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Sampson Went Down

Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series

Judges 14:1-20

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So the Christian life can get confusing. It's not that hard in this culture to lose your way. But God is good. He sends people into our lives to lead us, to disciple us, to mentor us, to encourage us, to be part of our story, to experience the life that God wants us to experience. But what happens when the person who is supposed to help you ends up hurting you and they go astray, and they wander into darkness? Is it possible that you will never experience the life that Jesus wanted you to experience because of someone else's failure?

Well, that's we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible turn with us to the book of Judges. If you're visiting with us today, we've been working our way through the Old Testament book of Judges. Last week Ryan opened up the story of Samson in Judges chapter 13. It's the announcement and birth of Samson. It's a beautiful chapter full of hope, and he reminded us what a God we have. Of all of the judges in the book of Judges—and this is the last judge—none of them have as grand of an introduction as Samson. As a matter of fact, of all the judges in the book of Judges, no one has it said of them that the Lord blessed him except Samson. Now if you did not know the story of Samson, what is it you would be expecting in chapter 14? Because I'm pretty sure what you would be expecting is not what you're gonna get. Chapter 14, verse 1:

> **Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife." Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me." However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.** (*NASB, Judges 14:1-4)

So we learned in chapter 13 that for 40 years the Philistines have oppressed the Israelites. They're not out on the perimeter, they are now well in to the land that God promised his people. As a matter of fact, one of the distinctives of this story is there's nowhere in the story where the Israelites cry out to God to deliver them. It's as if they have become so accustomed to the oppression, they're so enmeshed with the idol worshipping Philistines, that they're willing to settle for this as a way of life. But God wants so much more for His people. He wants to deliver them. He wants them to experience the freedom that He's promised them in this land. So Samson enters the scene.

I love the way these Old Testament narratives are written. They're just so skillfully done. So one of the things you see in this chapter and the next is the repetition of the words, **he went down**. **He went down** and **he went up**—16 times. Now geographically it's true. From where Samson lived to Timnah was about five miles. It wasn't far and geographically it was down. But if you look

how this phrase is used, it is also symbolic of Samson's journey as he goes down from what we expected he would be. So, Samson went down, sees a woman of Philistine, comes back, and tells his parents, "I saw a woman in Timnah. Get her for me as a wife." That's a very reckless, crude, selfish, self-centered, disobedient statement. As a matter of fact, one of the things you always want to notice in a Hebrew narrative is the first words that come out of the mouth of a main character, because often those words define that person. So, the very first thing that comes out of Samson's mouth is he's selfish, he's disobedient, he's demanding, he's lustful, and he wants what he wants.

Well, his parents respond because they know this is wrong. The Israelites were not to inter-marry with these countries around them. We even had this repeated in Judges, chapter 3. Now this sometimes gets confusing, but the simplest way to explain it is the issue wasn't so much about inter-racial marriages, but inter-faith marriages. God wanted a people set apart unto Him so that He could bless them. And through that, they would be a light to the rest of the world. You simply cannot do that if they are meshed together with pagan, idol worshipping people. So these marriages were forbidden. And that's why his parents say, "Can't you find a nice girl among our tribe, or even among the entire nation of Israel? Why are you choosing one from the uncircumcised Philistines?" Most of the nations around Israel practiced circumcision for a variety of reasons. It was a bit of a distinctive that the Philistines did not, and they were considered the most pagan, the most idol worshipping, the lowest of the low, so that's why that phrase is used. But Samson really doesn't want to hear it. He wants what he wants. So he says back, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me." Now, in a culture where we are so used to authority being disrespected, we read over that, and we probably don't even notice it. But in the ancient Near East, it was almost unheard of that a son would talk that way to his parents. The first readers would have immediately raised their eyebrows at how disrespectful that was to his parents. Literally what Samson says is, "Get her for me for she looks right to me." The reason that's important is because there is a repeated phrase in the book of Judges that defines this period of history: that **every man did that which was right in his own eyes**. So that's what Samson says, "Get her for me, for she looks right to me." In other words, he is the poster child for the problem. He doesn't really care what his parents want. He doesn't care what God has said. He doesn't care about any of that. Driven by what he wants and his own lust, this is what he wants. "Get her for me."

Verse 4 then is what we would refer to as an editorial comment. What that means is it doesn't advance the storyline, but the editor is telling you something you need to know to understand the point of this chapter. And what the editor tells us is that Samson's parents didn't know this, but it was of the Lord. In other words, God is in this. So what does he mean by that? It does not mean that the parents were wrong, they weren't wrong. They were right. What Samson was doing was disobedient, they were right about that. It also doesn't mean that what Samson was doing was right—that that was according to what God wanted. It wasn't right. It was rebellious. It was reckless. God didn't want that. What it does mean is even in the midst of that, God is in it and God will be faithful, and somehow God can still use a flawed hero to accomplish His purpose to set His people free. Verse 5:

> **Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a young**

goat though he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. So he went down and talked to the woman; and she looked good to Samson. (Vs. 5-7)

So they're going down probably to make arrangements for Samson to marry this Philistine girl. He decides to take a detour through the vineyard of Timnah. Now if you were the first reader and you understood that Samson was supposed to be under a Nazirite vow, we would immediately raise our eyebrows when he enters the vineyard, like, "What is he doing?" I'll come back to that in just a minute. So he gets into the vineyard, and a young lion rushes him. The text then says that the Spirit of the Lord—literally the Hebrew is the *Spirit of the Lord rushed on to Samson*, so it's a bit of a play on words. This is a phrase that's used several times in the Old Testament, but this is the first time it's ever used. So the lion rushed at Samson and the Spirit rushed onto Samson. So Samson takes the lion like they would take a young goat—meaning by the two hind legs—and literally tore it in half. This is the first glimpse we have of this unusual strength. But then the text tells us he didn't tell his parents. Well, that's a bit odd. If I just did that, that's probably the first thing I'd say. "You can't believe what just happened to me on the way to Timnah!" But a Jew would have understood he was to have no contact with a dead animal. If he did, he would be required to go to the tabernacle, to go through a process to be cleansed. But you have this reckless spirit in Samson. He doesn't care, not interested in what God says, but this is why he doesn't tell his parents. The paragraph then basically ends with again, "He went down to Timnah, and she looked right to Samson." When it says **he went down and talked to the woman**, the Hebrew is *spoke to the woman*. It's a more formal statement, probably means proposed. He proposed to her because she looked right.

When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion. So he scraped the honey into his hands and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them and they ate it; but he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey out of the body of the lion. **(Vs. 8-9)**

So a period of time passes. He's going down to take her which means to marry her. He goes back through the vineyard, apparently to admire his handiwork, and there in the carcass of the lion a swarm of bees have made a hive and it's full of honey. Again, to understand, a Jew was forbidden to touch an animal that was dead. But Samson didn't care. He scrapes out the honey and what's interesting about the way it's written is he doesn't sneak around eating the honey. The way it's recorded is he just strolls down the path defiantly eating this honey, because he doesn't care what anybody else thinks.

Now there's a couple of different ideas about the lion and how this worked. There's a group of people that think because of where this was in the world, because of the climate, that quickly the meat on this lion would dehydrate and become more like a jerky. So it isn't just kind of a bloody putrid mess—that's kind of what comes to mind. But I think more likely is that the predators, the birds, the animals had just picked all the meat off this lion, and what's left is the skeleton which would have made a perfect environment for the bees to come into the body cavity and make a hive there. So, he takes the honey but not only does he eat it himself, he gives it to his parents knowing full well that if they knew where this honey came from, they would not have touched it. That's

why the text tells us he didn't tell them that. He doesn't care. He doesn't even respect his parents enough to tell them that. One commentator said in chapter 13 the parents sanctified Samson and in chapter 14, Samson desecrates his parents. It's just reflective of this attitude, "I don't care. I want what I want. I'm going to do what I want to do. Don't anybody tell me what to do."

One other interesting part of that part of the story is the Hebrew language has a very clear word for **swarm**, as in a swarm of bees. But this isn't the word that's used here. This is rather a term that primarily is used to describe a community and almost always a community of faith. So a lot of scholars think this is also meant to be just a clever picture of the mission that God was on, where God was wanting Israel to be this sweetness in the midst of a decaying culture. That was their assignment to be a light, to be this sweetness, but the only way that's going to happen is if the nation of Israel and the Philistines are torn apart, and Israel once again is set apart to worship God. Verse 10:

> **Then his father went down to the woman; and Samson made a feast there, for the young men customarily did this. When they saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him.** (Vs.10-11)

So the father goes down, and they're going to have what would have been a seven-day wedding feast Philistine style. But literally the text reads, "And Samson made a place of drinking." That's the literal Hebrew there. For a guy that's under a Nazirite vow, that's a bit of a problem. Now going back to the vineyard: under the Nazirite vow, he was not allowed to have strong drink; he was not allowed to have wine. It was not even allowed to have unfermented grape juice. He wasn't even allowed to eat a grape. So it's like, "What is this guy doing in the vineyard?" Now it's advanced a little bit more when there's going to be a seven-day drinking party among the Philistines. Again, it's reflective of this dismissive, rebellious, "I don't care" attitude.

One of the interesting things all throughout the Samson story is it seems like he's always alone. Maybe nobody can stand being around him. So he's at his wedding feast and he's all alone—no friends. So the Philistines provide 30 companions, you might think of them as 30 groomsmen. But probably more to the point is the Philistines probably didn't like him, and they didn't trust him. So these 30 companions are to keep an eye on him trying to figure out what is this guy up to? So the whole situation feels pretty reckless. It's pretty sketchy. He's in Philistine territory, with all of these difficult dynamics, with lots of alcohol, but Samson's determined to make it worse. Verse 12:

> **Then Samson said to them, "Let me now propound a riddle to you; if you will indeed tell it to me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes. But if you are unable to tell me, then you shall give me thirty linen wraps and thirty changes of clothes." And they said to him, "Propound your riddle, that we may hear it." So he said to them, "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet." But they could not tell the riddle in three days.** (Vs.12-14)

So Samson's determined to stir up the pot. If you stop and think about it there is no way this part of the story could have ended well. So there's a riddle, a battle of the wits, which was not unusual

in that culture. "I'll tell you a riddle, you've got seven days to solve it." The payoff is 30 pieces of clothing. While it may seem like an odd currency to us, actually that had great value. Clothes were highly desired.

So they agree. So he gives them the riddle. Now in our English Bible, it has a nice little rhyme to it. Like for what it's worth, "Something to eat something sweet." But the Hebrew doesn't rhyme. It's just kind of an accident that it worked that way in the English, but it is this poetic rhyme for them to figure out. But they could not figure it out. Verse 15 then things get really ugly in a hurry.

> **Then it came about on the fourth day that they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband, so that he will tell us the riddle, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us to impoverish us? Is this not so?" Samson's wife wept before him and said, "You only hate me, and you do not love me; you have propounded a riddle to the sons of my people, and have not told it to me." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told it to my father or mother; so should I tell you?" However she wept before him seven days while their feast lasted. And on the seventh day he told her because she pressed him so hard.** (Vs.15-17a)

So they're three days into it, they can't figure this thing out. You get a sense of how valuable this clothing was by their line, "Are you here to impoverish us?" You know, they think she's in on the scheme. Now the language **husband** and **wife**, is used kind of loosely here. Technically, they're just betrothed. After the seven days of the feast, then the marriage is consummated, and they are officially married. So what they say to her is you need to entice—so it's a Hebrew word that has sexual overtones—seduce is what we would say. You need to seduce your husband into giving you the answer to the riddle or we will kill you and your family. Suddenly this got really ugly. So she goes to Samson, "You hate me. You don't love me. You've put forth this riddle and you haven't bothered to even tell me what the answer to the riddle is." Samson says, "I haven't even told my mother and father, why would I tell you?" Maybe not the best answer in that moment. But she keeps at it. And somewhere on the seventh day, she presses so hard that he gives in. Now we know that on the seventh day, after the seventh day of the feast, is the first time when the marriage is consummated. We know that Samson is a lustful, reckless guy, so it's highly likely that what she said somewhere on the seventh day is, "Listen, fella, there will be none of that, unless you give me the answer." And again, in reckless fashion, he tells her the answer.

> **She then told the riddle to the sons of her people. So the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, "What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."** (Vs.17b-18)

So she immediately goes to her people and tells them the answer. You have to feel for this young girl. She's had no choice in any of this and all of a sudden, if she doesn't get the answer, they're gonna kill her and her family. She's just trying to survive, but she gives them the riddle. They wait until bottom of the ninth, two outs, and deliver the goods and immediately Samson knows they got it from her. His language, "You plowed with my heifer." So what does he mean by that? So a heifer would never have been used to pull a plow so essentially he's saying, "You cheated." But he's saying more than that. It's like, "Rather than manning up and admitting you don't know,

you had to cheat. You had to plow with my heifer to get the answer." And he's not happy about this. Verse 19:

> **Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily,** (same language—*rushed upon him*) **and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of them and took their spoil and gave the changes of clothes to those who told the riddle. And his anger burned, and he went up to his father's house. But Samson's wife was given to his companion who had been his friend.** (Vs. 19-20)

So Samson is not happy. The Spirit of the Lord rushes on him and empowers him. He travels over 20 miles to one of the five key Philistine cities along the Mediterranean, and there he kills 30 men. The fact that it says *the spoils* is almost always military language. It is highly likely that the 30 that he killed were 30 soldiers. He brings their armor as well as their clothing and delivers it to pay off the riddle. But I think the message is, "You cheated and because you cheated 30 of your Philistine soldiers had to die." Then the text tells us he's so angry he goes back to his parents' house and leaves his wife behind. This would have been a significant dishonor to her and to her family. So the father, believing that Samson has abandoned the relationship, gives her to essentially his best man to marry.

Now, there's a whole lot more of this story to go so if you come back next week I promise you some fireworks from the book of Judges (*laughter*). But as we wrap it up this morning, I want you to stop and think about this. There were thousands and thousands of Israelites—real people with real lives living under the oppression of the Philistines. Would they spend the rest of their lives living in bondage and oppression because of the failure of Samson? All of a sudden you realize it's possible, the failure of this one person dramatically could affect the lives of thousands of people.

That's where verse four—the editorial comment—comes in. Because the answer is, no. Even though Samson failed God will be faithful. God longs to deliver His people. He wants His people to experience so much more than what they've settled for, and even though His hero is so flawed, He will be so faithful.

And so it is with us. The Christian life is hard and it can get very confusing. So God raises up people to help us—parents, pastors, Christian leaders, youth leaders, life group leaders, mentors, disciplers, maybe just special friends—that walk with you, that teach you, that challenge you, that encourage you. It's a beautiful thing. But what happens when those whom God has called to help you end up hurting you? They themselves go astray. They themselves get confused. They wander into the darkness. They make a mess of things. Does that mean that you will have to settle for far less of the life Jesus wanted for you because of their failure? And the answer is absolutely not. That's the importance of verse 4, the editorial comment is because God is still faithful, and God wants you to know that life that Jesus offers.

The reality whether we like it or not, is people are going to fail you. People are going to disappoint you. People are going to let you down. People are gonna wound you. And sometimes it's the very people whom God called to help you are the ones that end up hurting you. This is the story of the book of Judges. Each of these judges is meant to be a type, a glimpse of the great hero, the great

Savior to come. With each one of them we end up disappointed, and we long for that one true Hero. The judges moves to the time of the kings and Israel thought finally under King David they had finally found that one great king, and then he lets them down and makes a mess of things. And we find ourselves longing for something—someone—better, which works its way all the way to the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the Savior, the Deliverer, the King that everyone has always wanted. The One who will never leave you or forsake you, the One who will always do what's best for you. The One who will ultimately get you to the finish line, and the One who at the end of the story is victorious, and offers you a life more wondrous than you can imagine. He is the One that ultimately we trust.

The reality is that God can even use those experiences with people that hurt you, people that wounded you, people that disappointed you, people that let you down because God is faithful. He can even use those experiences to change you and to grow you, and to help you understand and experience the life that Jesus offers because even though they fail you, God will be faithful. So this I know, no matter what—no matter what—God will be faithful and Jesus will never leave me or forsake me. Jesus will always do what is best for me. Jesus will get me to the finish line. Jesus will win, and Jesus will deliver me to a future more wondrous than I can imagine. That I know. And for me, no matter what else, that's going to be enough.

Our Father, we celebrate Your faithfulness. God, what a disappointment Samson is turning out to be, yet in the midst of that You still show Yourself to be faithful. Lord, may we trust You. May we fix our eyes on Jesus, the One who will never leave us or forsake us, the One who will get us to the finish line, the One who ultimately wins. Lord, for whatever else we experience in this life may we trust You; may that be enough for us. In Jesus name, Amen.

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