

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 17. The Weak Strong Man.

In Hebrews 11:32 Samson is mentioned in the list of ancient worthies who were all commended for their faith – yet the record of his life shows weaknesses and follies that must forever mar the lustre of his heroic deeds. Samson was a man towering in supernatural strength through his firm faith and reliance on the gift God had committed to him. Yet Samson was also an adventurous, foolhardy, passionate and wilful man, dishonouring and frittering away his God-given powers to suit the lusts of his own flesh.

Why did God choose weak and sinful people to be judges of His chosen people? And why did He choose us? God did not encourage the judges in their failings; He used them despite their failings – which is just as well for us!

The Philistines over previous years had been driven from Crete by invaders from the north and had been granted permission by Egypt to settle in Palestine in what is known today as the Gaza Strip. By Samson's time they were in the process of establishing a small mercantile empire over the Israelites and other indigenous peoples. They brought with them the art and culture of Cretan civilisation, a superior military organisation and training, and an advanced metals technology. They brought the Iron Age to Palestine and gave their name to the region. Because yet again Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord (Judges chapter 13:1) the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for 40 years.

But in the midst of the evil ways of the nation 2 people remained true to God, living humble and pious lives in territory that bordered on the pagan Philistia. The woman, who was to be totally consecrated to God's will in order to receive God's blessing, who was to bear the one God had chosen as Israel's deliverer, is not even named! In fact it seems from chapter 13 that her husband Manoah was sceptical of her report of the angel's visit and required one for himself to make sure she wasn't fantasising! A balance is struck however in verse 23 when she shows much more common sense than her husband!

I guess there are many who can relate to the woman's position of subordination, a "second fiddle" to the main actor in the drama of their lives. Never think that a humble position is a barrier to service for God. The Bible is full of stories of these less-honoured servants of His who had a vital part to play in His scheme of things, and enjoyed along with more prominent characters the greatest honour of fulfilling His purpose.

In any case Manoah and his wife both showed an implicit faith in the verity of the angel's message. In verse 8 Manoah prayed to God for wisdom for them to rightly teach "the boy who *is to be born*," and again in verse 12, "When your words are fulfilled ..." Not, as in Gideon's case, "if You will save Israel by my hand as You have promised ..." In fact, the faith of these 2 peasants outshines that of Zechariah when the angel told him that he and his wife would have a son, John the Baptist; in Luke 1:18 this *priest of God* was sceptical enough to ask, "How can I be sure of this?"

With God, what counts is not our face, our fame, our fortune, our feelings or our faultless wisdom; it is simply our faith.

God honoured their faith and Samson was born; verse 24 – "He grew and the Lord blessed him," no doubt encouraged by his parents to be truly committed to following their God. As the angel had instructed, he was to be a Nazirite, one who, according to Numbers 6, was under a vow of separation to God. He had to abstain from eating or drinking any fruit of the vine, he must not touch a dead body, and he was not to cut his hair, wearing it long as a symbol of his separation to God. In the case of Samson (as for Samuel and John the Baptist) this vow was to operate for his whole life. His commitment as a young man is shown in verse 25, "and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him" as he visited Philistia, quite possibly with a missionary's zeal to teach the Philistines about his God, hoping to conquer them by love, not war.

But chapters 14 and 15 are not happy reading. Samson seems to have forsaken his mission. With a keen mind, no doubt he was attracted to the Philistine culture and advanced technology, but he was vulnerable. To his first-class mind he had the added attraction of giant strength and superb daring, calling forth much admiration from the women of Philistia, who certainly had no great regard for moral purity.

And Samson, though clever in many ways, was an absolute fool when it came to women; he would not be the last of God's servants to have fallen from their high calling in this way!

So, ignoring the simple, chaste girls of his homeland, Samson chose for himself a sophisticated Philistine woman, and to his father's plea against marrying a godless foreigner, he demanded self-centredly that his parents arrange the match for the simple reason that she was the one he wanted.

We marvel at Samson's strength in killing the lion with his bare hands, but in fact, when he helped himself to the honey in the carcase, he was actually breaking one of his Nazirite vows, not to touch a dead body. The honey itself would have been unclean to any orthodox Israelite, let alone a Nazirite. Judging by the beer mugs found among archaeological diggings in the Philistine area, they were prodigious drinkers, and it is quite probable that at the wedding feast Samson joined in the festivities, thus breaking a second Nazirite vow to never drink wine.

No wonder the marriage, and any attempt to bring God to these pagans, both suffered an ignoble defeat. Samson not only made a bad name for himself among the Philistines, but then suffered the treachery of his own countrymen. We marvel again at his feat of disposing of 1,000 Philistines with nothing but the jawbone of an ass (a fresh jawbone, in 15:15 – an old brittle one would have crumbled with the blows) but once again he was breaking the Nazirite vow of not touching a dead body. He had come to the stage of fighting his own private war with the Philistines rather than a war on behalf of Israel and God.

Yet in 15:18,19 we see a cameo of God's grace. Samson still calls himself God's servant, and to his selfish plea for life-saving water, God grants a miraculous and abundant answer in opening up a spring for him. In spite of everything Samson has done wrong, God's hand is still on him. He led Israel for 20 years and it is quite possible he did a lot of good things in that time.

That time should have been a time of deliverance from the Philistines but as chapter 16 tells, the years were marred and rendered ineffective through Samson's sinful lifestyle. The prophecy to his mother had been that he would *begin* the deliverance from Philistine rule, but complete victory was denied him because of his lack of commitment to God's way. In fact the hatred of the Philistines for Israel was worse at the end of his rule. Verses 1-3 typify Samson's moral weakness; only his superhuman physical strength saved him from an ignominious capture.

There is no point in "talking the talk" unless we are "walking the walk." The excuse of "There are too many hypocrites in the church" unfortunately can't be denied. As with the nation of Israel, the worst enemies of Christianity are those who claim to be true servants of God while going their own way.

Delilah's name is almost synonymous with "temptress" these days. Samson never learnt his lesson, never let his spirit and mind conquer his flesh. It is hard to understand how he could be so naïve, so stupid. It is a fact that wilfully sinful people lose not only their insight into spiritual matters, but into matters of plain commonsense as well. The Philistines knew his vulnerability and made an extraordinarily generous offer to Delilah to help bring him down. There was no magical power in Samson's long hair, but in allowing it to be cut, he was breaking the third of his Nazirite vows, and this time God's Spirit ceased to strive with him. Verse 20 gives us one of the saddest statements in Scripture – "He did not know that the Lord had left him." He lost his sight, he was bound with shackles he was too weak to break, and in prison he was assigned women's work of grinding grain; his disgrace was complete.

Yet there was still hope for Samson. Verse 22 is significant – "the hair on his head began to grow again." God had not abandoned him. Sightless and separated from his life of indulgence, he at last gained some spiritual sight. He still retained his faith in God and his last prayer, even if still quite selfish, gives evidence of that faith. Archaeological findings show that one type of temple had 2 closely-spaced supporting pillars made of wood. Standing on marble bases, they bore most of the weight of the roof, and by pushing them off their bases, Samson would have caused the entire roof to collapse.

So his final triumph over the Philistines came at a high price; the "prodigal son of the Old Testament" had come home – as a dead man. The life that began with so much promise ended in a horrible death for him and misery and bondage for the whole nation.

The book of Judges goes on to finish with more idolatry, inter-tribal fighting, immoral perversion and a general disintegration of the once-cohesive nation. The book ends sadly, in chapter 21:25, "In those days Israel had no king ; everyone did as he saw fit." Yet that is not the end of the story; let's conclude with a verse giving honour to God; chapter 10:16 says "He could bear Israel's misery no longer." In His great love, time and time again He delivered them. In spite of their broken promises, His promise to them remained firm.