HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK-- HOW WEAK IS THE STRONG

Ascension – November 19, 2017

TEXT: JUDGES 13: 2-5 and 16: 25-30

They say that there aren't any decent heroes around anymore -- people to serve as wholesome models for our children to follow. Most of our current TV heroes are flawed characters. Athletes used to have the image of clean-cut, all-American boys and girls, but now with refusing to honor the National Anthem, with drugs, tattoos, jewelry dangling from every body part, domestic violence, and worse, the image is tarnished. Our heroes are flawed. It's always been that way I'm sure, but now with the wonder of modern-day news the dirty linen is hung out for all to see.

The Bible's heroes are flawed, too. The Bible is God's Word and therefore entirely truthful and honest. If we were writing a book about pious men and offering them as examples for the faithful, we'd pretty them up and hide the pimples and blemishes. We’d fill the book with larger-than-life superheroes. God is honest in picturing sin, however. The Bible's heroes of faith are sinful human beings who became heroes because of what God accomplished through them in spite of their flaws and weaknesses. We have an excellent example of that before us today. Samson is as flawed a hero as you're ever going to find. We cannot begin to justify many of the things he said or did, and certainly we must not copy them.

Today we will consider the life of Samson in three parts. First, we will see: HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT; then, HOW WEAK IS THE STRONG WHEN SEDUCED BY SATAN; and finally, HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN SAVED FROM SIN.

FIRST: HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT

The Bible sets the scene: “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years” (13:1). The Philistines lived along the Mediterranean Coast in the southwest corner of Israel. They were one of those pagan nations that had not been purged from the land by the conquering people of God and became a perpetual burr under the saddle for the Jewish nation. At the time of our text, 1100 or 1200 years before the birth of Christ, God had allowed the Philistines to oppress Israel for 40 years already.

In the tribe of Dan in the city of Zorah, not far removed from Philistine territory, lived a man named Manoah. One day the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife and said: "You are childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. The boy is to be set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” Thus God announced the special birth of one who would prove to be the strangest of the judges – a judge being a temporary deliverer whom God used to rescue the Children of Israel from a foreign oppressor.

That special boy was born and given the name Samson -- a name certainly out of character for what he would become. Samson means "sunbeam" or "little sunshine.” From littlest on God was with him. The Bible says: "He grew and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him."

When he reached adulthood, through his parents Samson arranged to marry the girl of his dreams, a Philistine woman from Timnah. The Bible says that the Lord led him to this choice of a bride. One day on his way to pay her a visit, he was attacked by a young lion which came roaring at him. In self-defense Samson tore the lion apart with his bare hands; the Bible says, "as he might have torn a young goat.” The Bible tells us how Samson was able to do this: "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power.” It was God who granted him such amazing strength. Samson was mystified by what had happened and said nothing about it to anyone. He simply didn't know what to make of it. Apparently this was the first time such awesome power had been given to him.

The time for Samson's wedding came. A week-long party was planned, but treachery spoiled the festivities. Samson's bride teamed up with her Philistine countrymen to deceive Samson. Instead of joyful celebration, the party ended with Samson -- singlehandedly -- killing 30 Philistines.

Later after tempers cooled, Samson went back to his father-in-law's home to claim his bride, only to discover more treachery. The father-in-law had married off Samson's bride to the best man. In vengeance Samson -- again singlehandedly -- caught 300 foxes and tied them together in pairs. Then he fastened a burning torch to each pair of foxes and let them loose in the grain fields just before harvest. The frightened animals ran wildly in every direction setting fire to the crops throughout the countryside.

The Philistines were enraged. They sought revenge first by killing Samson’s wife and father-in-law. Then they prepared to attack Israel and capture Samson. Some of Samson's countrymen came to him: "What are you doing? Don't you realize that the Philistines can inflict great harm on our land? We're going to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.” Samson permitted them to do it. They bound his hands with two strong ropes and turned him over to the Philistine army. It was then that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson in power" once again. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the binding dropped from his hands. Grabbing the only weapon he could lay his hands on -- the jawbone from a donkey carcass lying there in the wilderness -- Samson flayed wildly and viciously at the Philistine warriors. When the dust cleared, 1000 soldiers had been killed.

HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT -- that's the lesson so far in the Samson story. The Bible records some bizarre events in the early life of Samson, and it clearly states that the Holy Spirit was behind them. It was the power of God that enabled Samson to tear apart the lion barehanded, to slay the 30 Philistines on his wedding night, and to strike down the 1000 warriors with the donkey’s jawbone. Why? The Bible tells us; before he was born the angel said: "He will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” Moreover, God attracted Samson to that Philistine woman, so that God could set in motion all the events that followed. The Bible tells us: the choice of that woman "was from the Lord who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines for at that time they were ruling over Israel.” God was using Samson and these bizarre events to break the Philistine's oppressive rule over his people. Samson was strong because the Holy Spirit was at work through him. The Bible clearly gives the credit where it was due. Samson does too. He cried out to the Lord: "You have given your servant this great victory."

In our battle against sin and Satan, in our struggle with those temptations which would rob us of our faith in Jesus Christ, in our war with our sinful self and the wicked weaknesses in us, we have such strength offered to us. The Lord says to us: "My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect when you are weak.” We can say with Paul: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” God's strength is offered to us. We get it through faith in Jesus Christ when we "hear God's Word and do what it says."

SECOND: HOW WEAK IS THE STRONG WHEN SEDUCED BY SATAN

Samson's early life was filled with bizarre events in which the Holy Spirit gave him strength to accomplish great things for God. Samson could have accomplished much more as a deliverer of God's people, but in time he began listening to the luring voices of Satan and his sinful self. He turned away from serving God and began to serve sin. As a result God withdrew his blessing for a while.

Deprived of the woman he loved on his wedding night, Samson remained a bachelor for 20 years while he served as a judge over the nation of Israel. Eventually, however, his sexual appetite got the better of him. Driven by sexual craving, Samson returned to the land of the Philistines to the town of Gaza. There he yielded to Satan's temptations and spent a night with a prostitute. The people of Gaza heard that their adversary was in their city and prepared to kill him when he left the prostitute's home the next morning. Samson awoke in the middle of the night, however, and made his escape by tearing the city gates off of their hinges. Up until this time the awesome power God had given Samson had always been used in order to disrupt the Philistine nation and weaken their oppressive hold over Israel. Now for the first time Samson used his power for an ungodly purpose. He used his power to escape the consequences of his sinful immorality.

Things would get worse. Samson's sexual appetite led him next to take a mistress, a woman named Delilah. In exchange for 5500 shekels of silver -- an enormous sum, the equivalent of 15 years wages, enough to purchase about 300 slaves – in exchange for this large sum of money Delilah agreed to find the secret to Samson's great strength. Three times she asked: "Tell me the secret of your great strength.” Three times he – suspiciously -- told her the wrong thing. Three times Delilah tried to subdue him by doing what Samson said. Three times Samson escaped unharmed. Three times in this way God was warning Samson not to trust Delilah. But, blinded by passion, perhaps puffed up with pride that trusted his own invincibility, the big dummy couldn't see. On the fourth time he told the truth. Delilah shaved off his hair and then called in the Philistines, who seized him, gouged out his eyes, and took him shackled to prison. Then in prison Samson was put to work, doing the task of a donkey or mule, turning the large grindstone on a mill.

The Bible tells us the real reason it happened: "The Lord had left him.” Seduced by Satan, enslaved by sinful desires, the strong man became weak. Without the Lord he was nothing. HOW WEAK IS THE STRONG WHEN SEDUCED BY SATAN

Samson’s feeling of invincibility led him to carelessly, foolishly reveal the source of his great strength. The lesson for us is obvious. The Bible warns: "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" Christian, beware of temptation. While Satan uses different strokes for different folks, sins against the Sixth Commandment remain one of his favorites. Things can start out seemingly so innocent, but it doesn't take much for sinful desire to flame into sinful actions, and soon one’s reputation, career, home, marriage, and children are ruined. When we think we can handle the temptations, when we think "it can't happen to me," that's when we're ripe for a fall. The Lord's advice is clear: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Avoid the situations that can lead to trouble. Don't give Satan opportunity to plant the first seed.

THIRD: HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN SAVED FROM SIN

People like to gloat in victory. Think of the ridiculous strutting and dancing of football players when they make a good play. Well, the Philistines were no exception to that. They had Samson now -- blinded, humiliated, powerless. Their adversary was now a pitiful wretch completely in their power. They wanted to enjoy the spectacle. A celebration was called by the five ruling princes of Philistia -- a great day to offer sacrifices to Dagon, the fish-god. The Philistines lived on the sea, and so it's not surprising that they created a god from the sea. Dagon had a body of a fish, the head and hands of a man. Dagon was thought to be the god of the grain harvest, so the god who provided their food.

3000 people streamed into the temple of this fish-god. Anyone who was anybody in Philistia was there. They cried out saying: "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.” Later when everyone was in high spirits, Samson was brought out, so the people could mock and torment him.

Samson was tied to the two large pillars in the center of the Temple. Then Samson prayed to the Lord: "O Lord Jehovah, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.” God heard Samson's humble prayer. He saw the repentance and faith in Samson's heart. God forgave Samson's sin and returned to him. Samson's great strength was given back to him, and he grabbed the two central pillars and pushed with all his might. The roof of the temple collapsed killing the rulers and all the others inside, including Samson. "Thus," the Bible concludes, "Samson killed many more when he died than while he lived.” In his death, Samson delivered his nation. Samson's last deed was the greatest of all. Through it he freed his people from the Philistine oppression. An extended period of peace would follow. HOW STRONG IS THE WEAK WHEN SAVED FROM SIN

Samson is a picture for us, showing us the source of strength in our times of greatest weakness and need. Call out in prayer. God promises to hear and answer our prayers.

Samson is a picture for us, reminding us of our need for God's forgiveness. We sin; we turn away from God, but God hears our calls of repentance when we turn back to him and say: "God, be merciful to me; I'm a sinner.” He is merciful. He forgives all our sins.

God forgives because of another person of whom Samson is a picture – Jesus Christ. Samson's was a special birth, announced by an angel. Samson was sent into this world by God to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. In a much greater way Jesus' was a special birth of the virgin Mary. His birth was announced by an angel. Jesus was sent by God into this world "to save his people from their sins." In one incident which we studied, Samson was handed over to his enemies by his own countrymen. A couple times he was betrayed by someone he thought loved him. But it was part of God's plan to bring deliverance for Israel. In a much greater way Jesus was betrayed by one of his own disciples. He was handed over to Pontius Pilate by his own countrymen. But it too was part of God's plan to rescue us.

The greatest similarity between Samson and Jesus is found in that Samson's death delivered his people from Philistine power and tyranny. In an infinitely greater way Jesus Christ shared in our humanity, "so that by his death he might destroy him that holds the power of death, that is, the devil, and free us who were held in slavery by fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Amen.