

Samson and the Riddle of Grace

SCOTT HOEZEE

Superman can leap tall buildings and run faster than a speeding bullet, unless he gets near kryptonite, that is. The cartoon character, Popeye the Sailor Man, could take on any foe, provided he got a healthy dose of spinach into him. Superheroes often have fatal flaws, or they need special boosts to do their work. Christians have long thought this about the character of Samson. His superhero strength came from his long, never-cut hair; but that is not quite accurate according to the book of Judges; in fact, much of what we think we know about Samson is wrong; and today on *Groundwork*, we will explore why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now episode four out of five of a series we have been doing on a very challenging and tough book, the book of Judges; and we have said all along, Dave, that there is an awful lot in this book that is troubling, tawdry, sometimes it is downright gross—almost sickening in terms of the violence; and today, one of the few characters in Judges that makes it into children's storybooks and Sunday school curriculums is Samson; but even Samson's story is not all that we might think it is.

DAVE BAST

Well, and especially as we grow older and kind of grow out of that childish approach, there are disturbing elements to Samson's story, and not just the sexual ones, but the story in terms of violence as well—it is one of the most violent. It is also one of the longest episodes in the whole book of Judges; it comes right at the heart...and Samson fills four whole chapters...Judges 13 through 16...with the story of his exploits. It begins with the story of his birth in Judges 13.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We will get right to that. We don't know the name of Samson's mother, but we do know that, like other women in this book, she comes off a little bit better than her husband, Manoah, but let's listen to this from Judges 13:

²A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. ³The Angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. ⁴Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink, and that you do not eat anything unclean. ⁵You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

DAVE BAST

So, right away we are alerted by the writer to the fact that there is going to be something special about this baby, because his mother is unable to have children...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we see that again and again and again in the story of scripture; we see it with Samuel's mother, Hannah; and we see it earlier with the patriarchs—they are unable to conceive; so, it just seems as though when...and later, in the New Testament, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; John the Baptist, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, it just seems when we have the condition of barrenness, like Abraham and Sarah, or Manoah, now, and his wife, that child is going to be very special, who will be born; and there is something else that is going to be special about him, because the Angel says: He must become a Nazirite.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; which is an especially dedicated person. You are not supposed to drink any wine; you are not supposed to get your hair cut; you are not supposed to become unclean in any way, shape or form; so, that is very important. So, this is going to be a special child. Manoah's wife tells him that an angel visited her, but he doesn't quite buy it. He says he wants to hear it from the angel's mouth himself, and as we see, God grants that request.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so we go on and read this: ⁹God heard Manoah, and the Angel of the Lord came again to the woman while she was out in the field, but her husband, Manoah, was not with her. ¹⁰The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He is here; the man who appeared to me the other day." ¹¹Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the man who talked to my wife?" "I am," he said. ¹²So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule that governs the boy's life and work?" ¹³The Angel of the Lord answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. ¹⁴She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine nor drink any wine or other fermented drink, nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Manoah hears this, and then he offers to cook the angel a special meal, and the angel says: No, I don't need to eat, but you can make a sacrifice to God—to Yahweh—and then we read this:

¹⁹Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the Lord; and the Lord did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched. ²⁰As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the Angel of the Lord ascended in the flame; and seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground; ²¹and when the Angel of the Lord did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized it was the Angel of the Lord (literally, the Angel of Yahweh). ²²"We are doomed to die," he said to his wife. "We have seen God!" ²³But his wife declared, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted our burnt offering and grain offering from our hands; nor shown us all these things; nor told us this."

DAVE BAST

So, once again the wife is a little more level-headed...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

A little more faith-filled than the husband. We have seen something rather similar to this scene in the story of Gideon, where there is this sort of supernatural, amazing, mind-blowing thing as the Angel of the Lord accepts the sacrifice and then ascends; and of course, that character, the Angel of the Lord, is a mystery in and of himself. Here he is again in the story. So, Samson is going to be set apart. He must be totally dedicated to the Lord. There are outward signs that fulfill this in terms of clean and unclean, and long hair and not drinking, but the crucial thing is his dedication to God...not really any of the signs themselves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; those outward things were not of themselves magic trinkets or the like, but they were signs of a larger faithfulness of being set aside; and so, we find out early, once again because of the miraculous nature of his conception and birth, this is going to be a special leader, as was always the case. He is going to deliver his people from the Philistines; so, in every part of Judges, we see a different enemy...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There have been all kinds of different enemies. Everybody attacks Israel eventually in the book of Judges. This time it is the Philistines; so, Samson is going to be a key leader, and a key part of his leadership will be, in his case, really quite spectacular strength; but again, it is not just the magic of long hair, it is the presence of God. It is sort of like the David and Goliath story later in scripture. David's slingshot did not kill Goliath; it was God acting through the smooth stone that killed Goliath...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Samson has to be faithful to God; but, as we are going to see, he is not very good at being faithful to God, and by the time we get...as we will in the next segment...by the time we get to the story of his famous haircut from a woman named Delilah, that ends up, actually, just being the last straw for God. So, we are going to take a look at Samson's life and some of his ministry; and we will take it up in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are taking up the story of Samson, one of the most famous of the judges; and we might just recall who a judge was; not a person with a long black robe and sitting in a courtroom and issuing decisions, but a judge was a deliverer—a savior—a redeemer—a champion; and Samson is kind of exhibit A of that role of a judge. God is going to raise him up to deliver Israel from the Philistines, who are the enemy currently afflicting the people of Israel. So, this is going to take place mostly in the area of Judea.

One of the things you mentioned, Scott, is how the enemies are different throughout Judges. The judges are different, too, both in terms of their roles and where they come from. It seems like they are from a different tribe each time...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, Samson happens to come from the tribe of Dan, which is one of the smallest and most obscure of all the tribes of Israel. So, he has this special conception and birth. The angel has announced that he is going to come, and has said he has to be totally devoted to God all the days of his life, right from conception. Even his mother is told she cannot drink wine, which is very healthy today, we know, but this was for reasons of ritual

purity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, we move right on from his birth story in Judges 13 to the first story in Judges 14, after Samson has grown up; and again, he is supposed to be devoted to the Lord and so forth, but no sooner does he grow up and he falls in love with a Philistine girl; and his parents protest. They say: No, no, no. Marry from within our tribe of the Danites, or just within Israel at least...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But don't go to the unclean Philistines; and Samson has a very curious response in Judges 14. He kind of bellows to his parents, and he says:

^{3b}“Get her for me, because she is the right one for me.” And what is interesting about the phrase, Dave, is that, in Hebrew that is an exact echo of the refrain of this book, that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. They weren't paying attention to God; they paid attention to what was right in their own eyes; and that is what Samson says: You get me that girl, Mom and Dad, because she is right in my own eyes. And so now, all of a sudden, instead of being just a leader and deliverer, Samson is part of the problem, too, it turns out.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the things we have been asking ourselves in the course of this series is what is the message of Judges, really? What is it all about? Does it have a theme? And that sentence...that phrase, which ends the book of Judges, everyone doing what they thought was right rather than what God said was right; well, that could be writ large over the whole book, and over Samson's life...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, we are going to see Samson now...he had such a wonderful beginning...such a wonderful childhood, we would say...you know, completely devoted to God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And no doubt his parents taught him day in and day out; and here he is an adult and he is completely headstrong, and he is just going to go his own way and do what he feels like doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that sets up a whole series of mayhem and so forth; but then, we also come to this story, which is one Sunday school kids even learn about, but again, it is not quite what we think. So, let's listen to this. This is Judges 14:5:

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 them. ⁶The 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. ⁷Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her.

DAVE BAST

⁸Sometime 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. ⁹He 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is a well-known story and a well-known image. One of my seminary classmates said: You know, Samson was kind of like a cross between Rambo and the Terminator...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, he is kind of God's Rambo...that muscle-bound Sylvester Stallone character...I mean, a lion comes at him, and they fight, and Samson wins! What a great thing; except, it really isn't, because later Samson decides to have lunch out of the carcass of the lion, and guess what? That made him ritually unclean. God told him: Touch no unclean thing. *Eat* no unclean thing; and here Samson breaks two rules at once: He touches an unclean thing, and he has lunch out of an unclean thing; and so again, this is not a heroic story, this is a story of disobedience to God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a really interesting point, Scott, and one that I have to confess I had never thought of before until you showed it here in this story; but that is exactly what happens here. This is not just a feat of tremendous strength and kind of a Tarzan moment where he, you know, chokes the lion to death or rips him apart; this is an act of disobedience on the part of Samson, and he has defiled himself in God's eyes by doing this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why he doesn't tell his parents where he got the honey...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He didn't get it from the A&P.

DAVE BAST

Samson does not get around to marrying this girl that he is on the way to marry...he supposedly is on his way to his wedding. He goes off somewhere and her father gives her to somebody else, which makes Samson tremendously angry and he goes out and kills a bunch of people. First of all, he killed thirty Philistines, and stole their clothes to give as presents...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

At the wedding feast; and then there is another incident in Judges where Samson takes the jawbone of a donkey and slays one thousand Philistines with it. You know, you step back...I can remember reading those stories and thinking: Wow, that's great, you know, he is doing in all of God's enemies; but from the Philistines' point of view, Samson must have seemed a lot like a terrorist, and a mass murderer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and to the Israelites, probably some sort of hero because he keeps killing these people, even if he is often doing it out of a sense of personal revenge; but meanwhile, there is also some little side stories that he keeps having dalliances with prostitutes; he keeps defiling himself. Again, he just keeps breaking his Nazirite vows...

DAVE BAST

Yes, they try to catch him, and surround the city, and he pulls up the gate and walks off with it. So, all this stuff goes on, but now we come to the most famous story of all, the story of Samson and Delilah, which of course, has provided Hollywood with the stuff of epic, but here it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is in Judges 16, and now this is sort of where all Samson's past sins catch up with him. He really kind of falls for this Delilah woman, and she wants to know: What is the secret of your strength? And he toys with her; he gives her three fake reasons; they are all false, and so forth; and finally, finally, Delilah has had enough, and she goes for broke, and in Judges 16:15:

She says, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you will not confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." ¹⁶And with such nagging, she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it, ¹⁷so he told her, "No razor has ever been used on my head because I have been a Nazirite, dedicated to God, from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me and I would become as weak as any other man."

DAVE BAST

¹⁸And when Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more. He has told me everything."

And so, they come back and she puts him to sleep on her lap. This is just so sad, and they come in, ²⁰and she warns him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I will go out as before and shake myself free." (And then comes the saddest sentence in the whole book of Judges): But he did not know that the Lord had left him. ²¹Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and took him down to Gaza.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is not a happy ending here. Sure, Delilah gives him that famous haircut and all that, but it wasn't that; it was the last straw for God; and so, God did leave him, and he gets taken prisoner. It is not quite the end, though. We get one last story; this is after he has been a prisoner for a while, and the Philistines are having a grand party, you know, to celebrate their victory over Israel and Samson...

DAVE BAST

And they bring him out to kind of parade him before the crowd...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, bring out Samson to entertain us...

DAVE BAST

Thousands of them are gathered, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, they bring him out, and he is sort of like, you know, a sideshow freak now; and they stood him among the pillars of this place where they are gathered:

²⁶And Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." ²⁷Now, the temple was crowded with men and women. All the rulers of the Philistines were there, and there were on the roof about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. ²⁸Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please God, strengthen me just one more time, and with one blow let me get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes."

²⁹And Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on one and his left hand on the other, ³⁰Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it; thus, Samson killed many more when he died than while he lived.

DAVE BAST

So, that is the end of Samson...the end of his story; and I think he learns at the end that his strength really did come from God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

It wasn't from anything superficial; but really, Samson presents a kind of a riddle, doesn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

His character is a riddle...God still uses him to save his people, but Samson is so deeply flawed. We will explore that riddling nature of Samson's life in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; so, we just mentioned riddling, and the riddle of Samson's life; and there is a famous riddle back in Chapter 14 that is the story about the lion and the honey. Let's take a look at that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, Samson kills that lion, and then he finds the honey later; and then, in the next part of the story, it is the wedding feast for that Philistine woman—the one he never does end up marrying; but at the feast, Samson teases the Philistines, and he says:

¹²“Let me tell you a riddle; 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. ¹³And if you cannot tell me the answer, you have to give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes.” “Tell us your riddle,” they said, “Let's hear it.” ¹⁴And he replied, “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.”

DAVE BAST

So, of course, the Philistines scratch their heads and puzzle over this for seven whole days, and they cannot figure it out; and they become incensed, and they go to the girl and her father and say: What's the matter with you? Are you trying to bankrupt us here? We are the guests, and where are we going to come up with thirty sets of expensive clothes if we cannot get the answer? So, just like later with Delilah, the girl goes to work on Samson...and you know, you have got to step back and say: How dumb can a guy be?! I realize he is strong, but is he thickheaded, too? Doesn't he realize what these women are doing to him? But, she works on him and he tells her the answer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the answer is what is sweeter than honey; what is stronger than a lion? So, it is a reference to his having killed the lion and then bees having built a hive in the lion's carcass. So, that is the riddle, but Samson's story is a riddle. As my teacher, Ray Van Leeuwen, said: The problem with Samson was that he *always* took his sweets from the unsweet. He was always violating his devotion to God; but it is Samson himself who is the real riddle, and I think in the end, Dave...the first book I ever wrote had this title based on the Samson story. It is the riddle of grace, because in the long run, what is stronger than a lion, what is sweeter than honey? Well, it is love; love is stronger than a lion, and love is sweeter than honey; and God's love comes to us in

grace; and boy, did Samson need a lot of grace.

DAVE BAST

He certainly did; and so do we all, you know? I mean, this is...in some ways, it is a wonderful encouragement to us as followers of Jesus, because we do all stumble and fall; we do all have good intentions, but we don't follow through. Maybe we were devoted to God from an early age. It makes me think of the Apostle Paul and what he said in Romans 7: The good that I would that I do not, and the evil that I would not, that is the very thing that I do. So, we are all a bit of a riddle in that sense, as Samson was.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I like the line that the great preacher Fred Craddock had in one of his sermons, where he said: All of us, as we try to follow Jesus, we are all perpetually crucified between the sky of our good intentions and the earth of our sinful failures; and that is true of all of us; and yet, it was while we were yet sinners that God loved us despite our failures. Like Samson, we can still be used by God, and we are still used by God. We are all a riddle of grace, in a way. To paraphrase something, I think you had referred to early, too, Dave, that God is just really good at hitting straight shots with crooked sticks.

DAVE BAST

Yes; but look at what God does through him; how he brings rescue and deliverance for the people of Israel, who at that time, were just being ground down by the Philistines. It was like a foreign occupation of a military force; and Samson is sort of a one-man army, who sets them free; and you know, most significantly, perhaps, of all: Samson is mentioned in the New Testament as a hero of faith. In fact, several of these characters in Judges that are sketchy, to say the least, are mentioned in the great chapter of faith: Hebrews 11. So, we read this in Hebrews 11:32:

What more shall I say? (The writer is kind of running out of time, as we are, incidentally, in this program; but he has just been telling the story of people like Abraham and Moses and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

David.

DAVE BAST

David...) I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah; about David and Samuel and the prophets...³⁹These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Samson...commended for his faith!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; who'd-a-thunk it. Now, if you only know sort of the cleaned up Sunday school version of Samson's story, you might read that without batting an eye. Well, yes; he was a superhero. He was God's Rambo, and so forth; but when you actually see the unvarnished version, which we have looked at in this program...how erratic he was; how a lot of his killings were terrible and kind of unjustified, because they came out of a personal sense of anger and pique and embarrassment; and you say: Really? That is faith?! He is commended for...what faith? The guy was faithless. He broke all of his Nazirite vows all the time. Oh, but wait; there is the riddle of grace. It is by grace we have been saved, so that when God looks at us, he doesn't see our bad deeds, he sees Jesus' good deeds...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because Samson is ultimately one link in the chain that leads us straight to Jesus; and we all get commended for our faith, not because of how good we are, but because of how good God is—how good Jesus is.

DAVE BAST

So, Samson failed often and regularly; yet, at the end, he dies with a prayer on his lips, and he dies as a testament to the grace of God and the faith that lays hold of it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope that you will join us again next time as we study how the book of Judges concludes, and then discuss its purpose in God's grand story of salvation.

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