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**Judges 16:18–21, ESV.**

*Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. <sup>19</sup> She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. <sup>20</sup> 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 left him. <sup>21</sup> And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles.*

**Samson and Kids with Special Needs.**

We’ve looked at the Book of Judges quite recently, so let me very briefly review the nature of the book. The Book of Judges is named after the group of people who ruled Israel from the time of the conquest of Canaan until the first king, Saul. The biblical Hebrew word for the Book of Judges is “*Shofetim*”, and although it nominally means “*Judges*”, it more precisely denotes charismatic tribal leaders, people with both administrative and military duties. We believe that the book was written over an extended period, many hundreds of years, by many people, and put into its final form around the time of the Babylonian invasion – perhaps 700 years after the initial creation of the material. The historical context of Judges is that Israel was fighting to maintain control of the land they had inhabited. They

were surrounded by peoples who wanted them gone. There was a small nation called Ammon east of the Jordan, a loose confederation of Canaanite peoples nearby, Philistines to the west, and Moabites to the southeast. Today, we're going to look at the Philistines. The period of the Judges was from about 1200 B.C. to 1020 B.C. We're going to look at a Judge who lived in the late middle of this period, and he is easily the most famous Judge: Samson. We think he lived from about 1150 B.C. to 1100 B.C. Although Samson is the last Judge described in the Book of Judges, we know from 1 Samuel that Eli and Samuel served as Judges after Samson. Like Samson, they served during a period of Philistine oppression.

First, though, I'm going to unapologetically tell yet another Catholic School story. You know that I have fond memories of attending Catholic schools, right through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In grammar school in particular, the sisters took loving care of us. The priests drove brand new Buicks while the sisters shared a single, older car, a Volkswagen Beetle, as I recall. As I also recall, Catholic schools mainstreamed children with disabilities long before public schools did this. There was a boy in my grade who had behavioral issues and perhaps some minor cognitive limitations, as well. We'll call him Mike. We were taught to ignore him when he was disruptive and to treat him like any other kid made in the image of God. One thing he would sometimes do was get angry when he was told by the teacher to do something. He

would throw books on the floor and yell that he wanted to be left alone. But I never saw a sister yell at him or treat him like he had deliberately disobeyed, no matter how hard he seemed to be trying to get a negative response. One day, after getting angry in class, and with the other kids ignoring him and the sister telling him that she was only trying to help him learn, Mike got frustrated, I believe, and ran out of the classroom and into the hall. We watched through the windows as he ran down the street in front of the school. Yes, I will get back to this.

The story of Samson is an interesting one in that we believe that the Book of Judges was written and edited over a long period of time, very possibly several hundred years. Yet the writers and editors never toned down Samson's behavior, and more significantly, inserted almost no verbiage into the text condemning Samson's extremely low moral standards. Scholars believe that the story of Samson was so widely known and so frequently repeated that the authors and editors figured they couldn't get away with altering the story in any way. In the end, they simply presented Samson as the brutal and corrupt man that he was. This allows the story of Samson to provide very powerful spiritual lessons for us.

The story covers Chapters 13 to 16 of Judges. In Chapter 13 we meet a woman who is described as "barren", unable to have children. We must remember that God's covenant with the Israelites promised them 1) his blessing, 2) their own

land, and 3) progeny. These were a people who needed children to work the fields and with the sheep and who did not fully embrace the notion of a pleasant afterlife. Thus, they focused on the rewards received in this life and in creating a kingdom on Earth. Children meant everything to the Israelites. Without them, there was literally no future of any kind. But an angel appears to this woman and tells her:

*“Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. <sup>4</sup> Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, <sup>5</sup> for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”*

There is a lot here. She isn’t simply going to have a child. She will have a special child – a Nazirite. Her child will rescue her people from the Philistines. Because he will be special, she must take special care of herself. Nazirites are people consecrated by God to serve special purposes. They did not drink alcohol at all, not even wine, the common drink of the Israelites. They did not touch anything dead. Very critically for Samson, they never cut their hair. We will see that Samson at least breaks the vows to not touch anything dead and to not cut his hair.

Next, in Chapter 14, Samson is a young man. By tradition, Israelite parents chose or at least heavily influenced the choice of a spouse – but Samson chooses a Philistine girl on his own. This is outrageous. As the wedding is being arranged, we get a hint of the great physical power of Samson when he tears a lion apart with his

bare hands. This is hyperbole, of course, but the story of Samson, and Old Testament stories in general, are filled with obvious exaggerations designed to illustrate the power of God. Before the wedding, Samson makes a bet based on a riddle that he thinks no one can answer. His fiancé's people manipulate her into betraying Samson and telling them the answer to the riddle. Samson loses the bet. He kills thirty Philistines to get what he needs to pay the debt. His best man marries his fiancé. Samson retaliates by burning the Philistines' fields and killing many of them. We are now in Chapter 15. Samson's own people, the Israelites, tie up Samson and turn him over to the Philistines. Samson breaks his bonds, grabs the jawbone of a dead donkey and uses it to kill 1,000 Philistines. Samson then goes to a Philistine city and visits a prostitute. Then he hooks up with Delilah, who is apparently a Philistine. She too betrays him by telling her people that the secret of his great physical power is his hair. The betrayals are not over. We read:

*Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. <sup>19</sup>She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. <sup>20</sup>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 left him. <sup>21</sup>And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles.*

So, Samson goes to sleep. Delilah gets someone to cut Samson's hair because she is not a union certified barber, we assume. Note that because he

allowed himself to get into a situation, via committing very immoral acts, where his hair is cut, and because of the other ways in which he has broken his vows as a Nazarite, *“the Lord had left him”*. And finally, this happens:

*And he ground at the mill in the prison. <sup>22</sup> But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.*

They make a prisoner of him, forcing him to ground grain like a slave. He is now weak and he is blinded and shackled. But quietly – his hair begins to grow back.

I should get back to Mike. The sister teaching us immediately ran from the classroom and we watched her drive down the street in the sisters’ VW bug after Mike. Before driving away, though, she asked a parent volunteer in the office to keep track of her class. I am guessing that I was in about fourth grade - but I am not sure. We’ll call the volunteer Mrs. Nelson. Mrs. Nelson impacted me greatly.

We are now deep in Chapter 16, the last chapter of the Samson story. Jubilant at capturing the great Samson and making him powerless, the Philistines gather to offer a sacrifice to their god Dagon, a major ancient farming fertility god. The Philistines are believed to have inherited Dagon from another enemy of the Israelites, the Canaanites. They praise Dagon for delivering their enemy, Samson, into their hands. They then decide that it would be fun to torment Samson, so they

bring him out of the prison and make him stand between the pillars that hold up the Temple of Dagon. There are 3,000 Philistines on the roof, watching.

Samson realizes what he has done with his life and how he has dishonored the gift that God has given him. He knows why he was blinded. We read:

*Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes."*

Samson's hair, as it turns out, has grown back enough to allow him to knock down the massive structural pillars, despite being blind. Everyone, including the lords of the Philistine people and Samson, die. Somehow, we conclude, the Philistines were not clever enough to keep Samson's hair short.

We see from the story of Samson that even when it appears that humans have come to the rescue of the Israelite people, it is in truth God doing this, using humans as tools. A parallel lesson is that if we don't obey God, then we lose whatever protection and power that God gives us. There is a misunderstanding about Samson's hair and its meaning in the story. We have been taught that it is a metaphor for his strength. That's not right. His hair is a metaphor for his vows as a Nazarite, a man who was supposed to dedicate himself to the service of God. To redeem himself, he must be blinded and humiliated, and he must die. But he saves his people from the Philistines. Up until the final act, he has treated his vows with

complete disrespect, living a corrupt life among the enemies of his people. Only when he has learned his lesson and come back to God, is he allowed to regrow his hair – in other words renew his vow – but now, as a blind captive. Then he does what he was supposed to have done all his life: he protects the People of God.

What about Mike? The sister who went after him did return with him, perhaps an hour later. I think she found him quickly but spent some time talking to him before bringing him back to school. By the time he returned he was calm, and in fact, happy. He sat peacefully through the rest of the day, did what he was supposed to do, and hung around after school to talk to the sister some more. But the real point to the story is Mrs. Nelson. She used the opportunity to talk to us all about what she called “Kids with special needs”. It was the first time that anyone had talked to me about this subject, about children who have trouble behaving because of things that are not their fault. I don’t remember what she said. I think she covered a range of topics, from congenital issues to kids who are just different. What I do remember is being amazed by the topic as a whole. I had no idea why Mike or other kids acted the way they did. It never occurred to me that I was blessed to be able to fit in with other children. Mrs. Nelson did impress upon us that we should be thankful to God that we are able to sit still in class, listen, and learn. When Mike made it back into the classroom, we cheered him. He smiled.

There is more to the Samson story than that God is the source of our strength and power, and that we lose this if we wander from the path through God's kingdom. Consider the fact that up until the very end of the story, Samson is not at all a character that we care about. He is not true to his people. He runs off with two different Philistine women, after trying to marry a third. He goes off and lives with the enemy. He was told from birth that he was special, that God had given him a great gift. He didn't care. Falling for Philistine women is symbolic of abandoning the one true God and becoming a pagan. He is violent, selfish, disrespectful to God, immoral, and in fact, he seems stupid, clumsy, foolish. We're embarrassed for him. He shows us the powerful and dangerous pull between faith and culture. We can learn from this. A surrounding culture can normalize highly abnormal, immoral, unethical behavior. We all risk becoming Samsons.

Still, there is more. Just before Samson pulls down the two great structural pillars of the pagan temple, killing the leaders of the people oppressing his people, he speaks to God saying: *"Let me die with the Philistines."* It is the ultimate admission of regret. In that moment, he is asking for forgiveness, not for rescue. His head being shaved, being shackled, being humiliated and betrayed repeatedly, are representative of what has happened to his people. We imagine that he finally understands this, and the only thing he wants to do at the end is redeem himself

spiritually. He is not looking for God to restore his vision or his status, or to give him another chance at life. He belongs to a people who don't live for eternity. They live almost entirely for today – and yet he is ready to die for God.

There is more. Samson shows us that God is willing to do more than forgive and redeem. God is willing to wade into the sinful and rebellious world of humans to accomplish his goals for us. He can take someone or something tragic and use it. Any of us can find ourselves serving God – even if we are trying as hard as we can to not serve. God will let us make fools of ourselves, then bring us to our knees and manipulate us into doing something good. God will forcibly redeem us.

Mike was not a bad kid. He wasn't evil like Samson. But he was disruptive to the education of the kids around him. From a simplistic perspective, it was not good for the rest of us to have him in the classroom. Except that God made use of his presence to whisk Mrs. Nelson into the classroom, and instead of her teaching us reading or math, she talked to us about kids with special needs, which today would perhaps be called neurodivergent. She made us aware of the importance of making all kids feel welcome and secure. That lesson was far more important than whatever the Sister had scheduled for that time. God did something great with something bad. If we keep the right attitude and leave our hearts open, God will take not-so-good things in our lives and use them to serve his purpose.