

DESIRE, DECEPTION, AND REVENGE

by Steve Zeisler

I was listening to a taped message on Judges in preparation for today, and heard a joke that struck me as appropriate. It seems that the most reprobate man in town died, a man whose misdeeds were known by all. His brother came to the local pastor and said, "I'd like you to perform a funeral service for my brother who died, and I want you to refer to him as a saint in your message." The pastor said, "Your brother was the lyingest, cheatingest, vilest man I've known in a long time! How can I call him a saint?" The brother replied, "If you do, Pastor, I'll give twenty-five thousand dollars to the building fund at your church." The pastor instantly began to see things differently, and he agreed to do it. The next day the funeral service was held, and he stood before the people who had assembled and said, "The deceased was the vilest, cheatingest, lyingest, most reprobate man in town, as you all know - but compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

Sometimes it seems that the only way we can say something positive about the individuals we encounter in the book of Judges is to compare them to each other. You have to work at finding something good to say about them!

In chapter 16 we're going to finish Samson's story this morning. The first verse puts us right back into the middle of this man's life:

Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her.

There are three major stories of Samson's adult life. One begins with his saying to his father, "I've seen a woman in Timnah. Get her for me, she looks good to me." Samson's physical desire for this Timnite woman led to the long story (in chapters 14 and 15) of his marriage, the wager and its aftermath ending with a thousand Philistine killed by Samson with a donkey's jawbone. The second story is this short paragraph here about his traveling to Gaza to see a prostitute. The third and most famous story, which we'll consider this morning as well, is the archetypal "fatal attraction" story of Samson and Delilah. Each story is introduced with Samson's sexual desire as his motivation to act:

Verse 2:

When it was told to the Gazites, saying, "Samson has come here," they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. And they kept silent all night, saying, "Let us wait until the morning light, then we will kill him." Now Samson lay until midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts and pulled them up along with the bars; then he put them on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain which is opposite Hebron.

The gates of Gaza had heavy beams studded with metal that were sunk into the ground as posts to support them. Samson arose in the middle of the night and ripped the whole gate structure out of the ground. He terrified the guards who were stationed on every side, and marched off forty miles to Hebron with this great weight on his shoulders. The man was extraordinary. Everything about him was larger than life and out of control. This short story of the night in Gaza was evidently typical of him. We're not told much here, just enough to be reminded of the kind of life he lived.

Life Without Limits

Every time we meet Samson in any of the events of his life, he was alone; he never had a brother or a friend.

He was a man who got to do everything he ever wanted to do in life. If he wanted a wife, he demanded that his father get him a wife. He destroyed those who angered him for good reasons or bad. He traveled freely among his kinsmen and his enemies with complete fearlessness. In this story, he strode into the enemy city of Gaza, saw a prostitute he liked, had her, and took off with the gates of the city on his shoulders, terrifying everybody around him. No one ever forbade Samson to do whatever he wanted. But Samson's problem was that he didn't know what to want in life; the desires that drove him were all aimed at the wrong things.

Does the idea of unrestricted freedom to do whatever you want seem like a good idea to you? Perhaps you spend your days in a high stress work environment that has no prospect of improvement. Perhaps your family has entrenched problems that seem insoluble. Every time you turn around you're being buffeted by some pressure, restricted by some wall, or under some burden. Over and over again I've had conversations with brothers and sisters in this church who feel frustrated at their inability to do the things that they wish they could do. "Oh, I'd love to be like Huckleberry Finn some day and just take off with no responsibilities-float down the river and have adventures, be irresponsible, and get to do whatever I want."

Samson's story is living proof that getting to do whatever you want is a very bad option unless you want the right things, unless you have learned to crucify the desires and inclinations in yourself that will send you off in the wrong direction. God places restrictions, walls, and impediments in our lives and lays burdens on us precisely to teach us to want different things than we otherwise would. He gives us these things to make us realize that this world is not our home, that we are only temporarily assigned here, and that we are being prepared for eternity. We are being taught, if we'll listen, to become aware of the unseen realities, to long for heaven, to care more about the presence and peace of God in our lives than whatever circumstances can offer us. He makes it hard on us precisely to teach us that the things we keep reaching for aren't worth having. Have you ever seen toddlers when they're learning to walk, kind of careening around trying to take their first steps? All the adults in the room do everything they can to remove the obstacles, don't they? If a toddler is about to step on a tennis ball, you quickly get the tennis ball out of the way. If he is about to crash into a wall, you turn him to the side. A toddler who doesn't know how to walk needs the adults in his life to remove the obstacles so that nothing bad happens to him. Samson had always been a spiritual toddler. God had always removed the consequences from his life, until the day finally came that he offended his Lord seriously enough that all of the consequences descended at once. So it's not a bad thing for the Lord to build restrictions into our lives, it's a good thing.

Garth Brooks has a song in which he thanks God for unanswered prayers. It's the story of a man who in high school had fallen in love with the most beautiful girl in the school, and prayed every night that God would let him marry her. As the song goes on, however, it turns out that he's back at a high school reunion with his wife, whom he loves and has made a wonderful life with. He sees the beautiful girl and realizes what an awful experience it would have been to have married her and gotten what he had wanted in high school. The refrain of the song is:

I thank God for unanswered prayers.
Just because he don't answer doesn't mean he don't care.
And we'll see that Samson's life of unrestricted opportunity was a devastation to him.

Fatal Attraction

In verse 4 we meet Delilah:

After this it came about that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. And the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and said to her, "Entice him, and see where his great strength lies and how we may overpower him that we may bind him to afflict him. Then we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver."

Delilah was the first individual with whom Samson created a relationship that made him vulnerable. It says he loved her, and that word is not used of him anywhere else. His life of sexual adventures and short-term

relationships had finally weakened his thinking process to the point that he was not only attracted to this woman, but now he had become emotionally enthralled by her. She was as cold-blooded and calculating a person as you could find. She was utterly uninterested in Samson's welfare. The five men who were heads of the major cities of the Philistines, were sick and tired of Samson ripping gate posts up, terrorizing the countryside, and killing everybody who got in his way. They wanted him done away with, they offered her an extraordinary price if she would use her emotional control of this man to find out how he could be taken advantage of. She had no qualms whatever about going along with their plan. Verse 6:

So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you."

I hope she was a little more clever than that in the expanded version, but if not, then Samson was even dimmer than it appears at first blush! She probably managed to convey something like, "You're my lover and I'm yours. In the safety of our cocoon of intimacy, tell me your deepest secrets. Tell me why you're so extraordinarily, frighteningly strong." But he lied to her.

And Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh cords that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh cords that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. Now she had men lying in wait in an inner room. And she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he snapped the cords as a string of tow snaps when it touches fire. So his strength was not discovered.

The Philistines hid in an inner room to see if it was going to work; they didn't want to risk their lives by being there when she ran the experiment. She tied him up just as he said. Of course, as soon as she woke him up and said, "The Philistines are upon you!" he snapped the cords, and presumably the Philistines slipped out the back door and high-tailed it down the hill.

So she repeated the experiment. "Oh, Samson, you kidded me the first time. Now really tell me the secret." So they went through the charade again. He told her another lie. And again the Philistines were hiding in the back room and took off when it didn't work.

Then a third time: "Samson, this is really getting tiresome. Please tell me, because I love you and you love me. Your muscles are so big and strong." We can imagine her batting her eyelashes at him. And he lied to her for the third time. But he was weakened; he began to talk about his hair, although he didn't tell her the truth.

Delilah's Persistence

Finally, however, the Philistines gave up on the deal because it didn't look like it was going to work. They left her behind. But she remembered the fifty-five hundred pieces of silver that had been promised her, and she wasn't going to give up on the project. She began to turn up the heat of her pleading. Verse 15 carries on the story:

Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is." And it came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I shall become weak and be like any other man."

Delilah realized that this time God's name had been brought into the story, and she could tell by Samson's countenance that he had finally told her the truth. Verse 18:

When Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. And she made him sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him [perhaps tickle him or punch him], and his strength left him. And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.

Samson had been the instrument of God from his mother's womb. God had chosen him to be the fearful opponent of the Philistines, a wicked, violent, destructive people who deserved everything they ever got from Samson. They were idolaters who hated the cause of the living God. God continued to use Samson, and the power of the Spirit of God would come upon him, enabling him to do extraordinary things. Throughout his life we can imagine the Lord waiting for Samson, urging him, wooing him, wanting him to respond not just as an instrument of God's power, but as someone who had a relationship with him. But this was the last straw. What Samson did here was give the story of his Nazirite beginnings into the hands of a Philistine courtesan, making himself completely vulnerable to her. And the Lord finally departed from Samson. When his hair was shaved and the last vestige of the vow that he was to keep was gone, God's patience with Samson was at an end.

I was at a beautiful wedding yesterday. The bride, whom I know, is a lovely girl, and she was given by her family to an honorable young man. It was an occasion to rejoice over. I enjoyed watching the bride and her father dance together at the reception, seeing all the indicators that a family had brought up their child to have values that were worth having and to begin a new life that was worth living. In reading Samson's story, I find myself wondering how many of the children of this church will be able to have that kind of wedding day. Samson made choices over and over again that reduced him. He was a man whose sexuality in particular led him to relationships that took away his strength, his manhood. Nothing would ever destroy Samson from the outside; he was invulnerable to attack. But he could destroy himself. So we find him having lost his ability to know or to choose what was right, and he began to make choices that were destructive. Delilah was as bad a partner as you could pick. She lived for herself, and she was willing to sell him down the river at a moment's notice.

Agape Love

Why would you pick such a bad partner? Or a better question is, how do you become a good, honorable marriage partner? Conversely, how do you find someone who is worth marrying? If we make the choices to go along with our culture, to sell out as Samson did, we're extraordinarily vulnerable to falling into the kind of relationship that is not worth having at all, like this one.

It was the accumulation of the choices Samson had made that brought him to the point where he found himself wanting to be with a woman who wanted nothing but to use him. Now, look carefully at why Samson chose Delilah: He was trying to use her as he had always used women. Women were there for his pleasure, for his amusement, for parties. Women were there to sleep with. They existed to serve him, and she was just the current one. He was more emotionally attached to her, but he was using her, nonetheless.

Yesterday at the wedding ceremony Ted Wise articulated in a wonderful way the truth of 1 Corinthians 13, saying to the bride and groom, "You need to learn sacrificial love for each other, to care more for the person you're married to than for yourself. You need to learn to lay down your life and bless the one you're marrying." If Samson had been the kind of a man who approached Delilah with sacrificial love and reached out to her in her hardness, if he had tried to understand her and the hurts she had suffered that made her the way she was, then he would not have been so vulnerable to being used by her. But his interest was all selfish. He was going to use Delilah to his advantage, but the trouble was that she was a better user than he was. Because he hadn't learned to love sacrificially and to enjoy giving in a relationship, he was a taker who got taken. Samson was playing in the big leagues of self-interest when he met Delilah. He couldn't keep up.

If we never let God shape our desires and our character; if we aren't learning the lessons of humility, trusting

God, and giving rather than taking; then we are apt, as Samson was, to choose to be with someone who is operating on exactly the same basis we are. Two users using each other is a vicious cycle to be in. I sometimes wonder about people who are onto their fifth or sixth marriage. Why do they keep choosing bad relationships? It is because most of the time they're looking for someone to use to fill a void in themselves, and they unwittingly become victims of another user.

Samson's Superstition

Samson finally gave up the last vestige of whatever he had been taught about separation unto God. He gave it away to Delilah, and at that point the Lord departed from him. Beyond looking at the way Samson related to women, perhaps the most important thing we can ask about Samson is, what did he believe about God? That is ultimately what determined what he did, where he went, and how he lived. And what he believed was that God was filled with superstition. His hair was a rabbit's foot, a talisman, some kind of magic dust that kept him protected in all circumstances. When in verse 17 he finally told Delilah, "If [my hair] is shaved my strength will leave me." he seemed to believe that the strength of his body would drain itself out of his head as the locks of his hair were chopped off.

But look closely at verse 20:

"And he awoke from his sleep and said, 'I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.' But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him."

It was not magic in his hair that ultimately departed from him. It was the Lord God himself. That's what Samson never understood. Do you see how sad that is? The presence of God in his life had just been removed, and he didn't know it because he had never been sensitive to the personal God who cared for him. He had assumed that his strength was there by superstitious refusal to cut his hair, that it was magic. Thus he became vulnerable to what would follow next.

It is critical that we have a relationship with God that is personal, living, and vital. We live in a world that is getting crazier by the day. Dangerous and unstable times make people-- even those with Christian backgrounds -- susceptible to the powers of superstition. Gurus with strong personalities and an air of mystery gain ascendancy. Individuals find themselves doing odd little rituals, reading secret books, learning chants, and doing all kinds of other silly, superstitious things because they're so desperate and afraid. Conversely, if religion doesn't become superstition in hard times, it will become legalism; rules, boundaries, and walls will be drawn up, and everybody will be bent on external conformity.

Neither superstition nor legalism is a protection in a society that is going down the drain. The only real protection is personally knowing the living God who will teach us to follow him day by day and grant us wisdom if we will ask for it.

(But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. James 1:5)

Who will steer us through the mine fields of life, and from whom can we draw strength when we need it? Only the living and personal God. Samson had a superstitious religion and he lost everything, as we will see. Verse 21:

Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza [he had humiliated the Gazites once, and now they took him to Gaza to be humiliated] and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it was shaved off.

Now the lords of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice, for they said,

"Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hands."

When the people saw him, they praised their god, for they said,

"Our god has given our enemy into our hands,
Even the destroyer of our country,
Who has slain many of us."

It so happened when they were in high spirits, that they said, "Call for Samson, that he may amuse us." So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them. And they made him stand between the pillars. Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." Now the house was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there. And about 3,000 men and women were on the roof looking on while Samson was amusing them.

The Temple of Doom

We probably ought to imagine this temple as having a ground floor crowded with Philistines, Samson in some kind of open place, and then an upper story or roof that was creaking under the weight of thousands more Philistines. It was supported by a pair of pillars in the middle, and Samson would pull those out. The roof would fall, and the people above would die in the fall, and those underneath would die by being crushed.

Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life. Then his brothers and all his father's household came down, took him, brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. Thus he had judged Israel twenty years.

Samson was captured by the Philistines in his weakness, blinded, brought to Gaza, and used as an amusement piece. He was set to do women's work with a mortar and pestle grinding grain, humiliated in his captivity. Then at the festival, they brought him out to ridicule him in public; to amuse themselves with the indignities they hurled on him. It's very clear, however, that the context in which this ridicule was taking place was praise of Dagon and denouncement of Yahweh. "Our god has defeated their god," the leaders said, and the people repeated it. This is an arena in which the God of Samson was being mocked, not just Samson himself.

The events that took place the day he died are the reasons that he is mentioned in the New Testament as a man of faith. Now, God's grace was at work immediately upon his capture. Even before Samson learned any lessons, his hair began to grow back. You can imagine Samson in his captivity beginning to think of all that he'd done, all that he'd been, and the life that he'd lived, and realizing as he touched his head that God still cared about him, that his hair wouldn't stay shaved forever. So he had been reflecting on his life, and then in this moment when the name of God was being ridiculed, he called out in prayer, "Lord, please strengthen me one more time and avenge me for my eyes." I'm convinced that he understood at this point that the loss of his eyes was intended to mock the God of Israel. He was asking not only for personal vengeance, but that the name of God be upheld in the temple of Dagon. For that reason we see him as a man of faith.

Remember the prayer he prayed at the end of chapter 15: He had just killed a thousand men, he was thirsty, and he yelled at God, "Shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised? Do something!" But

this prayer is very different. He said, "Lord, please..." There's contrition and humility in it-it's a request. He had no certainty that it would be granted; God had the right not to grant requests if he chose. Every other time Samson killed Philistines, it was because he was mad at them. They got in his way, they killed his wife, or they did something else that made him furious. But here God was being mocked, and because of this, we can assume that Samson for the first time began to care about something other than himself. So he called out for strength to act.

The Need for Christ

As we conclude, let's review: We misunderstand the reason for difficulties in our life at times, don't we? We wish that life would be easier so we could get what we want, but getting what we want leads to a life of fleshliness and ultimately to the sort of spiritual weakness that characterized Samson. We don't ever learn to want what's right, to seek the things of God, if we get what we want all the time. Samson's out-of-control life stands as a testimony to our need to be restricted so that we'll learn.

Another observation we can make in review is that sin accumulates, especially sexual sin. As it accumulates, it weakens us and makes us less capable of giving and more insistent on getting, to the point that we're not able to understand that in our desire to use another, we're very likely to get used in return. It takes away all the possibility of sensitivity to the other person that a relationship ought to have.

Finally, God is gracious even in the hardest circumstances. When Samson lost everything, his hair grew back and he learned to pray and focus on the things of God as he hadn't before.

The very last sentence out of Samson's mouth was perhaps the most important of all. Having asked for strength and feeling the pillars crumble, as the roof began to fall on him, he said, "Lord, let me die with the Philistines!" Samson's life had become a burden to him. There are many people whose sicknesses and sufferings have become so great that they don't want to live anymore. Samson, with his eyes gouged out and the humiliations he had suffered, had come to that point. He had no family to live for and nothing else to do. He was a man who would presumably be blind for the rest of his life. He didn't want to live anymore. So we can understand his saying, "Let me die!" But what he said was, "Let me die *with* the Philistines!" And the point of that prayer was to say to God, "I'm no different than the Philistines. I've been as far from you as any worshipper of Dagon is, and my heart is as dark as any other heart. I don't deserve gracious treatment. I don't deserve to live. So let me die with the Philistines." Samson had finally come to the end of loving and defending himself, and he was willing to die, not just because he was sick of life, but because he accounted himself the same as those who had offended God all their lives.

We need to have exactly the same attitude: I'm just like everybody else. My life is offensive enough that I deserve to die with the Philistines. I have acted in ways perhaps not as debauched as Samson's, but I'm just as rebellious, self-seeking, hardhearted, and likely to use people. I have taken the things of God and used them to my advantage; I've promoted myself. I don't deserve mercy or advantage in life. Only instead of saying, "Let me die with the Philistines!" the privilege of Christians is to say, "Let me die with Christ!" We have a Savior who died in our place. Remembering his life given up for us, we apply its advantages to ourselves. May we acclaim with the apostle Paul, "I've been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

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