

## EVERYONE NEEDS A HERO – SAMSON!

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April 30, 2017

Judges 13: 1-5; 16: 28-31  
Hebrews 11: 1-2, 32-34

“Everyone Needs A Hero”: It’s a cheesy 80s song by Pretty Boy Floyd, but it’s also the title of our spring sermon series.

Who are the superheroes in our culture? – I mean the real ones, not the CG inventions of Marvel Comics and the Hollywood Studios? Chesley Sullenberger, known to most of us as Captain Sully, is one of them. He was that U.S. Airways pilot who made an emergency landing on the Hudson River in 2009. Because of his quick thinking and steely determination following a catastrophic bird strike, all 155 people on board the plane were saved.

Then there are local superheroes – people who have shown outstanding courage and dedication in our own community. Mike Leum, who sometimes attends this church, is the Dwayne Johnson of the Crescenta Valley. Mike used to be the captain of the all-volunteer Montrose Search and Rescue Team. He now helps to coordinate all eight of the volunteer search and rescue teams in the county. Mike regularly risks his neck for the sake of others. He has helped to rescue dozens of people who have walked or driven off cliffs, or lost their way in the woods.

Last week we talked about the ancient action hero Deborah. She was the prophetess who convinced the weak king, Barak, to stand up to Israel’s enemies. Barak told her he wouldn’t fight unless she went with him, so she did – and he did. No one today, Jewish or otherwise, would question Deborah’s hero status.

Today we’re focusing on Samson. Like Deborah, we learn about Samson in the Book of Judges. But we quickly realize, as we read the amazing tales of his exploits, that Samson isn’t what we would call a superhero. He falls into kind of a different category.

In our culture we’re very familiar with the flawed hero. We’re fascinated by the complex drama that emerges when a heroic character has to struggle simultaneously with external enemies and internal weaknesses. In literature, think of Prince Hamlet and Scarlett O’Hara. In movies, think of Rooster Cogburn and Jason Bourne. Such characters are so far from perfection that we sometimes call them *antiheroes*.

Samson may be the first and the best example of this kind of hero. Samson faces challenges that call forth superhuman strength. And he frequently displays charisma, courage and dogged determination. Yet Samson is often utterly lacking in self-control. In particular, his sex drive and his hot temper very nearly ruin him.

First Samson becomes engaged to a Philistine woman even though his calling from God is to deliver his people from the Philistine menace.

Then at his engagement party he poses a riddle to 30 Philistine men and makes a ridiculous bet with them. If they can solve the riddle, he, Samson, will give them each a fine set of clothes. But if they fail to solve it, they have to give him 30 sets of fine clothes. The 30 Philistines get the answer through the treachery of Samson's fiancée. Then, in a fit of rage, Samson slays 30 Philistines in a distant city so he can pay his promised reward.

When Samson returns to his fiancée's home town, he discovers that her parents have given her in marriage to his best man. To get his revenge, Samson catches 300 foxes, ties their tails together in pairs with a burning torch between, and sets them loose in the Philistine's grain fields. The Philistines respond by burning his fiancée and her father. But they soon discover that they've underestimated Samson. He takes hold of the jawbone of a recently expired donkey and with it Samson slays 1,000 more Philistines.

And we haven't even gotten to the sordid stuff!

Next we see Samson bedding down with a prostitute in Gaza. The Philistines try to ambush and kill him, but he escapes in the middle of the night. Later he falls in love with Delilah. We don't know if Delilah is an Israelite or a Philistine, but this much is certain: she's nothing but trouble. Determined to capture Samson, the Philistines pay Delilah big money to find out the key to Samson's strength. She and Samson play a little bedroom game where he lies to her a few times about what will defeat his strength, but eventually he tells her the truth. He explains to her that as a Nazirite he's not allowed to cut his hair. If his locks are cut off, the Spirit will leave him and the Philistines will be able to overpower him.

This is the part of the story that's worth reading aloud. This pathetic exchange between Samson and Delilah tells us everything we need to know about the mushy condition of Samson's brain, and his weakness for beautiful women. Judges chapter 16, starting at verse 15:

Then [Delilah] said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't 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." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

So he told her everything.

- Judges 16: 15-17a

The knucklehead.

Samson falls asleep on Delilah's lap like the big baby he's become. A guy slips out of the shadows and slices off his man bun. A gang of Philistines tie him up and gouge his eyes out. And Samson lands in prison.

In the final scene of the Samson saga, Samson and the Lord have the last word. The Philistines gather to make a great sacrifice to their impotent god, Dagon. Several thousand of them are inside and up on the

roof of some kind of temple. No doubt under the influence of cheap wine, they tell the jailors to bring Samson to them so they can have some fun with him. But what no one there realizes is that Samson's hair has been growing back, and that God's Spirit has returned with Samson's manly mane.

At Samson's request, the guards place him between the two main pillars that hold up the temple. Filled with the Spirit, Samson shoves them sideways, and the whole temple crashes down. Samson is crushed, but so are hundreds of Israel's rivals so that, as Judges notes with a twinge of irony, Samson "killed many more when he died than when he lived" (16:30).

(And there he is on the screen, in all his glory, looking suspiciously like Hugh Jackman.)

In the light of these dark stories, it seems odd that Samson is presented in Judges as Israel's liberator. Before Samson is born the angel of the Lord appears to his parents. The angel declares to them that Samson is to be a Nazirite who is set apart for service to God. He prophesies that Samson "will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (13:5). The Philistines, in the time of the judges, were the greatest existential threat to Israel. So that prophecy about Samson beginning the process of Israel's deliverance was tantamount to saying, "Samson will be the greatest hero of his day, and every succeeding generation will call him great."

We also have to wonder why the writer of Hebrews holds up Samson as a hero of the faith. Samson is listed in Hebrews, chapter 11 with spiritual giants like Gideon, David and Samuel. Because all of them had faith in God, Hebrews tells us, God enabled them to conquer "kingdoms, administer justice and gain what was promised" (Hebrews 11:33).

All of this is kind of confusing. The glaring weakness displayed by Samson – his inability to control his passions – often makes him look to us like a fool or even a thug.

But here's the thing to keep in focus: the Bible's perspective on what makes someone a hero is very different from ours. In our culture, heroes are people who stand alone against the forces of evil. Their strength comes from within. They're self-reliant and self-confident. In the Bible, heroes are defined in relationship to God. They stand with God, and are commissioned and sent out by him. They derive their strength from the Holy Spirit. They put their confidence in the Lord instead of themselves.

In a word, biblical heroes like Samson are *faithful*. They're not perfect – they sometimes wander far from God's path and fall headlong into sin. But they know in their gut that God has appointed them to do his work, and that they owe their allegiance to him. More than that, they understand that their strength comes from the Spirit, and that they're at risk of losing the Spirit when they disobey him.

I'm not suggesting that Samson's bad behavior is excusable. I don't think we're supposed to look at Samson and say, "Wow – now there's a real man – there's a guy that every Boy Scout should imitate!" Samson has little to offer besides his reckless courage and his intimidating abs and biceps. God wants us

to see that it's by faith that Samson becomes a liberator. It's by the power of his Spirit that Israel's many anti-heroes become superheroes.

The Lord also wants us to learn that importance of self-control. That's why the Samson stories include all those salacious details. God wants to read the stories and say, "Think what Samson could have accomplished if he'd just learned to control himself!"

Self-control is a counter-cultural virtue. It cuts against the grain in our manic culture. The American Dream is about squeezing as much out of life as we possibly can. Moderation, or self-control, is – at least in part – about holding back and keeping things in balance. It's about controlling our passions so they don't overwhelm us.

Because we usually associate it with over-eating, we think of gluttony as a minor sin. In reality, gluttony impacts many areas of life that have nothing to do with food, and often in ways that are astonishingly destructive. What begins as a harmless amusement can morph into an unhealthy fixation. What we do just to relax and take the edge off can become an all-consuming passion – one that causes us to sacrifice the things in our life that are truly precious, whether it's our health, our families, our children, our ministry with others, or our relationship with God. We all know someone whose life has been ruined by an addiction to alcohol, or pills, or sex.

I know several people whose careers were nearly destroyed because of their fixation on video games. One of them was regularly playing an online, world-wide game for nearly seven hours a day at his desk. One of his children later became addicted to gaming.

I know another man here in LA who was so obsessed with his health that he was going to the gym to lift weights for two or three hours a day. Partly because of his use of steroids, he eventually developed all kinds of debilitating muscle problems. At one point could barely get out of bed. Soon after that, his marriage broke up and he lost all contact with his children. His wife has remarried and is living in Texas.

Many of us have completely lost control of our money. In our consumer-oriented society where credit is so readily available, we're constantly tempted to spend more than we make. The rewards of financial gluttony can be wonderful, and they can be protracted for a long, long time. When business leaders and politicians and ordinary citizens are all spending money they don't have, the party can go on for years. But, as we've learned in recent years, it can't go on forever. Eventually the liquor runs out, the cops show up, and everyone gets sent home or to jail with a splitting headache. As the poet Goethe observed, "Unlimited activity, of whatever kind, must end in bankruptcy."

Samson's core problem is one that millions of men struggle with every day. At every twist in his long saga, Samson feeds the fire of his lust. And what makes the Samson stories so powerful is that the narrator doesn't lecture us about the evils of illicit sex. Instead, he shows us how Samson is continually defeated and humiliated because of his sexual liaisons. The unspoken message to all of us who struggle in that area is that we're playing with fire.

A huge number of men are regularly viewing internet pornography, and many of them are becoming addicts. Every study of the subject points to that conclusion. One study that I saw recently was particularly alarming. An astonishing 47 percent of Christian adults said that pornography was a problem in their home.

New research is uncovering an even more alarming trend. Pornography addiction is now a large and growing problem among children in upper elementary school. We're only beginning to understand how an early porn addiction can affect a person's future, especially as it relates to family life and raising children. But we know this much: God is weeping for his kids. And it's our job as parents to teach our kids self-control. It's our relentless obligation as a church to teach them to avoid what God has forbidden.

What all of this tells us is that there's no such thing as a harmless dose of cyber-sex. Online pornography is every bit as addicting as pain pills or crack cocaine. Or more to the point, it can be just as destructive as an encounter with a prostitute or an extra-marital affair.

If we want to avoid the Samson syndrome, we have to gain control of our passions. But how do we do that? How do we escape the clutches of addiction? How do we put out the fire that's burning inside us? What was true for Samson is true for us: God is our strength and our salvation. The question is: Are we willing to let him in, and let him take control of our lives?

God wants us to lead happy, satisfied and productive lives. That's why he sent us his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. When we receive the Lord into our hearts, and we begin to obey him, God gives us his Spirit to encourage our spirits. Paul explains it like this:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for... the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

- Titus 2: 11-13

Paul goes on to explain, in one sentence, why God sent us his Son. He speaks of Jesus,

...who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

- Titus 2: 14

Paul is talking about what happens to us after we receive the free gift of salvation by putting our trust in Christ. The Lord begins to teach us self-control, and all the other Christ-like virtues. His goal, as the song says, is to change us from the inside out – to make us into people who do good not because we're *told* to do it, but because it's in our very *nature* to do it.

Paul isn't saying that we earn our salvation by learning to control ourselves. That would be a terrifying message for people like me who struggle every day to keep our appetites in check and our lives in balance. Instead of urging us to take control, he's telling us to *surrender* control to Christ. Only by his strength can we learn self-control.

That change that Paul describes is a work of God, but of course we also have a part to play. The change only happens as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. I love the way Richard Holloway makes the point.

God is waiting eagerly to respond with new strength to each little act of self-control, small disciplines of prayer, feeble searching after him. And his children shall be filled if they will only hunger and thirst after what he offers.

Like Samson, we try – and fail – and try again to put the Lord first. We struggle to say “No” to the world and “Yes” to God. And the Lord builds on our flawed and feeble efforts as he fulfills his plan for our lives. He changes us, sometimes in fits and starts, into people who resemble him. He makes us truly human, as *he* is truly human, so we can enjoy intimacy with him and live forever as God's children.

*God of Grace, your word tells us that we're slaves to sin. And when we're honest with ourselves, we see that it's true. We try to control our lust, our anger, our greed and our pride and we keep failing. Most of us can't even control our diet. We need strength from above. We need the power of your Spirit.*

*So we yield our lives to you, here and now. We open our hearts to you, Lord Jesus. Take control. Do your work in us and through us. Fulfill your dreams for our lives, and make us abundantly fruitful.*

*Amen.*