

A SWEETER EATER - JUDGES 14:1-20

STUDIES IN THE JUDGES #11 (SAMSON #1)

When thousands saw the newspaper headlines, they just couldn't believe their eyes. George Reeves was dead? It couldn't be. George Reeves had committed suicide? It just couldn't have happened. But it had happened. The depression that George was suffering had deepened and deepened until he had lifted that pistol to his head and pulled the trigger.

Adults who saw or heard the news were amazed by the irony of a seemingly successful man with lots of money and fame taking his own life. But when children heard the news, many had a different response. They wondered how this man could have possibly committed suicide. They wondered how the bullet could have pierced into his brain. After all, the bullet was made out of lead. If it would have been kryptonite, it would have made more sense. But lead couldn't pierce the flesh of superman, could it?

Yet it was true. The man who had played superman for years on the television, the man who had been presented as the man of steel, had taken his own life. This indestructible force, this good guy that no villain could touch, had self-destructed.

Thousands of children were disillusioned that day. But it was just the beginning of many disillusionments in their lives. For it has been the goal of every generation in the history of the human race to find that indestructible person. The person who could control his environment, the person who had unlimited abilities, the person whom no force could stop. Most generations

have looked for such a person in vain, and been disappointed after the search. But those generations who have seemed to find such a person had ended up in disillusionment as well. For the person who could not be defeated by any outside force has always seemed to defeat himself - whether it be a fictitious character such as George Reeves playing Superman or a real-life person such as Alexander the Great who self-destructed after conquering the world. So every generation needs to be reminded afresh that human beings have been created in dependence upon Almighty God. That God alone is infinite in his being, and that any power that we have must come from God alone.

We come this evening to perhaps the best known of all the major judges. And no doubt, Samson is most notable because he was the superman of his day. He was the man of great strength. He was the man who could defeat armies single-handedly. He was the man whom no enemy could conquer. But sadly, while it was true that no outside enemy could defeat him, Samson never did gain the spiritual maturity needed to conquer himself.

It is Samson's distinction from the other judges in his leadership capability that makes him so applicable to our world today. For where the other 5 major judges all had charismatic leadership abilities to muster an army and lead them into battle victoriously, Samson was given such unique abilities that he didn't need anyone else to help him at all. God gave Samson such strength that he could defeat the Philistines single-handedly. The world of Samson's day was filled with turmoil and anarchy. But he was personally given all that was needed to make it right, if he disciplined himself properly.

Now it is important for us to note this. For the world today glorifies abilities and giftedness. The athlete who is born with unusual abilities, the singer who is blessed with the beautiful voice, the prodigy who graduates from Harvard at the age of 14, the model who has a perfect physical form - these are the people who are admired and almost deified in the world in which we are living. The message is clear to all of us - if you haven't been blessed with great natural abilities, you will never quite make it. What is often overlooked is the primacy of self-discipline in the whole process. Any knowledgeable person knows that no athlete reaches the top of the professional field, no matter how naturally gifted he or she might be, without thousands of hours of hard work and practice beforehand. No singer steps out on the stage before a packed house without thousands of hours of hard work and practice beforehand. Nobody graduates from college without the hours of doing homework and writing papers. Raw ability is never enough. The greatest necessity is to discipline and develop the abilities that we have. Samson teaches us this truth. There is nobody in the entire Bible (outside of the Lord Jesus Christ) who had more raw ability than Samson had. Yet few judge Samson to be successful in his life and ministry. The reason for Samson's failures was not lack of ability. The reason for Samson's failures was lack of discipline to direct those abilities successfully.

So we each need to realize, especially in this world where raw talent and gifts are so glorified, that each of us have been given abilities by God, and we will be successful as we make the most of those abilities through dedication and

discipline.

Because, like Gideon, Samson's life is given more space than most of the other judges (4 complete chapters) we will devote 4 weeks to his example looking at each of the major episodes that God chooses to reveal to us in His word.

This evening, I would invite you to turn to the first scene that is given to us of Samson's life found in Judges 14 - the time when Samson first started his adversarial relationship with the Philistines. Let's read the interesting story found in this chapter together. (READ Judges 14:1-20)

JDG 14:1 Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. ² When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."

JDG 14:3 His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?"

But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me." ⁴ (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.) ⁵ Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. ⁶ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done. ⁷ Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her.

JDG 14:8 Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, ⁹ which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his

parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass.

JDG 14:10 Now his father went down to see the woman. And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. ¹¹ When he appeared, he was given thirty companions.

JDG 14:12 "Let me tell you a riddle," Samson said to them. "If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. ¹³ If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes."

"Tell us your riddle," they said. "Let's hear it."

JDG 14:14 He replied,

"Out of the eater, something to eat;
out of the strong, something sweet."

For three days they could not give the answer.

JDG 14:15 On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?"

JDG 14:16 Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer."

"I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" ¹⁷ She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people.

JDG 14:18 Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him,

"What is sweeter than honey?

What is stronger than a lion?"

Samson said to them,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have solved my riddle."

JDG 14:19 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their

belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house.²⁰ And Samson's wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding.

We are not given any details of Samson's childhood, but are rather introduced to Samson when he begins his ministry as judge to begin the deliverance of the Israelites from the Philistines. Samson's parents are the focus of the angelic announcement of his birth that is very unusual in itself. There are only 4 people in the entire Bible who had supernatural pre-birth announcements - Samuel, John the Baptist, Jesus and Samson. This puts Samson in pretty elite company. So there can be no question that Samson's life was blessed right from the start.

But even from his first assignment, we can see some critical weaknesses in Samson. The raw ability is certainly there. But there are critical weaknesses in his wisdom and character.

Samson went down to Timnah to begin his deliverance of the Israelites from the Philistines. Samson was probably about 20 years of age. He was living in the territory originally allotted to Dan, mainly around Zorah and Eshtaol - 2 small towns about 2 miles apart. Zorah was a small town about 20 miles west of Jerusalem. Samson goes down to Timnah, a small Philistine town located about 4 miles west of Zorah, undoubtedly with the intent of scouting out the Philistines to begin his mission of delivering the Israelites from Philistine oppression. Samson's birth was so unique that his parents most likely had told him about his God-given mission. It would be very strange indeed for

his parents not to have shared the circumstances of his birth with him.

But while scouting out the enemy, a strange thing happens. Samson sees a beautiful Philistine woman and because infatuated with her. And this initiates a string of events that lead to much confusion and heartache. By the time this story ends, instead of a clear-cut victory for the Israelites, there is a jumbled mess with Samson even involved romantically with one of the Philistine women. How could this possibly happen?

I WOULD INVITE YOU TO NOTICE 3 WEAKNESSES THAT SURFACE IN SAMSON THAT LEAD TO THIS INCOMPLETE VICTORY IN HIS FIRST VENTURE AS JUDGE.

1. SAMSON DIDN'T KEEP HIS EYES FOCUSED ON HIS ACTUAL MISSION.

Chapter 14 begins, "Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman."

Now we must remember that Samson did not go down to Timnah in order to pick up women. He went down there because he had been called by God to be a judge over Israel. He went down there in order to scout out the land for a plan of deliverance. Jewish men just didn't go off into a Philistine town. It was too dangerous. But Samson had a reason. He had a mission. But he no sooner got into Timnah, then his eyes were turned by the sight of a beautiful young Philistine woman.

A person will never be successful in the completion of a mission unless he or she keeps his eyes focused on that mission. That is foundational to success.

Several months ago I was in the Water Tower Place on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. The Water Tower Place is kind of like a vertical mall with a large atrium in the center. There are dozens and dozens of stores several stories high that surround this atrium. One of the stores in that vertical mall is a clock store. All it carries is clocks - and they have just about every kind of clock that you can imagine. I remember seeing one clock in that store that didn't have any hands on it. It had beautiful inner workings that you could see - a pendulum swinging, gears going around. There was a very attractive face to the clock. And it was very expensive. But there were no hands on the face. So there was no way to tell what time it was. Now I imagine that there is some kind of artistic expression that the creator was trying to express. But my reaction to that clock was - what a waste. It seemed to me that the clock-maker had forgotten his main mission. For the major purpose of a clockmaker is not to make an artistic masterpiece. The major purpose is to create an instrument that tells time.

Samson, in some ways, was like that clock. He was a gifted man with unique abilities, especially equipped to deliver the Israelites from their Philistine oppression. But when he went out to accomplish his mission, he lost sight of what his mission was.

There are many people who are also like that clock. You look at their lives and they are very busy, occupied day and night with numerous activities. You can hear the tick, tick, tick of their feverish existence. But they have lost sight of their purpose, their mission in life. They are like a clock without

hands. So inside, there is frustration and emptiness.

2. But let's move now to a second weakness that we see here in Samson.

SAMSON WASN'T SENSITIVE TO THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE OVER HIM.

READ 14:2,3

² When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."

JDG 14:3 His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?"

But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me."

Now predictably, Manoah and his wife were not pleased with Samson's infatuation with this Philistine woman. There was good reason for their concern. Samson's request to marry this Philistine was in direct violation to the law that God had given to his people. In Deut. 7:3,4 we read these words, "Do not intermarry with them (the foreign people living in the land of Canaan). Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you." And in addition to the fact that Samson's request was a transgression of the law, Samson's parents knew the mission that God had given to their sons. They had received the angelic announcement of his birth. They knew that God had chosen Samson to be the judge to deliver the Israelites. What kind of an example would it be for the judge, the leader to publicly violate the law of God

and marry a Philistine? How could Samson deliver the Israelites from the Philistines if he were married to one? So Samson's parents were rightfully concerned with this ungodly request from their son.

Now some have tried to use verse 4 to prove that Samson had a master plan here to as it were sneak into the Philistine camp. Verse 4 says in a parenthetical way, "(His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines)". But in the context, it is inconceivable that Samson was planning this marriage just to attack the Philistines, for his reaction to the loss of this Philistine bride shows how infatuated he was with her. No, God as the Sovereign Lord has the ability to bring good even out of transgression - and he did so in this case. But that doesn't lessen the guilt of Samson's transgression, nor did it lessen the pain that he would suffer from the consequences of his sin. And the heartache and confusion that would occur came in large part because of Samson's failure to listen to the advice of his parents.

Now we can learn a lot from Samson's example. We can learn directly from the example of his failed romance here. Samson's eyes were blinded by the heat of his emotions. His hormones were running wildly. But his parents were in a much more objective position. A child is wise if he or she is sensitive to parent's counsel when it comes time to choose a lifetime mate in marriage. In our culture, we basically choose marriage partners following Samson's methods. Most Americans make the decision to marry based solely on an emotional feeling that we call love. But Biblical love is much more than just an

emotional feeling. Biblical love involves a decision of the mind that is based upon reason. Parents naturally want the best for their children. No one wants a child to marry successfully more than a parent. So a child is wise if he is sensitive to the blessing of his or her parent before entering into a marriage covenant - a great deal of heartache could be avoided.

But there is even a more general application that we can make here regarding being sensitive to our authority structures. God is a God of order and authority. Every institution that He has ordained has order and authority. Families have order and authority, governments have order and authority, the church has order and authority. One of the most valuable lessons that we can learn early in life is to learn how to submit properly to authority and how to relate positively to authority in life. For God has given authority to us for our protection as well as for guidance and security. Samson did not respect the authority structure that God had given to him. Because Samson did not learn the discipline of submission to authority, he never learned to discipline his own life - and that lack of discipline eventually killed him. How different Samson's life and ministry could have been if he would have learned a proper respect and submission for authority.

3. SAMSON ALLOWED HIS LUSTFUL FEELINGS TO DIRECT HIS DECISION-MAKING.

Samson had an interesting experience on the way to Timnah. A lion attacked him, so Samson killed it. Some time later, when he was making another trip to Timnah, Samson noticed that a queen bee had chosen the lion's

carcass for her hive. So Samson makes up a riddle for the friends of the bride's family who were involved in the wedding. "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." It was obvious what Samson was doing here. He would not only trick these Philistines, showing himself to be intellectually superior to them, but giving the answer would also allow him the occasion to humbly tell of his heroic exploit in killing the lion with his bare hands showing himself to be physically superior as well. And when you consider the fact that there must have been a great deal of tension surrounding this wedding - this was an Israelite man marrying a Philistine woman. These were enemies. We can get a feel for the lack of wisdom that Samson shows making matters even more tense by introducing the competitive element of guessing this riddle.

What Samson underestimated was his own weakness in relying too strongly on his emotions in his decision-making. But by this time, the Philistines had seen this weakness very clearly. So when the friends of the bride couldn't guess the riddle, as the allotted time came to a close, they appealed to Samson's fiancé to get the answer out of him. What did she do? She batted her eyes and cried and complained that Samson didn't love her unless he would share the riddle with her - and Samson caved in. He told his betrothed the answer to the riddle. And his bride-to-be rushed to her friends and betrayed Samson so that the Philistines won the riddle contest. Samson again was betrayed by his own fleshly desires. And the results were:

*Samson lost face having his betrothed show herself to be disloyal to him

favoring her Philistine friends by telling them the answer to the riddle

*Samson had the humiliation of being outsmarted by the Philistines so he had to give them the 30 garments of clothes rather than receiving them himself. Usually, the bride and groom receive gifts at a wedding, not have to give them away.

*Samson retaliated by killing 30 Philistines in order to get the garments which obviously would not have set well with the bride or her family.

*Samson lost his bride, for her father took the first chance he could take to give his daughter away to another man seeing that this Samson fellow would be nothing but trouble.

*And Samson leaves the scene filled with anger and bitterness.

*God had gifted Samson to be a great deliverer. The Spirit of the Lord had been given to him so that he could exercise superhuman strength. But Samson had taken God's gift to him and used it selfishly rather than using it wisely for the good of God's people the Israelites.

Now we are going to conclude this episode next week, the Lord willing, as we look at Samson's revenge against the Philistines. But let me just conclude our time together this evening with some observations.

We have been looking at this period of the judges because it so pictures the day in which we are living today. The period of the judges was a time when everyone did his own thing, when there was a lack of respect for law and order, when moral boundaries were relaxed, when values were discarded, and when crime and anarchy were escalated. Samson's weaknesses reveal some

personal dangers inherent in living in such a culture.

*When the culture around us is continuously throwing up false gods and values before us, it is difficult to maintain our vision. We have been created in the image and likeness of God to fulfill his purposes in our lives. We will only be successful as we continually focus on that vision.

*When the culture around us is continuously degrading authority it is difficult for us to maintain a proper respect and submission for authority that God has ordained. But we must maintain a proper attitude towards authority for God interprets our attitudes towards authority as respect and honor for him.

*When the culture around us is continuously promoting sexual promiscuity and giving in to the desires of the flesh, it is difficult for us to make our decisions based upon the truth that we know is right rather than our vacillating emotions.

*But if we are to be people of God in this day in which we are living, we must be people who have our eyes focused on the divine vision that God has given to us, we must be people who recognize and respect authority, and we must be people who make decisions based upon what we know to be right rather than what we feel like doing at the time.