

Brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Boys and girls, today we're looking at someone who might be considered a superhero of the Bible. He's not the Spiderman or Superman of the newest movie who can swing from place to place and fly through the air at high speeds. But he can kill a lion and empty a bee's hive with his bare hands. He killed 30 Philistines—bad guys in Israel's books. And that's just chapter 14. If you read on, Samson catches 300 foxes with his bare hands again, ties them together in pairs by their tails, attaches a torch and sets them off running through the Philistine grain fields, burning the crops as they go. Later, the angry Philistines come to capture him. He breaks the big ropes that tie him up like they are threads and then kills 1000 men with the jawbone of a donkey. Later still, he tears the city gates and frames out of the huge wall and carries them almost 60 km away, up the hills that face Hebron. And in his final act of vengeance against the ungodly Philistines, Samson brings down their temple with 3000 people in it by pushing out the pillars that support the building. That's some kind of strong man, destroying evil Philistines.

The problem with Samson is that if he's a hero, he's not really the kind of hero we'd want our kids to look up to and copy. Samson is not a pretty character. One commentator calls him an “over-sexed buffoon. He is ill-tempered, slaughters people when he doesn't get his way, takes his vengeance-seeking anger out on three hundred foxes He's a womanizer, falling head over heels for every pretty face. He has no self-control, he is disrespectful of his parents, and he [breaks his sacred Nazarite] calling... I'm not sure I'd want my kid to play with him, and I am very sure I wouldn't want my daughter to marry him. Let's be honest.” (Berkenbosch in Reading and Hearing the Word, Leder, editor, 245ff)

Samson is a living contradiction. And we are too. We are Christian contradictions all too often.

Samson The Example

The genius of the Samson story, however, is that Samson the judge of Israel is a microcosm of the nation of Israel. That means that Samson alone gives us a picture of what the whole nation is like. He's an example of what's wrong with Israel.

Another way of saying that Israel is a living contradiction is that she has a split personality or heart. She serves God, on the one hand, but engages in the vilest acts of the world on the other. She could be used of God and at the same time wants nothing to do with God. And that can be true of Christians today as well. Too often we are living contradictions—just like Israel and just like Samson. I often think of the Christian preacher and apologist, Ravi Zacharias, who died a couple years ago. He was—it seemed—a vibrant and wonderful servant of the Lord. But after he died, he was discovered to have been a terrible womanizer and pervert. A Christian contradiction.

Last week we saw that Samson is born by the grace of God to Manoah and his wife who were barren. God miraculously intervenes to give them a son—and an honoured Nazarite at that. From the start, everything looks promising. As the story of his birth ends, we are given these wonderful words in ch.13:25,

Jdg 13:25 "the Spirit of God began to stir him..."

But the very next verse begins chapter 14. The good turns bad. In a series of verses this becomes clear. Look. Listen for a common word. Here's what we read in v.1:

Jdg 14:1 "Samson went down to Timnah."

Then in v.5.

Jdg 14:5 "Samson went down to Timnah."

And in v.7:

Jdg 14:7 "he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her."

And then in v.10:

Jdg 14:10 "Now his father went down to see the woman."

The writer gives a double use of the word *down*; he doesn't just say Samson went to Timnah. No, he went down to Timnah. Going to Timnah, in other words, is part of Samson's downfall. The word down is added in those verses to show us not only a physical direction but also a moral flow and flaw.

Sadly, more than the Spirit of God is stirring in Samson. "Samson goes down to Timnah, the heart of enemy territory," writes one man, "and falls in love with a pretty Philistine girl. Just one look was all it took. This is the one for him. He insists that his parents arrange a hasty wedding. But they protest, as they should, 'Samson, you should find one of your own people. That's the will of God.' But Samson says, 'I know what I want, and I want it now. If that bothers God, too bad. I guess I'll learn to live with it.'"

Now, it is true that the Bible says this was all part of God's plan, for we read in verse 4,

Jdg 14:4 "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord...."

But that is what we call a confessional commentary supplied by the author. That's why it is in brackets in the NIV. It was not apparent to Samson or to his parents that he is acting in accordance with God's purposes. Far from it! He is only too willing to play fast and loose with his Nazarite vows and, more generally, what he and all of Israel know to be the will of God. So off to Timnah go Samson and his parents to make arrangement for the wedding.

On the way, something very significant happens. My OT seminary professor reports, "Near the vineyards at the outskirts of town, a young lion suddenly charges out of the forest and attacks Samson. Clearly not a smart lion! He doesn't know who he is dealing with, and he's no match for the young Samson." Why? V.6:

Jdg 14:6 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.

And "somehow he manages to hide this act from his parents and carry on to Timnah." (Berkenbosch)

In short, Samson is a poor example of living as a child of God. And an even worse example of a how a Christian leader should live. We see one issue after another with how he chooses to dishonour God's calling for his life. He's a Christian contradiction!

Spirit and Flesh

Now, what are we to make of this man and his hunger for a Philistine woman? And what about this lion episode? Let's see it as the battle between the Spirit and the flesh that rages in each of us.

Think of the lion as a symbol of the Philistines. Samson's ability to kill the lion in the power of the Spirit of God is a hopeful sign that he's a great judge and deliverer for Israel. But at the same time, the lion is a warning sign that Samson is moving into enemy territory where he does not belong. And he's going there to marry a woman he should not marry. He's going against the desires of his parents and God. Later he takes honey from the carcass of the lion and brings it to his parents but doesn't tell them where he got it because these actions have led him to break his Nazarite vows which called him to stay away from dead things. In these acts, we are witnessing in Samson the pull between the Spirit of God and our flesh or sinful desires.

Here's the contradiction in Samson's life. Empowered by the Spirit of God he can do great things. He can defeat the enemy of God, even the lion-like Philistines. But at the same time, he is so spiritually and morally weak, driven by a spirit of self-gratification. He invites the enemy right into his heart by seeking a Philistine wife. That has led some to say, Samson "is awfully strong and terribly weak."

Then comes the wedding story. As the weeklong wedding celebrations begin, Samson is assigned 30 Philistine men as his "companions." They are like the bridal party but also serve as the bouncers of the party. They keep out the uninvited guests. Feeling rather festive and sure of himself, Samson makes a deal with his companions for 30 new sets of clothes if they can figure out his riddle. And if they can't, he gets 30 sets.

From his experience with the lion and bees, he tells the men his riddle, a jeopardy clue and the 30 men need to give the question:

*Jdg 14:14 "Out of the eater, something to eat;
out of the strong, something sweet."*

Tough riddle. And these Philistines are poor losers. They threaten Samson's bride and her family with death. She smooth-talks Samson into giving her the answer.

Samson loses the bet, gets angry with his companions and... surprise!

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.

This is God sovereignly using Samson to do what Israel was supposed to do... ride their land of ungodliness rather than cozying up to it.

Look at the answer the Philistines gave Samson. They answered Samson's riddle with a riddle of their own. This is what one of my seminary profs said about that. "According to John Stek, the riddle "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" was a common piece of folklore. Every Jew knew the answer: love, passion, desire. More to the point, lust; that's what's sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion. Lust drew Samson to his Philistine honey in the first place. "Oh yes, he could kill a lion with his

bare hands, but he could not resist the forbidden honey of beautiful Philistine women.” (ibid).

Samson is a big contradiction. He wasn't always interested in living for the Lord. He did amazing things in the power of the Spirit one moment and was committing spiritual adultery the next—carelessly breaking every rule in God's book because he did not treasure God's gift of setting him apart. God puts this story in the OT to keep reminding Israel that she's just the same. And we in the church today can be the same too. Just think of it. Israel was God's chosen nation. He set her apart—like a Nazarite—to receive his blessing in order that she would be a blessing to the other nations around her. God said, in effect, if you live in the power of my Spirit, you will live for me and, in doing so, you will point other nations to the source of salvation. You will be for them a deliver.

Time and again the book of Judges shows us that God's people turned their back on God and his law and did what was right in their own eyes. They chased after the gods of the Philistines and their neighbours just as Samson chased after Philistine women. Israel craved after honey that came from a desecrated source, which led to spiritual indigestion.

I suspect if we look at our lives, we'll see some places where we like to eat the Philistine honey of our culture. There are times when our walk and talk don't mesh, our confession and our lifestyle. We are Christian contradictions, living by the Spirit but giving in to the thoughts and passions of the flesh as well. We're all somewhat double-minded and have our hearts set on God as well as something else.

Samson's not so strange. We have that too. Worshiping God on Sunday, receiving the mark of the covenant in baptism to set us apart in this world as God's children. Coming to the Lord's Table, praying daily around the dinner table. But then going out and watching a dirty movie or drinking too much with friends, cutting a crooked business deal, pursuing unbelievers to be our spouse, forsaking God's design for our sexual practices or in some other way dishonouring God's word. We follow the flesh and our life and witness is a Christian contradiction.

Implications Today

Now consider some obvious implications for today.

First, God has always called and consecrated people for his service. Without the gracious call of God, no one would serve him, nor even try. Samson was a Nazarite. The Israelites were God's chosen people. And Christians today are similarly set apart for God's holy purposes by baptism and the filling of the Holy Spirit. We belong to God because of Christ!

Therefore we must draw near to Jesus. To stay strong in the face of the temptations of the flesh that lead to contradictions in who we are and what we do, we need to draw near to Jesus. We need to realize that the spiritual battle is real, as we've talked about during Lent. But the ultimate battle has been won through Christ. So as we look to him and get strengthened by him, we'll more and more live into our new identity in

Christ, the gift of being set apart to be God's children in this world, even as Samson was set apart as a Nazarite.

That is one more reason why we need to be at the Lord's Table today. In this sacrament we are reminded of our identity in Christ. He feeds and strengthens us for spiritual battle. Come to the table, dear friends. Don't let this gift of grace pass you by if you desire to grow closer to Jesus and receive his strength through the Holy Spirit to fight against the flesh.

Secondly, the thing to note in chapter 14 is that the very thing Samson chased after and went to great lengths to get, he loses. Look at the last verse of this chapter again:

Jdg 14:20 And Samson's wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding.

Isn't that the way it really is? The pleasures of this world that drive even Christians today to great evil, promise much but fail to deliver. Church members are tempted to chase after money and the luxuries of this world, or indulge themselves in the flesh: fun and games, too much alcohol, coarse joking. Some secretly view pornography in magazines, on the internet, in strip clubs or carry on affairs outside of their marriage. Sexual sin is everywhere in our culture. It's our culture's "honey." It all seems sweet—just like it did to Samson—but in the end it doesn't satisfy. We're left just as empty as ever. The promise that these things will deliver us some new satisfaction and our insistence on getting those things, leave us heartbroken and unfulfilled. Keep that in mind when temptation comes your way. The temporary satisfactions of sin never last.

And thirdly, please note that our failure to keep Jesus first has devastating consequences. Had Samson surrendered his heart and flesh to the service of the Lord his God, he could have served Israel well as a judge and spared himself a lot of personal heartache and physical pain, including eventually getting his eyes plucked out. His life was devastated by his desire to follow his flesh. Similarly, Israel should have gone into Canaan and claimed every part of the land for God's service as they were commanded. But instead, she compromised herself. She quit before her job was done. She began to worship the idols of the other peoples, live like them and intermarry with them. As a result, the Lord had to punish her with the nations around her. The people she tried to befriend turned on her.

The lures of our society are like honey from an unclean source. When we chase after the honey of our culture, it has personal negative effects. Think only of the broken lives in our society that result from a couple having a one-night stand: a strained relationship that got off on the wrong foot. An unplanned and unwanted pregnancy. That can lead to abortion and all the emotional scarring that leaves. There can be confused children from such a relationship. That's just a small sample of what can happen when we seek after our cultures unholy honey.

Moreover, chasing after the honey of our culture also seriously impacts our communal efforts to further the mission of God for the church. When the light of Jesus Christ burns so dimly in our lives that it is hardly noticeable, when our character as God's holy people is so compromised, then our world cannot see the glory of Jesus. They cannot be attracted to salvation in Jesus through our examples.

However, rather than dwell on the negative side of that, think on the positive side. Think of the opportunity we have to be a light today. When I listen to teachers in our schools today talk about all the disfunction they see in children from kindergarten already, kids that are being raised by parents who themselves are so broken, there's a window for a light of Jesus to shine through his children working in such places. I'm sure the same is true when you work in a hospital. You see a lot of physical brokenness but also a large amount of emotional trauma that people carry. While your hands may aid the physical healing, the light and love of Christ in your smile and words has the potential to bring about some inner healing as people connect to Jesus. Regardless of where we work, go to school, or live, there are people around us who will be blessed by the light and love of Jesus in us.

Going forward, friends, the solution to Christian contradiction is first of all to admit that it exists. We should never give anyone the impression that we have arrived and that God is pleased with us because we're so good. We'll never be done battling sin in this life. That's why we need a Saviour and why we must depend on the Holy Spirit. Jesus died for our sins. The Lion of the tribe of Judah is our Saviour. We must confess our weakness. We need to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit, partake of the blessed means of grace at the Lord's Table, and commit ourselves by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power to serving him wholeheartedly. We need to fill our hearts and minds with the things that strengthen our relationship with Jesus, instead of indulging ourselves in the sweets of our culture that only leave us empty.

We need less of the sweets the devil uses to lure us away—the self-gratifying lifestyles that lead us to do whatever we want. Instead, we need to make choices that feed our heart good soul-food! We need to hang out with other Christians. We need to choose marriage partners that share our faith in Christ. We need to be involved in Bible Study and small group, and pray to strengthen our inner spirits. In short, we need to learn more and more how to lean on Jesus alone. And then our light will shine.

Christian contradiction is real and it blows God's calling for us to be a light to the nations. While the story of Samson reminds us that we're saved by grace, it calls us to live by grace each day. When we live following our own fleshly desires, that has negative consequences on our own lives and on the mission of God. Yet we must marvel that God still used Samson despite his obvious flaws and he can use us despite our contradictions. So, marvel at God's grace, dear friends. Freely praise God for providing a Saviour who has no contradictions. And freely yield yourself to the Spirit's power each day.

Amen.

Judges 14 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."
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 powerfully upon him 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.
⁸ Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass, and in it he saw a swarm of bees and some honey.
⁹ He scooped out the honey 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.
¹⁰ Now his father went down to see the woman. And there Samson held a feast, as was customary for young men.
¹¹ When the people saw him, they chose thirty men to be his companions.
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."
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.
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 steal our property?"
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.
¹⁸ Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, (*here's our response to your riddle*)
"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."
¹⁹ Then the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he returned to his father's home.
²⁰ And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had attended him at the feast.