

A Little Sunshine

In the name of him who was born to set us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil, dear friends in Christ: Dark days indeed – that pretty well describes conditions in the nation of Israel as we get to where we are now: the tail end of the period of the Judges. Whereas earlier this era when Israel turned away from the Lord and suffered the inevitable consequences, after they returned to him and he delivered them from their enemies by a judge, there would be at least a few years of relative faithfulness that followed. Sadly, by the time we get to Samson's story, that's no longer the case. No, because the general trend over the generations has been one of spiritual descent and moral decay, by this time even at their best and most faithful the Israelites aren't in very good shape. While they pay lip service to the Lord, at the same time there's still all kinds of idolatry and wickedness going on. And as a result – because his people aren't completely faithful to him – the Lord doesn't completely deliver them from their enemies.

This time it's the Philistines; and they're going to turn out to be the most persistent and long term thorn in the side of Israel than all of their other enemies put together. They made things very hard for God's people, mostly by demanding excessive annual tribute payments of gold, silver, grain, livestock, and humans to be used as slaves. And one of the things they did to ensure that their domination continued was to get rid of all the blacksmiths in Israel. That meant Israel couldn't produce weapons or armor in order to equip an army to rise against their Philistine masters; nor could they buy weapons because the Philistines controlled the iron works, and they weren't about to sell to those they'd conquered. The only iron items the Israelites could buy were tools for farming – which, since the Philistines had a monopoly on the market – had to be purchased at astronomical prices. It was really quite clever of them. And it's a big part of why the Philistine domination of Israel lasted – in one way or another – for about a hundred years. And that's a long time to live in the dark shadow of enemy oppression.

But that brings us to Samson who, in the Lord's great plan, is the one chosen to begin to break the yoke of Philistine tyranny. It's a job that won't be completed until the reign of King David many years hence. And in that sense, you might think of David as the rising sun of a new day for God's people. Samson, on the other hand, whose name means "little sun", you might think of as the morning star. He's like the smaller light – the little sunshine – that heralds the coming of new day. He'll bring some relief to God's people, as well as the promise of a greater deliverance and a brighter light to follow. And, of course, both of these lesser lights, Samson and David, are in turn heralds of Him who is the Light of the World, who will defeat the forces of darkness once and for all, and who will usher in the endless day of glory for God's people.

What that means, though, is that we should expect to find in Samson some images that point to Christ and his work. On the surface, however, that may seem to be a hopeless task. Samson comes across as a rough, unruly, and reckless fellow. Little about him strikes us as Christ-like. Consider: against the explicit command of God who forbade his people from intermarriage with the pagans, Samson chooses and marries a Philistine woman. Then he murders 30 men for their clothes. And that thing he does with the 300 foxes to burn up the Philistines' wheat and orchards—that's just mean. And what do you suppose the folks at PETA or the SPCA would say about it? I'll bet if you did something like that to a *single* pair of foxes today they'd lock you up and throw away the key – and that's quite apart from the charges of arson you'd have to face. Anyway, it's tough to imagine Jesus doing any of these things. So there doesn't seem to be very much even remotely Christ-like about Samson.

But that only means we'll have to look harder. And when we do, we will indeed be rewarded by seeing a little of the light of Christ shining through him. First of all, for example, there are the extraordinary circumstances of his birth. An angel of the Lord appears to the woman who will become his mother – who, we discover, is physically unable to conceive. The angel tells her that she will bear a son who will begin the deliverance of God's people. It's hard to hear that and not be reminded of how the angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary, and told her how she would bear a Son who save God's people from their sins. In both cases too, we have the Lord miraculously causing a conception to take place where it was otherwise impossible: Samson's mother because she's sterile and Mary because she was and remained a virgin – during her first pregnancy anyway. Obviously the conception of Jesus is a much greater miracle since in him God became flesh; but the point is that in both cases the Lord intervenes to cause his chosen deliverer to be born miraculously of a woman who otherwise could not conceive. The message is: this is the Lord's doing, and this is the Lord's chosen agent.

Interestingly enough, like John the Baptist, whose birth was also foretold by an angel, Samson is to be a Nazirite from birth. A Nazirite was a person who took a voluntary vow to set himself (or herself) apart for the Lord for a certain period of time during which they'd concentrate on prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, doing good works, and a number of other spiritual disciplines. But it was meant to be a temporary thing. You might choose to do it for a month, or several months, or maybe a year. And in addition to everything else during that time you were required to abstain from wine, from cutting your hair, and from coming into direct contact with any dead person or animal carcass. There were theological reasons for this; but suffice it to say these outward signs marked the person as one set apart for the Lord. The thing to see here is that both Samson and John the Baptist aren't given a choice in the matter. They are chosen by God to be set apart from before birth as life-long Nazirites and by this to be special bearers of his Holy Spirit. For Samson, the Spirit's presence is seen mostly in his great strength. For John, the Spirit will be mostly seen in the power of his message. But both men are given the Spirit to help them prepare the way for a greater one who comes after them. John will prepare the way for Jesus, and by beginning to deliver God's people from the Philistines, Samson will prepare the way for David. In any case, Samson's mother is told that her yet-to-be-conceived son is to be a Nazirite so that she can begin enforcing his vow by abstaining from wine herself while she's pregnant – which she soon becomes, much to the couple's delight. And not too much later Samson, their little sunshine, is born and becomes the bright light of their old age.

Good. Then we heard how after growing up Samson fell head over heels in love with a young Philistine woman he happened to see one day – this to his parents' displeasure and disapproval. I'm sure they didn't see it coming, especially knowing as they did that he was to be doing the work of the Lord. Strangely enough, we read that the Lord himself was behind Samson's attraction for this forbidden woman. This tells us that there's a message here. And as it turns out, it's two-fold. On one hand, the Lord intends Samson to be a living picture of faithless Israel. As I mentioned before, the Lord had expressly forbidden his people from intermarriage with the pagans. He knew that would lead them into adopting their pagan practices and idolatry. Of course, this is exactly what happened. The Israelites ignored the Lord's command, intermarried with the Canaanites, and happily began worshipping all their false gods. That always causes trouble for God's people. And Samson will find that out too. His love for pagan women never ends well for him. And so he will be a living illustration of this.

But at the same time, Samson, by his consistently falling for women who don't worship the Lord, whose virtue is doubtful at best, who really don't return his love, and who always end up breaking his heart and getting him in trouble, is an illustration of the Lord and his inexplicable attraction to and love for the unfaithful nation of Israel. This is a major Old Testament theme: the idea that the Lord has taken Israel as his bride, and how he always remains the faithful

husband and provider while Israel plays the role of the habitually unfaithful wife. By turning from the Lord and worshipping other gods, the Lord accuses his people of committing spiritual adultery and prostitution. The love, the intimacy, the union that she owes him alone and that he longs to share with her, she squanders on other immeasurably less worthy suitors – suitors who invariably take from her and abuse her. They leave her beaten, bruised, and bleeding, thrown out like the trash. But despite her unfaithfulness, the Lord, like a longsuffering and ever hopeful husband, always takes her back, cleans her up, and tries to make her respectable again. This Old Testament illustration finds its New Testament fulfillment in the picture of Christ and his bride, the Church. So Samson, in his attraction for this Philistine woman, is an image of this as well.

This comes into clearer focus in what happens as the family travels to Timnah to contract the marriage. Unbeknown to his parents, Samson is suddenly set upon by a ferocious lion; but the lion is no match for him. He snaps it like a twig and leaves it dead. It's an impressive display of Samson's strength; but there's more going on. Lions carry theological significance. Sometimes they are used in the Bible to represent the enemies of God's people, foremost among whom is Satan, who, we are told, roams about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Oddly enough at other times in some of the prophetic writings the Lord himself is described as a lion. And Jesus is called the Lion of Judah.

The lion here may be seen in these two ways. On one hand it may be seen as the enemy coming upon Israel, in which case Samson is the Christ figure who defeats his attack and protects God's people from harm. Looking at it the other way, we could see the lion as the Lord coming in judgment against his people for their unfaithfulness. The lion is then the Judge, Jesus, who himself is killed in order to save God's people from their sins. This aspect is highlighted when later as the family passes by again on the way to the wedding, Samson discovers a hive of bees and honey in the lion's carcass. Honey is often a picture of God's grace and mercy. So now we've got honey, God's grace, found in the dead body of the Christ figure, which illustrates how Jesus, the Judge of mankind, dies in sinful mankind's place and from his body comes sweetness in the form of God's forgiveness – which is communicated to us in something to eat: namely his body and blood under bread and wine. Interesting, no? Understood this way, we see that the secret to Samson's riddle is the mystery of the Gospel itself. And this explains why no one can figure it out. The Gospel is a mystery of God that must be revealed. It never enters the mind of sinful man by natural reason.

But this brings us to the wedding. At considerable expense, Samson and his family host the seven-day wedding feast. (As a father of two daughters myself, I'm all for reinstating this wonderful biblical practice of having the groom's family underwrite the entire cost of wedding festivities.) Anyway, the bride's family provides Samson with 30 groomsmen to attend him. Our translation described them as "companions"; but they're no friends of Samson. They're more like freeloaders – which is what the Philistines are to Israel. They've been eating at Israel's expense for 40 years. It's to these groomsmen that Samson presents his riddle in the form of a friendly wager. They, however, are deadly serious about it. And it will be helpful to know that clothes were extremely costly back then. We're not talking about the price of jeans and a T-shirt but rather what you might pay for fine Italian suit – say a couple thousand dollars—*thirty* times. When three days into the feast the groomsmen realize that they can't solve the riddle, they get desperate and threaten the bride and her family. Samson spends the next three days (which should be some of the happiest in his life) in a private hell as the love of his life blubbers, sniffs, nags, and accuses him of not caring about her. Some honeymoon this turned out to be. Apparently it never occurs to her to tell Samson what the problem is and that her life's in danger. She doesn't trust him to protect her. And out of fear and foolishness, she sides with her own people against her new husband. Eventually through her steady flow of tears, she wears him down, and he reveals the secret of the riddle – which she promptly uses to betray him.

And in this we see another picture of how faithless Israel treats the Lord. Though he has promised always to love and defend her with his mighty arm, she doubts; and because of this she invariably sides with the enemy – the very ones who mean to harm her. In times of trouble she accuses the Lord of not loving her. And then she uses his unfailing love for her – the Gospel itself – to betray him.

When Samson realizes what his companions have done, he's furious; and he goes on a tear of violence that begins with him killing 30 Philistines for their clothing to pay the wager. At least he had the goodness to remove the dead men from them before handing them over to their new owners. And while it may not strike us as a very nice or ethical thing to do, it must be remembered that Samson has been sent by God to begin to deliver his people from the Philistines – and that can only be done by killing them. There's no nice way to do that. And this whole episode was set up by the Lord to give Samson occasion to be the instrument of his judgment on Philistia. Anyway, having paid the wager, Samson withdraws to his father's home leaving his wife behind because he's so angry with her.

Eventually his anger cools. He decides to forgive and forget; but discovers that in his absence, her father has given her to another man. Again it's a picture of how the Lord forgives Israel for her infidelity and how he honors the promise he made to her, and how she in turn treats so lightly the promise she made to love, honor, cherish, and obey him. His dander up once again because of this second betrayal, Samson proceeds to do the Philistines real harm by destroying their crops by fire. Using the foxes, though cruel to the animals, is a clever way to spread the damage as wide as possible. This escalates the mutual animosity between Samson and the Philistines. They respond by murdering his one-time wife and her family. So he kills more of them and then withdraws to a cave in the land of Judah.

The Philistines launch a major manhunt for him. Their invasion upsets the Israelites, who, not surprisingly, don't much like having hoards of Philistines camped in their yards. They blame Samson for stirring up their enemies against them – which is too bad: they really should be joining him; but they too fear the enemy more than they trust the Lord. So, with Samson's consent, like Judas, they hand over to the enemy the man the Lord sent to be their deliverer. They hand him over bound – certain that this will mean his death. It's not. With his miraculous strength Samson breaks his bonds, snatches up a most ignoble and unlikely weapon, a donkey's jawbone, and proceeds to slaughter a thousand heavily armed men – thus achieving his greatest victory to date. The rest of the Philistines wisely choose to flee. And for fear of Samson, for the next twenty years or so, they grant Israel a much greater degree of freedom – a little sunshine in this otherwise dark time.

And all this too points to the person and work of Jesus who was handed over to death by God's faithless people. But even the bonds of death could not hold him. And he triumphed over his enemies by the most ignoble and unlikely weapon of all: the cross on which he died for my sins and for yours. In this way he sets us free – and he continues to shine the bright light of God's grace and forgiveness upon us in our dark age.

So, though it might not have looked that way at first, there's actually a good deal of Christ that can be seen in Samson. Hopefully, by the Spirit, you see that. And hopefully too, by same Spirit, the Lord is at work to make Christ – chiefly his love, his forgiveness, his humility, and his faithfulness – seen also in us. Let this be our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!