

## "LESSONS FROM SAMSON"

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

(Robert B. Chisholm)

### **Thematic Emphases**

Once more Israel's rebellion resulted in subjugation. But this time the people did not cry out to the Lord; they were resigned to their condition (see 15:11-12). Yet the Lord decided to intervene anyway, giving life to Manoah's wife's barren womb.

Samson failed to understand his role as God's consecrated servant. In her exuberance over her pregnancy, Manoah's wife failed to communicate to her husband Samson's role as Israel's deliverer. Samson gives no evidence that he saw himself in this capacity. His conflicts with the Philistines were motivated by personal vengeance, not by any larger vision. Without an understanding of the significance of his Nazirite status, Samson was willing to place it in jeopardy and eventually succumbed to personal gratification.

In some respects Samson represented Israel (Klein 1988, 116; Olson 1998, 842-43, 860-61; and Webb 1995, 116-17). Despite his miraculous beginning and tremendous God-given potential, he missed his calling to be God's consecrated servant. He became a humiliated prisoner on foreign soil, but in the end was vindicated by God when he desperately begged for divine intervention.

With Samson's death in the rubble of the Philistine temple, the decline in Israelite leadership was complete. Deficient faith and lack of wisdom culminated in spiritual ignorance and utter folly. This leadership void characterized this period of chaos in Israel's history (see chapters 17-21).

God accomplished his purpose (the beginning of Israel's deliverance from the Philistines), despite Samson's shortcomings and Israel's apathy. In the process he again demonstrated his sovereignty and superiority to pagan deities by destroying the temple of a foreign god (cf. 9:46-49). Samson's great victory in Dagon's temple reminds us that it was God's disfavor with his people, not the power of foreign gods (cf. 16:23-24), that caused them to be humiliated before their enemies.

**Exegetical Idea:** *God was at work among his people, even when they were insensitive to his presence. He accomplished his purpose through unwise Samson, though Samson failed to understand his role as God's deliverer and was motivated by personal gratification and vengeance, not some sense of a higher calling. His failure to understand his role in God's plan led to tragic personal failure and pain, and kept him from enjoying the benefits of God's mighty deeds.*

### **Theological Principles**

Perhaps more than any other story in Judges, the story of Samson illustrates God's sovereign freedom to act as he sees fit. Even when his people seemed content to live under divine discipline and did not ask for divine intervention, God was at work and began to bring them relief despite their apathy and ignorance.

In accomplishing his purposes God can use the most clueless of instruments. In the process he supernaturally energizes his servant (cf. 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), providentially maneuvers him into situations that are advantageous to the realization of the divine goal (cf. 14:4), answers Samson's prayers for help and vengeance (cf. 15:18-19; 16:28), and even exploits Samson's failures (cf. chapter 16). When all is said and done, God demonstrates his commitment to his people and his superiority to their enemies and all so-called gods.



**Theological Idea:** *God is always at work among his people, even when they are insensitive to his presence. He can even accomplish his purposes through unwise instruments who fail to understand their role as his servants and are primarily motivated by personal gratification. However, a failure to understand one's role in God's plan can lead to tragic personal failure and pain, and keep one from enjoying the benefits of God's mighty deeds.*

**Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]**

(1) God is always at work accomplishing his purposes, even when his people are apathetic and clueless. In so doing, he demonstrates his sovereignty, bringing triumph out of tragedy. When the story of Samson is viewed from this perspective, it may be entitled, "*A Sovereign God Can Win with His Hands Tied Behind His Back.*"

(2) Persistence in sin and assimilation to the surrounding pagan culture can make God's people insensitive to his purposes for them. Unfortunately a clueless community fails to experience, appreciate, and enjoy the benefits of God's work in their midst. Subsequent generations, who inherit the story, are the primary beneficiaries.

(3) Even when a leader is used mightily by God, his life can end up in personal tragedy if he makes personal gratification his priority and never understands his role in God's plan. Samson's miraculous conception seemed to foreshadow a great career, but his failure to understand his divinely ordained destiny seriously handicapped him from the start. When we are ignorant of God's larger purposes, we can miss the significance of his work in our lives and give priority to personal gratification. A preoccupation with satisfying our physical appetites, especially when coupled with an unclear vision of our spiritual destiny, can jeopardize our status as God's servants and lead to tragic failure and humiliation.

**Preaching Idea:** *We should be encouraged to know that God is always at work among his people and can accomplish his purposes in far less than ideal circumstances. Yet when we fail to understand our role in God's plan, we can experience personal failure and pain and miss enjoying the benefits of God's mighty deeds.*

This preaching idea reflects the Samson story as a whole literary unit. If we focus on the first trajectory, we can see a silver lining in Samson's tragic story, which illustrates God's ability to accomplish his purpose in less than ideal circumstances. *A preaching idea for this theme might be: We should be encouraged to know that God is always at work among his people and can accomplish his purposes in far less than ideal circumstances.*

If we focus on the second and third trajectories, the story is a tragedy in which a specially endowed servant of God, commissioned from birth, fails to achieve his potential and never grasps his purpose in life. *A preaching idea for this tragic dimension might be: When we fail to understand our role in God's plan, we can fail morally and experience embarrassment, humiliation, pain, and even premature death.*