**

If you will, please look with me at the first record of anything actually done by Samson—**Judges 14:1-10**...

1 Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines.

2 So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife."

3 Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me."

4 However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.

5 Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him.

6 The Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a young goat though he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done.

7 So he went down and talked to the woman; and she looked good to Samson.

8 When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion.

9 So he scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them and they ate it; but he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion.

10 Then his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for the young men customarily did this.

And so in **Chapter 14**, we run into several problems.

- Starting in **verse 1**, Samson goes down to Timnah among the Philistines—among those who were committed to destroying the nation of Israel.
- Samson should have known better, but he goes down there and he sees a beautiful woman and he demands that his parents go get her for him.
- They encourage him not to do it, but Samson repeats the demand—disrespecting his parents in the process.
- Right here he has already broken three or four of God’s commandments, and yet we find that Samson was merely reflecting the common feeling in the nation of Israel—all of the people seemed to be more interested in the pagan nations around them than they were in the one true God.

As Christians, we need to ask ourselves whether we are following Samson’s example here—always being fascinated with the world—always in love with big houses, and cars, and so on.

- Nevertheless, we find in **verse 4** that God was using Samson's weakness and Samson's sin as an opportunity against the Philistines.
- We remember Samson's purpose—he was to, “...*begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*”

In not honoring his parents and marrying a foreign woman, Samson violates several of God's laws and he goes on to break the Nazirite vow.

- In **verse 5**, Samson, this man who was not to drink any wine, heads for the vineyards—not a good move!
- Young people, be careful where you hang out on Friday and Saturday nights!
- And as he is there at the vineyards, he is attacked by a lion, and he kills the lion with his bare hands.
- He then spent some time getting to know this woman, because by the time he starts heading back home, some bees had made some honey in the carcass of the lion.
- He scoops it up with his hands—violating the commandment against touching a carcass (let alone eating out of one).
- In **verse 10**, Samson makes a “*feast.*”
- The word used here refers to a wild drinking party—basically a bachelor party.
- And so again, Samson appears to violate the Nazirite vow which restricts one from drinking alcohol.

In the rest of this chapter, Samson creates a riddle (in **verse 14**) and makes a bet that the guests at the party will not be able to solve it in seven days, “*Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet.*”

- The men cannot solve it on their own, and so they get the answer from his wife, and by the end of it, Samson feels cheated.
- And so (referring to his wife in **verse 18**), Samson says to the Philistines, “*If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle.*”
- And so after basically calling his own wife a cow, he gets mad and kills thirty Philistines and uses their clothing to pay off his gambling debt.
- There again, Samson violates his vow by touching the dead bodies to remove the clothing.
- And as far as we can tell, Samson is never able to consummate his marriage, but (in the last verse of this chapter) his bride is given to the best man.
- Well, that obviously makes Samson pretty mad, and that brings us to the next phase in Samson's life...

III. ...because we discover in **Judges 15** that **SAMSON STARTS TAKING REVENGE.**

If you will, please look with me at **Judges 15**...

1 But after a while, in the time of wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, "I will go in to my wife in her room." But her father did not let him enter.

2 Her father said, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead."

3 Samson then said to them, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm."

4 Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails.

5 When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves.

6 Then the Philistines said, "Who did this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.

7 Samson said to them, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit."

8 He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

9 Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi.

10 The men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" And they said, "We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us."

11 Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them."

12 They said to him, "We have come down to bind you so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines." And Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not kill me."

13 So they said to him, "No, but we will bind you fast and give you into their hands; yet surely we will not kill you." Then they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

14 When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as they met him. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands.

15 He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it.

16 Then Samson said, "With the jawbone of a donkey, Heaps upon heaps, With the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand men."

17 When he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place Ramath-lehi.

18 Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, "You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"

19 But God split the hollow place that is in Lehi so that water came out of it. When he drank, his strength returned and he revived. Therefore he named it En-hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day.

20 So he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

Some men might have brought chocolates or flowers, but up in **verse 1** Samson brings his wife a goat.

- And yet in spite of the very thoughtful gift, the father-in-law would not let Samson visit, but offered Samson his wife's younger and more beautiful sister instead.
- Samson is very upset, and so in **verse 3** he vows to take revenge.
- It is hard for us to even imagine this, but Samson catches 300 foxes, and ties their tails together with a torch between each pair.
- The foxes then destroy basically everything.
- Well, the problem with revenge is that the score is never even.
- In response to what Samson did, the Philistines then kill his wife and father-in-law.
- Well, in **verse 7** Samson now has *reason* to take revenge, the Bible says he "**struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter.**"
- The Philistines then come up and appear to be getting ready to wipe Israel off the map, so the Israelites turn on Samson and turn him in.
- Knowing that he can break the ropes, Samson goes along with the idea, and when the Philistines show up, Samson grabs a donkey jawbone (a fresh one, not an old brittle one) and he uses it to kill a thousand Philistines.
- And so we see that the revenge has escalated. This is the story of Samson's life.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have learned that Samson came on the scene not in response to a fervent prayer, but he was sent by God to shake things up.

- He was set apart from before the time he was born to be different, just as the Israelites were to be different.
- And yet we have learned that he failed to be different, just as the Israelites also failed.
- His first act as a grown man was to demand that his parents go get him a Philistine woman, and when that did not go well, his life spiraled into a sinkhole of lust and revenge.

What does all of this actually mean for those of us here this morning?

- Well, one thing we might have missed the first time we read through this last section in **Judges 15** is that this episode evidently puts the fear in the Philistines for at least a little while, because in the very last verse we find that Samson actually judges Israel for twenty years.
- Sometimes we mistakenly put all of this right up next to what happens with Delilah in **Chapter 16**, but there is really a twenty-year gap.
- And so for twenty years, Samson seems to keep it together.
- We remember God's original purpose—even before Samson was born—that he would "...*begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines*" (**Judges 13:5**).
- Even though Samson was driven by pride, and hunger, and thirst, and lust, and revenge, it should encourage all of us here this morning that God was able to use this man in spite of his faults.

I mean, certainly it would have been better if Samson had gone along with God's plan, it would have been much better for Samson to enjoy all of this, it would have been so much better for Samson to have cooperated, and yet without Samson's obedience and willing cooperation, God continued to use this very flawed man.

- He was certainly not perfect, and yet in his own imperfect way, Samson remained a servant of God.
- Samson, then, is a reminder that God uses broken vessels to accomplish his sacred work.
- As the apostle Paul would go on to say in **2 Corinthians 4:7** (speaking of the gospel), "*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.*"

We think about our situation today, there are times when we blow it. Sometimes we sin.

- Sometimes we stumble and fall. Sometimes we surprise ourselves with how evil we can be.
- And yet God is still able to get things done.
- In fact it might be accurate to say that God often gets things done *in spite of* us more often than He does *because of* us.
- But with Samson, this concept is multiplied.
- It has been said that Samson had more potential than anyone in the Old Testament with the possible exception of Moses, and yet he failed to live up to that potential.
- Samson, in fact, is one of the most worthless of all the judges.
- In many ways his life was wasted as a "**Hollow Hero**," as an empty suit.

This morning, let us think about this, and let us re-examine the way we are using our time and our talents.

- We have not been given supernatural strength, we have not been given the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound, and yet has God put us in a unique situation so that we can do something to build up the Lord's church?

- Are we using our God-given skills for our own personal pleasure, or are we using those talents for God?
- What are we good at? What do we enjoy doing?
- If we are skilled at communicating, are we using that for God's glory?
- If we have the ability to organize events and activities, are we using that skill to build up the young people here in this congregation?
- If you are an artist, are you using that talent for God?
- As we think about the first part of Samson's life, I want us to seriously think about how we are using those skills and abilities that God has given to us, and let us not waste our lives as Samson did.

The good news is that if we *are* wasting our lives, God allows u-turns.

- God does not allow a few sins here and there to keep us down.
- God allows us to have a change of heart.
- We think about those great heroes of faith in **Hebrews 11**—every single one of them sinned, and yet God was able to use them in spite of what they had done.
- The heroes of **Hebrews 11** were not perfect, but they were ultimately faithful.

The lesson from Samson, then, is that we need to recognize our sin and turn away from it.

- We need to be open to the will of God. We need to allow ourselves to be used by God.
- We can only imagine what God could have done if Samson had only given in to the will of God in his life.
- Let us be encouraged by Samson's example.
- Lord willing, next Sunday we will conclude our study on Samson by looking at his eventual downfall in **Judges 16**.

If you need the prayers of this church to help you overcome some kind of sin in your life, if you are facing some kind of struggle that you would rather not face alone, we would encourage you to let us know about that.

On the other hand, maybe you are not yet a Christian.

- The Bible teaches that we call on the name of the Lord by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water so that our sins can be forgiven.
- In **1 Peter 3:21**, the apostle Peter describes baptism as “...*an appeal to God for a good conscience.*”
- If you would like to make this appeal to God this morning, you can let us know right now.
- If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song.
- Let's stand and sing...