



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 13
SAMSON**

MARCH 26-31, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Judges 17-20; Psalm 61	Judges 13; Psalm 61
Tuesday	* Leviticus 1-6; Psalm 62	Judges 14; Psalm 62
Wednesday	Leviticus 7-12; Psalm 63	Judges 15; Psalm 63
Thursday	Leviticus 13-20; Psalm 64	Judges 16; Psalm 64
Friday	Leviticus 21-27; Psalm 65	Judges 13-16; Psalm 65

* The *Through The Bible* reading has already covered Samson, so the next two weeks we will be reading previously skipped books.

READ

Judges 13

Psalms 61

REFLECT

The introduction to the Samson stories begins with a strong indictment of Israel: “The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines” (Judges 13:1). Forty years of captivity! Into such a dysfunctional bunch, the Lord inserted a “child of promise” – whose birth was announced to a long-time barren woman, the wife of Manoah. The promise was more than good news to the woman. It was also God’s encouragement to his people with news of a judge who would “*begin* to deliver Israel from the hand of Philistines.”

There is a recurring biblical theme about the barren woman at last giving birth to a promised son: Sarah (Gen 16:1); Rebekah (Gen 25:21-26); Rachael (Gen 30:1-2); Hannah (I Sam 1); and Elisabeth (Luke 1:5-25). These are signal events in the flow of Old Testament history, and the birth of Samson fits the pattern perfectly. The announcement to “the woman,” (we never learn her name) got her husband Manoah deeply agitated. He tried to give food to the announcing angel, who refused it: then was instructed to make a sacrifice to God. In the encounter with the angel, Manoah was fearful, because he had “**seen God**,” an event punishable by death. Then the angel disappeared in the ascending flame from the sacrifice.

Samson was born under strict conditions, beginning with his mother, in the pattern of a Nazirite. As part of the promise for divine power to the boy, the mother during pregnancy had to follow the Nazirite restrictions concerning food and drink: eat nothing unclean; have nothing to do with any product of the vine; drink no liquor of any kind. The same restrictions applied to Samson from birth, with the added vow that from birth to death, no razor would touch his head (ref. I Samuel 1:11 *Hannah’s Vow*).

While still a young man, “the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him,” especially by dreams. It can only be assumed that Samson had a normal childhood. He grew up, and the Lord blessed him. Nothing is written about unusual events in his life prior to the stories that begin with his quest for a wife. That episode will follow tomorrow.

Biblical scholars have noted that Judges 13-16 represents Hebrew story-telling at its best. Very likely these stories were told and retold as part of the oral history of Israel, and include bits of Hebrew poetry, riddles, taunts, and actions of revenge. In many ways, the period of Israel’s captivities reads like the American wild West, with untamed sweeps of bold response to personal affronts and unwarranted abuses. It is important to read about Samson in such a light, and realize that in his time, there were few tight behavioral patterns to govern how people should act. His actions don’t sit easily with New Testament morality, and can best be appreciated in the context of Israel’s period of captivity.

RESPOND

Observe the pattern of God’s response to the needs of His people. Israel was “in the pits,” behaving in any way they chose, mindless of the God dimension to life. But they were still “God’s people.” So a family was prepared as an agency for reform. Manoah, his wife, and the promised son Samson, served as the beginning of an antidote to the condition of Israel. God still has plans for the restoration of His people. Take a hard look at the state of society, the world, the people of the world, the “stuff” that sullies too many expressions of our normal living, and always keep in mind that there is hope. God provides deliverers when the time is right. How and when He invades human history with a person or event, or series of events, to set things more closely to “right,” we do not know. But we trust the God who loves us in the “now,” and anyway.

PRAY

Gracious Lord, thank you for Jesus, the only true and complete Deliverer. When I shudder at the state of our world, and the barrel of personal and global disturbances that discourage me, “when my heart is faint, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” (*Psalms 61:2*)

- D.E.E.

READ

Judges 14

Psalm 62

REFLECT

We might call this next episode “The Saga of the Philistine Wife.” The young Samson wandered away from his home in Zorah, traveled to Philistine territory in Timnah, with the expressed purpose of finding a wife. He returned home, reported to his parents that he had found “the right one,” and said, in effect, “Go get her for me.” Manoah and his wife were taken aback with the thought of intermarriage with the Philistines, but proceeded anyway. What they did not know was that God was “seeking an occasion against the Philistines” (v.4) and Samson’s marriage would provide the first such occasion.

On the journey to Timnah, Samson was confronted by a lion. Out of sight of his parents, he accomplished his first act of strength by tearing the lion limb from limb, saying nothing to them. He went on into the village to talk to the woman, who “looked good” to him. The marriage would take place. On his return to take her as bride, he passed the carcass of the lion, now providing a snack of fresh honey for Samson to enjoy. He shared some honey with his parents, but did not tell them the source. Had they known, they would never have eaten something defiled by being in touch with a dead being, according to Hebrew restrictions.

By tradition, Manoah, Samson, and thirty young men of the community had a feast in celebration of Samson’s marriage. Samson, as the groom, proposed a wager around a riddle. The answer to the riddle had to come within the seven day period of the feast. By the middle of the week, the thirty men had not solved the riddle, so they bribed the new wife to wiggle the answer out of Samson under threat of her family’s destruction. She put on a weeping fit, pleading for the answer. She prevailed, because Samson was “worn out by her nagging” (v.17).

Thoroughly angered by the conniving that went on around the answer to the riddle, Samson reacted when “the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily,” (v.19) and with vengeance, killed thirty Philistine men, took their spoils, and paid off the wager to those who answered the riddle. And what did Samson get out of it all? He lost his wife to a friend. What can we say?

One might say that Samson had to get in touch with his youthful need for a wife. He certainly got one – for a brief while. Or, we can assume that Samson needed to flex his muscles, and recognize the extent of his physical strength. He would need all of that later. Or, it could be that the events surrounding his wedding feast, the Philistine young men, the nagging Philistine wife, and the other Philistines he slew, would lodge in his mind the nature of his appointed foe, and the challenges he was to face in his role as judge for Israel.

RESPOND

When Samson came to the end of this episode, he must have wondered about his calling to “begin to deliver” his people. He thought he had chosen a beautiful wife, had involved his parents in his bridal transaction, had entered into the traditions of his new Philistine family, and then been sabotaged and spurred into a violent action that left him single again. Is this the way God treats his agents for deliverance? And what was Samson to expect from these other benign captors when the tensions build, and stronger action must be taken? One lesson we glean from this passage is that when disappointments come, and plans change, we have a choice: to react with anger, or “rest in the Rock.” The Psalmist claimed his refuge, an impregnable castle, that was his Rock. He is ours as well.

PRAY

Loving God, teach me how to cope with life as it comes to me, and believe with the Psalmist, “On God my salvation and my glory rest; the rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.” Thank you for enabling me by your presence and power to face today with confidence.

- D.E.E.

READ

Judges 15
Psalm 63

REFLECT

We can only imagine the delight that Israelite families experienced as they recounted the old “oral history” stories about how Samson “took care of those bad Philistines.” In Chapter 15, it is not difficult to resonate with Samson’s strong anger and revenge against the Philistines. The bride’s father barred Samson from going into his supposed wife’s room, with the announcement that the bride had been given to another, because Samson hadn’t showed up for awhile. Some consolation – that the father offered the bride’s younger sister to Samson as a replacement bride. You’d find the hair on the back of *your* neck standing straight up under the same situation.

What a powerful response for Samson to make. It was harvest season. The wheat was ready to be reaped. The vines were loaded with fruit. The groves were at their prime. So in the second recorded story of superhuman strength, Samson caught 300 foxes, tied each pair by their tails with a torch between them, lit the torches afire, and set that crazed mass of arsonists to run through the fields, vineyards and groves, wiping out a whole season’s productivity. Devastation! All in retaliation for the horrible treatment Samson received from the Timnite Philistine father-in-law.

When the reason for Samson’s action became known by the Philistines, they, too, reacted with vengeance. First they wanted to know who the culprit was. When they learned that Samson had caused the entire harvest to be burned, and his reason for doing so, they took it out on the Timnite father-in-law and his daughter, Samson’s “first” wife. Now there was a tornado of revenge being set loose, with Samson announcing, “If this is the way you Philistines are going to act, I swear I’ll get even. I’m not quitting till the job’s done.” And oh, what a slaughter! Samson tore up the whole lot of them, limb from limb. Then he fled to a cave for safety, and respite from the horrors of the slaughter.

The Philistine and Israelite tribes lived in close proximity, were usually in conflict over small local disputes, with free communication and trade, even intermarriage. But now, hostilities escalate. Philistines

invade Judah’s territory. Men of Judah asked “Why?” Upon learning it all was Samson’s fault, a 3,000 man delegation found and confronted Samson, asking “What have you done to incite the Philistines?” His answer: “As they did to me, so I did to them.” Getting “even” was the law of the culture. Samson was bound, to be turned over to the Philistines. When the Philistines came to meet them, Samson was again visited by the Spirit of God, and was given great power. He burst the ropes that bound him, thongs slipped off his hands; and spotting a fresh donkey’s jawbone, he grabbed it and killed the whole company. Then he was thirsty, and claimed God’s attention to his need for water and protection.

Chapter 15 ends with the notation that Samson judged Israel for 20 years in the days of the Philistines. From our Christian perspective, we are inclined to discount the effectiveness of a God-appointed “deliverer” whose recorded actions seem so violent, so vengeful, so much a reaction to personal affront. Reflection must affirm that such were the times in which Samson lived, and let it be.

RESPOND

A review of what is going on in our world today would suggest that the human condition is not much better now than it was in Samson’s time. We live in a world filled with peoples who seem not to get along, who retaliate with aggressive actions when territories are invaded or personal injury is inflicted. In spite of all the international symposia calling for the study of peace and mutual respect among nations and peoples, conflicts keep on coming on. But, scripture does not promise a world completely at peace – in this life. From God’s perspective, we’ve got a large assignment for learning to get along with each other. This begins at the very smallest personal level – in families, among friends, in communities, and extends to the national and international tables of diplomacy. One might feel a bit embarrassed that we haven’t progressed very far forward of Samson’s time.

PRAY

Understanding Lord, when life gets nasty, prompt us to remember that we have a point of steadiness through our faith in Jesus, and enable us by your Spirit to “hold on to you for dear life, and you will hold me steady as a post.” (Psalm 63:8 TM)

- D.E.E.

READ

Judges 16

Psalm 64

REFLECT

My father occasionally quoted an early (40's - 50's) talk radio host named Zeke Manners, who delighted in singing a little ditty about being on guard around women. The refrain was simple: "They're out to trap you. And when they trap you they won't let you go, oh no . . ." That was certainly not my father's view, nor mine, nor would it fly in today's world. But it might have been a strong word of counsel to Samson, especially in the light of what happened to him in Chapter 16 of Judges.

There must have been paparazzi in Samson's time. When he engaged a prostitute in Gaza, it apparently was public knowledge. It tells us something about the ancient mores of the Israelites during their Philistine captivity, to have Samson's action reported without censure. But Samson's reputation regarding the Philistines being well-known, his enemies saw an opening to do away with him. They were primed to kill – at sunrise. Samson outwitted them by leaving the brothel at midnight, then seizing the doors to the city gate, he uprooted two gate posts, bolts and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of a hill out of town. So much for that!

Talk about jumping from the frying pan into the fire, Samson's next reported escapade was with Delilah, with whom he fell in love. Again, the local Philistines learned of Samson's affair with Delilah, and seized upon the opportunity to do Samson in. Delilah was approached with a bribe, and a challenge to discover the source of Samson's strength. "Tell me, dear, the secret of your great strength." It took four attempts to break through to the secret: seven fresh bowstrings; new ropes; seven braids of hair woven into the fabric on the loom. In each of the first three tests, Samson broke the bindings when he was told, "The Philistines are upon you." Only after being nagged and tormented to the point he couldn't take it another minute, Samson spilled the beans.

It must have been an intense harassment by Delilah that drove Samson into the corner of denial of his Nazarite vow. As long as "no

razor touched his head" from birth, he was blessed with super-human strength. But now, with his secret exposed, his strength was gone. The Philistine hoodlums brought the bribe money to Delilah, who got Samson to go to sleep, while one of the men cut off Samson's seven braids. The absence of strength came as a surprise to Samson, not realizing that God had abandoned him. Unable to defend himself, his eyes were gouged out, he was taken to Gaza where he was shackled, put to work at a female prisoner's back-braking task of grinding, and effectively ending his leadership. But, there is a somewhat better ending to be wrapped in tomorrow's lesson.

RESPOND

Samson was a rustic hero of frontier days in Judah, almost a folk hero like Paul Bunyan or Peer Gynt. He may not have been a giant in physical stature, but he possessed enormous muscular strength. He was given to selfish passions and feats of vengeance to restore his injured honor. He was a trickster; a conqueror of women, wild beasts and warriors out to capture him. His moral virtues and vices were those of the rough days in which he lived. In many ways, the stories of Samson are tragedy, when selfish, uncontrolled passions, and the forgetting of sacred vows, brought him to disaster in the end.

In the specific story of Delilah, and her efforts "to trap" Samson, we see what happens when a person is lured into compromising situations, and how easy it is to forget that God is watching. In Samson's case, the whole city saw what happened to him. In our time, we have witnessed the devastating destruction of the witness of prominent Christian leaders when their weaknesses have been exposed. Seems like we should be able to learn from history, and from the available guidance of the Holy Spirit, to avoid all behavior and thought that will be a defaming hindrance to the spread of the Gospel.

PRAY

Great God of power, shield us from acting in any way that would be an embarrassment to You, and our witness to Christ; and help us remember that "Everyone sees it. God's work is the talk of the town. Be glad, good people! Fly to God! Good-hearted people, make praise your habit." (Psalm 64:9)

- D.E.E.

READ

Judges 13-16

Psalms 65

REFLECT

The summation of the Samson stories finally allows the light of victory to shine on Samson. At a time when the Philistines were having a celebration to their pagan deity, Dagon, one of them had the bright idea that Samson might provide a bit of a show. So Samson is brought out of prison to be on display, to become the object of their victory in conquest over the “judge” of Judah. Remember, Samson is now blind. But also be reminded that his hair has grown back.

Samson is led to a place between two pillars holding up the pavilion where the celebration of Dagon was being held. At least 3,000 people were assembled in the temple. He understood the situation rather clearly. He called out to God: “Please look on me again; give me strength once again. Let me be avenged for my two eyes.” Then, holding the two pillars, Samson prayed, “Let me die with the Philistines.” He pushed the pillars with all his might, and killed everybody. His body was retrieved by his kin, and he was buried in his father’s tomb.

We might call Samson a negative religious hero, an example of what God’s charismatic individual should not be. He had been devoted to God before birth. The working of God’s Spirit was evident in his childhood, exhibited in his mighty feats of strength in spite of his very human behaviors, withdrawn when in his pursuit of his own passions he forgot his vows, but surging back again in response to his prayer of desperation. And for all this, he is included in Hebrews 11’s heroes of faith?

The fact that in so many ways Samson failed to measure up to the great expectations should not obscure the eagerness with which his birth was anticipated, and the care with which his early years were surrounded. God’s call to Samson was part of his very being. The counsel of St. Augustine might help: “God can use even strange instruments to accomplish His purpose.”

And clearly, God’s purpose was to plant a thorn under the heel of the Philistines, who would increasingly oppress the Israelites. Samson was never described as a “deliverer” from the enemy, but was to “begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines,” in this case, by feats of purely personal revenge.

Samson stories have inspired paintings by Rembrandt and Rubens; an oratorio by Handel; Saint Saens’ opera *Samson and Delilah*, and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. His life and behaviors provide not only a glimpse into his period of history, but also billboards of warning for us to heed as we manage our own passage through the challenges of today.

RESPOND

It is unsettling to me to learn of the multiple expressions of violence that flood the channels of our minds with movies, video games, and a myriad of other technological delivery systems. Jump to the global scene with wars, tribal uprising, fiendish destruction of lives and properties. The Samson stories, while in a primitive setting, are really not a far reach from our world today.

The inclusion of the Samson stories in the Bible might raise the question, “Why?” For me, the exercise of reading from Judges, reflecting on the actions described, and making some sense out of them for our time, forces me to affirm again, even more strongly, that in spite of what humans may choose to do with their lives and opportunities to accomplish either good or bad, God is still in charge. He can use people and events to fulfill His purposes. We can depend on it.

PRAY

Gracious and loving Lord, you offer forgiveness for our misdeeds, and provide for restoration of relationships with You and others, and we thank You. Your abundant favor causes me to be silent in Your presence, for “Silence is praise to you, Zion-dwelling God, and also obedience. You hear the prayer in it all.” (Psalm 65:1 TM)

- David E. Edwards