

Judges 13-16

Intro March 11, 2007 A Warrior with Warts

The names and faces may change, but humanity has a lasting love affair with warriors who embody wisdom, strength and courage in the face of evil. We call it hero-worship. We've all had our heroes, be they father or favorite uncle, athlete or actor. As a kid I idolized Batman, the campy TV show with Adam West, not the dark and sulking version of a later generation. I loved the clean cut Johnny U and knew better than to venerate Broadway Joe Namath, who's off the field antics was grist for the gossip mill.

We want our heroes to behave ... well, heroically, to demonstrate not only skill, but moral fiber. The *Oxford Dictionary* points out, when the word "hero" entered the English language in the 14th century it meant: "A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods ... regarded as intermediate between gods and men, and immortal."¹

Over the next three centuries, the term broadened to include anyone "who exhibits extraordinary bravery, firmness, fortitude, or greatness of soul, in any course of action, a man admired and venerated for his achievements and noble qualities".

While in ages past the heroic exploits were the mythic tales of our ancestors around the campfire, today the hero is generated in celluloid and marketed by Hollywood. Hollywood once saw heroes in simple terms. They were the goodies put on Earth to fight baddies. Heroes ensured that evil were defeated, the girl was saved, disaster averted and the world returned to decency and stability. The most clichéd manifestation of the "goodie" hero was Alan Ladd in *Shane*. He wore white buckskins, was filmed from a low angle against a blue sky and did "what a man's got to do" in silent dignity before riding into the sunset.

Interestingly when the American Film Institute polled 150 directors, actors, screenwriters, critics and film historians to determine the great heroes and villains of the American cinema, the winner was not some pectoral-flexing, square-jawed macho man, but a middle-aged widower who, as a single parent, tried to look after two children and constantly felt he wasn't much good as a parent - Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

If there is one quality to any lasting hero, it is complexity, confusion, even tragedy. In this case, words from F. Scott Fitzgerald are apt: "Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy."

The common hero of our day is the anti-hero, one for whom we root to win, and yet decry his lack of moral compass. Shows like HBO's hit "The Sopranos" and FX's stark cop drama "The Shield" have introduced TV viewers to a new kind of protagonist. It's tough to call him a "hero."

He kills his enemies (they were bad guys anyway), rebels against legitimate authorities (the authorities don't know what's really going on), and grabs whatever he can (stealing from a criminal isn't a crime, is it?). But he also shows flashes of humanity: he cares for his family, takes risks for his friends, and occasionally bursts out in honesty. Apparently, the writers want us to root for these guys.

John Furia, Jr., a TV professor at the University of Southern California, isn't so sure these new flawed heroes are good for us. Speaking of the brutal and corrupt lead character on "The Shield," Furia told the Chicago Tribune, "We say, 'Well, he did a bad thing, a corrupt thing, an evil thing, a cruel thing. But on the other hand, he loves his autistic son and devotes himself to him diligently.' That is a very human thing, but I think it tends to push us as an audience to not only forgive the errant ways of these characters, but to consider the things that they do when they're behaving badly to be OK. I would decry that."²

An anti hero is a dark, edgy character who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero. He or she may be bewildered, ineffectual, deluded, or merely pathetic. More often an antihero is just an amoral misfit.³ As believers we may critique the Postmodern anti-hero as only another rejection of biblical norms and would be right to hold up the unchanging truth of right and wrong.

And yet, the confused hero is not an invention of our age, but is the recognition of the biblical truth of fallenness, it is exactly what we see in the lives of almost every character of Scripture and in every life we encounter, especially in our own lives.

How should we view this? Samson, the immoral Judge of ancient Israel serves us well here.

By the time we get to Samson, the marauding-army-of-the-day is the dreaded Philistines.

The Philistines were sea people who settled in Gaza on the shores of the Great Sea. The area of land that we know today as the Gaza Strip was the site of conflict long before the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. In Samson's day, the tribe of Dan of the Israelite people cracked heads with the Philistines.

But it was the Israelites that got cracked for the most part. For 40 years, the Israelite people were dominated and oppressed by the Philistines, until Samson came on the scene.⁴

Samson is a most puzzling, even bizarre character. He tears a lion apart with his bear hands, ties 300 foxes by their tails to torch wheat fields in a fit of anger. He beds a prostitute only to rip the city gate in Gaza from its walls. He is God's man of the hour, but not the kind of guy you want your daughter to marry. His tragic life seems to have little redeeming value to it. Listen to how it ends. READ 16:23-31

This morning we will cover four chapters in 30 minutes, but will do so with a glance at this confused hero's life. Our aim is to learn how to better read not only this story, but all of God's Word. We misread Scripture when we gaze through two equally appealing, but myopic lenses. They are moralism and cynicism.

Moralism tells us to avoid these behaviors

When we review the life of Samson, we encounter a man we want none of us to become. We don't want to hear about our little Billy playing Samson with the neighbor cat or girl next door. He is controlled not by God's Law and well reasoned compassion, but by the most animal of instincts: lust and vengeance. He marries a woman of Timnah, a Philistine, someone outside of God's people. He goes to a harlot's house, he's cruel to cuddle foxes only to end up with Delilah and we all know what powerful destruction a beautiful woman has over a man. The fact he gets his eyes gouged out is only just. Let this be a lesson guys!

In moralism there is a pious optimism, an assumption that if we state the obvious we will avoid the problems that plague our hero. There is a high view of self, a certainty that we can do what we put our mind to do. God's Word becomes nothing more than a primer on respectable behavior and in the end we are our own saviors, a greater tragic end than even Samson's demise.

Cynicism tells us to expect these behaviors

The cynic has been burned enough trying to be moral that he or she simply concludes that this is what we should expect out of fallen people. It is easier to celebrate the sin than try to change. What do you expect? His parents placate him, nobody stops his anti-social behavior. This bronze-age battling is what we come to expect from semi-civilized brutes. Learn to accept it.

In cynicism, there is a pious pessimism, the assumption that we all fail, so why get bent out of shape about another sinner. There is a high view of sin, a certainty that we can not change our stripes. Whereas moralism is correct in its decrying the breaking of God's Law, so is cynicism accurate in its assessment of our sinfulness.

These both have elements of truth in them, yet both fail horribly for they miss the core of the gospel. They see all life from a very human perspective.

Samson is a true hero of the faith, not despite his sins, but because of God's grace. Passages like this should neither be fodder for moralism, telling us the sins to avoid nor cynicism justifying our rejection of holiness. The lens through which we should read Samson and all of God's Word is through the covenant.

Covenantally reading this story tells us about sin and its consequences as well as God's promises.

Our focus is not to be human success or failure, but rather it points us to the God who promises to work in and through us. This should be the way we read God's Word. This is not a collection of stories about various people's exploits trying to do what is right, but God's victory in every circumstance to bring glory to his name. If we either give up or try harder we'll miss the point of the hero of the text – God working through fallible faithful people.

This is the how God would have us read the story. Want to know how I know? How should we view Samson? How does God's Word view Samson outside of these chapters?

Hebrews 11:32 gives us a good insight to our answer. He is a man of faith not because of his moral character, but because God works through him.

Woven throughout this story of reckless power and cunning trickery is the faithfulness of God who never stops caring for his people. When the people of God are toiling under the oppression of the Philistines, God is faithful and sends a deliverer. Whenever Samson delivers God's people through his strength, we find these words: "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him" or "rushed at him". It is an active presence that gives him his supernatural strength. The Spirit of the Lord is an *active* participant in the life and strength of Samson.

We must remember that God's power is not at our disposal. We are not like painters who get to use this color or that as we do our work. It is we who are used by God to accomplish his purposes. God is the painter; we are only the paint. Samson's greatest mistake was forgetting

whose power it was that defeated the Philistines. God was using him, not him using God. While Samson was arrogant, God was faithful.

We make this mistake when we speak of Samson's greatest asset. We think strength. Why would you think that? What indication do you have that he is strong? The fact that he beat up so many people? Our mental picture of Samson is Schwarzenegger, not the aging broken leg, cardiac impaired governor our California, but Conan, Mr. Universe, with rippling muscles. Is he more at home in the gym pumping iron or part of the chess club at school? The fact is we don't know, but whatever is the case, this is no man of natural strength

Samson certainly had *issues*.

His lusts outweigh not only God's Law, but common sense. But he is more than just flawed, he's disturbed. Samson exhibited almost all of the symptoms of a person with Antisocial Personality Disorder, known in the psychology trade as ASPD. According to Dr. Eric Altschuler, from the University of San Diego, Samson exhibited six out seven criteria for diagnosis of ASPD (as identified by the American Psychiatric Association in its diagnostic bible, the DSM-IV) and a person need only manifest three of the seven criteria to be diagnosed with the disorder.

Altschuler and his co-authors cite a number of questionable acts as evidence of his ASPD diagnosis including: his failure to conform to social norms by torching the Philistines fields and then refusing arrest; his lying to his parents by not telling them that he had killed a lion; his impulsivity; his repeated involvement in physical fights, bullying, and cruelty to animals; his reckless disregard for the safety of others - he was reported to have taken on and killed no less than a 1000 Philistines; and his lack of remorse, as evidenced by his gloating after the killing of 1000 men.⁵

Let's look at Samson's sins and God's promise to be faithful to the covenant, in spite of those sins.

Samson demands a pagan wife contrary to God's commands (14:1-3)

It all started with a woman. How many times have we heard that story? How many chic flicks do you need to watch before you know the script?

Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love with girl. Girl breaks boy's heart. Boy gets girl.

Only in Samson's case it ends like this:

Boy lusts after girl, boy marries girl, girl nags boy, boy goes on murderous rampage and girl marries his best man. Not quite the Hallmark Channel.

But the key to the event is found in 14:4. What no one knew was how God was working to be faithful to his people. God was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. The repeated refrain that echoes through this story is how the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him (6) when he killed the lion as well as when he exacted retribution on the town of Ashkelon (19).

What we miss when we moralize is that God uses fallen, sinful creatures to accomplish his purpose without making acceptable their failures. Rather than focusing on Samson, we should see that God is faithful to what he promised to do for his people.

Does God ever use your sin to accentuate your Savior? I hope daily, but that never makes your sin right. Rather when you struggle with your own anger or lust, rather than falling into a morass of self pity, fall at the feet of the cross. God's promise, his covenant made with us is upheld not by our morality nor is it lost by our sinfulness. Rather, the God who has promised will work through you for his glory.

Next we see Samson enraged over the loss of the bride he rejected.

After the murder of 30 men from Ashkelon, he cools off and returns to his nagging bride with a gift of a goat, only to find that she married his best man. His response is one of comic cruelty.

Since his peace offering of a goat (15:1) does not gain him entrance to her bed, he ties the tails of 300 foxes together and attaches a torch to each pair, thus igniting the wheat fields just as they are about to be harvested. Such unwelcome behavior results in the murder of his bride and her family. His response is more mayhem.

By this point the Philistines have had enough. So they attach the Judah at Lehi and pressure them to deliver Samson to them. While Judah is afraid of the Philistine, Samson agrees to the exchange, only to break free of the ropes (15:14) when the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and armed with only a fresh donkey's jawbone, he decimates 1000 men. God not only empowers him, but then satiates his thirst (18-19)

What no one else was willing to do, Samson did. Israel was commanded to rid the land of the Philistines, but instead they played patsy to the Philistines by caving into their demands.

We miss the bigger picture when we focus on Samson's moral failures but miss that God was seeking to be good to his people despite their failures to do the job themselves. God uses this oaf to protect his people. Like Gideon's 300 or left handed Ehud, God is not very particular about who he uses. He'll use someone like you, warts and all.

His final foray into fornication still shows God's faithfulness to his covenant.

When we first meet Delilah, we do not know if she is a Philistine, a Canaanite, or an Israelite. What we do know is that she was in league with the Philistines. They wanted her to find out the secret of Samson's great strength, and promised her great reward if she could. So three times she asked ... three times Samson lied. First he told her that if he were tied up with 7 bowstrings, he would lose his strength. She tied him with 7 bowstrings, the Philistines came in, he broke them easily. Next he told her that if he were tied with new ropes, he would lose his strength. So she tied him with new ropes, the Philistines came in, he broke them easily. Then he told her that if she wove his hair into a loom and tightened it, he would lose his strength. So she wove his hair into a loom, the Philistines came in, he broke free easily.

Now at this point in the story, you have to start to wonder about Samson. He is either:

- A) *really* dumb, not to catch on to what is happening. OR
- B) *really* blinded by love or lust or something that brings him back time and again to this woman who clearly does not have his best interest in mind OR
- C) *really* arrogant to think that whatever he tells her, it doesn't matter because he can beat anybody on his own, without anybody's help. His presumption is amazing.

This brings us to the final chapter of his life. After 20 years of being used by God, he is now chained, blind and a Philistine plaything.

The cynic and the moralist are correct. We should expect sin and we must avoid sin. But if we want to know how to change, God's promise is the key. That promise is what we see in his final act.

The Philistines parade him in the temple before their god, mocking Samson and his God. Samson, requests the favor to lean against a pillar, tired from his ordeal. Once again he calls on God to be his strength. He wished to die with the Philistines. In that one act, he killed more of God's enemies in his death than he did in his life. In sacrificing himself, he brought peace to God's people.

As scandalous as it sounds, Samson the tragic failure is a type of our Savior. He is a hero not for what he did, but to whom he directs our attention. For that reason, the author of Hebrews places him among the great ones of our faith. He exists not just to point us to what to avoid or to remind us how impossible holiness really is. He sends us to Christ. Anything he accomplishes is done not by his own heroic efforts, but because God was at work in him to save his people.

Christ is what Samson could never be.

Christ's death on the cross achieved our freedom from the tyranny of oppressing sin. He died at the hands of those who mocked him, pulling down the temples of this world signaling the imminent destruction of all false religion. In Christ's death, death died. The serpent is crushed, the grave robbed of its sting, the curse of condemnation removed from every believer. Our peace is through his death.

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is a confusing hero for our world. His life appears as a failure to all who do not believe. He lacks the fallenness that makes him attractive and ends up lifeless. To those who believe, he is, as Hebrews 12:2 reminds us, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Founder – archegos – literally prince, leader, one who rescues, a classic hero. Are you willing to lay aside your self-efforts to try harder or your rejection to try at all and trust this one who has done it for you?

Rather than trying to be classic hero and saving not the world, but yourself, cast yourself to the God who will save those that seek his grace. Find in Christ the hero you need, one in whom the mercy of God rescues us.

¹ Introduction adapted from *Hero worship*, Bruce Elder, 07/04/05, Sydney Morning Herald <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Film/Hero-worship/2005/06/03/1117568361528.html>

² Elesha Coffman, editor, Christian History; source: "Cop Shows up the Ante for Anti-heroes," Chicago Tribune, 6/03/02

³ <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AntiHero>

⁴ February 12, 2006: Samson and Delilah: Tragedy or Love Story?, Matt Sturtevant, 02/12/06 Sections of his sermon are used liberally throughout. See <http://www.fbctopeka.org/sermons/2006/february-12-2006-samson-and-delilah-tragedy-or-love-story>

⁵ Eric Altschuler, BIBLICAL HERO SAMSON MAY HAVE BEEN SOCIOPATH AS WELL AS STRONGMAN, ACCORDING TO NEW RESEARCH, 02/21/01 <http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/newsrel/soc/dsamson.htm>