

Deeper Discoveries

Judges



Lesson 9: Judges 16

God's Gift of [Partial] Deliverance

Samson's story is filled with irony. No other deliverer in the Book of Judges matches his potential. Called prenatally by Yahweh, stirred as a youth by the Spirit of Yahweh, empowered with extraordinary gifts by Yahweh, and granted exceptional opportunities for heroism by Yahweh, the narrator devotes more attention to Samson than to any other deliverer. Despite all these advantages and this special attention, Samson accomplishes less on behalf of his people than any of his predecessors. Perhaps herein lies his significance. The distinctive feature of chaps. 14–16 is the narrator's preoccupation with the man's personal exploits. Though Samson is impressive as an individual, he turns out to be anything but a military hero. He never leads Israel out in battle; he never engages the Philistines in martial combat; he never experiences a military victory. All his accomplishments are personal; all his victories, private.

Within the context of the book the literary picture the narrator paints in chapter 13 is a relatively pleasant one. A decent (if not overly devout) couple experiences the joy of the birth of a son, miraculously conceived by a barren woman and destined by God for a special place in history. One may assume from the fact that the blessing of Yahweh was upon Samson that his parents took great care to uphold the Nazirite vow divinely imposed upon his mother during her pregnancy and then upon the boy in his youth. In due course, when he had grown, the Spirit of Yahweh began to stir the young man. Verses 24–25 hold out such hope, such promise.

But how different is the dream from the reality! In chapter 14, the author paints a literary picture of a self-centered and rebellious child. Outwardly he appears respectful of his parents, but at heart he is utterly calloused and corrupted. Inwardly he looks spiritual (the Spirit of Yahweh stirs him), but in his actions he brazenly violates his Nazirite status and fraternizes with the enemy. On the one hand, he is born and buried as a hero, but on the other he is a bandit, a trickster, and one who frivolously fritters away his extraordinary calling and gifts. (Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary)

If, like the rest of Scripture, the account of the twelfth judge's downfall is God speaking to the reader, we have to ask what he was saying through it to its original readers. They were certainly meant to see themselves in it. The question would have been, where? Often in their history, they must have been relieved to note that their ancestors in the days of Samson had been in very different circumstances from their own. They felt free, therefore, to wag their heads with sad disapproval over other people's follies. But if Samson represented Israel, and if the corporate sins of the nation were focused in this individual, it was much harder to avoid the implications. Israel's dubious relations with a seductive neighboring community were rephrased as one man's dubious relations with the seductive girl down the road, and in becoming personal, the lesson became universal and unavoidable.

Personally, Samson stands as a dreadful warning, the man of enormous potential who never grasped that the Spirit's call to holy discipline is even more important than the Spirit's gifts. But on the broader canvas, the plan of God goes inexorably on, and through Samson, tragic figure though he is, the Spirit of the Lord brings about the salvation of his people. He cannot, in the end, be like any other man, as he thought he would be once the secret of his strength was betrayed (16:7, 11, 13, 17). That is why he is said, twice and truly, to have 'judged' Israel; why he rightly appears in Hebrews 11; and why his birth and death really are a reflection, however dim, of that other birth and death centuries later. (Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges: Grace Abounding*)

16:1–3 The opening verse parallels 14:1. Samson went to a Philistine town and **saw** a woman. Like the history of Israel, the spiral in Samson's life is downwards. This time he did not want to marry her, he just wanted to sleep with her. **Gaza** was the most distant city of the Philistines from Samson's home, which symbolizes how far from God Samson had gone. When the Philistines heard that he was there, they surrounded the city and waited for him at the only exit, **the city gate**. Yet such was Samson's enormous strength that the Philistines were unable to trap him. His vast show of strength in uprooting the city gate and carrying it roughly forty miles uphill to the **mountain overlooking Hebron** heightens the irony of his subsequent weakness in the hands of a woman. (CSB SB)

16:17 As with his Timnite wife (14:15–17), Samson succumbs and reveals the truth. (NIV BSB)

16:18–21 The source of Samson's strength was ultimately the Lord. With the shaving of his hair, Samson's last Nazirite vow was broken and his strength left him. The Philistines humiliate Samson by blinding him and setting him to work grinding grain, work usually done by a slave or a woman. He suffers the consequences for the flippant revelation of his special giftedness and status with Yahweh. (NIV BSB)

16:21–22 Samson was carried off to exile in **Gaza**, the city of his earlier exploits in vv. 1–3. His eyes, which had caused so many of his problems, were removed by the Philistines, and his reduced strength was put to work in their service, grinding **grain**. In the midst of his hopeless situation, there was a ray of hope: **his hair began to grow back**. (CSB SB)

16:28–30 Samson demonstrated a measure of faith by calling upon God and believing that God could and would help him (cf. Heb. 11:32). However, Samson seems to have desired God's intervention more for personal revenge than for the protection of God's people. (ESV SB)

16:31 The main body of the book of Judges now ends, with a final editorial comment about Samson's judging. Samson, the last judge, had been empowered by God's Spirit, just as the first (Othniel) had been. However, much had happened in the interim. Samson and most of his predecessors certainly were not paragons of virtue. Yet, despite the generally poor examples of the judges themselves, God had worked to deliver Israel and to protect his own name and reputation. But the book's message is not yet played out. In the following chapters, the nation's apostasy sinks to even deeper levels, and the stage is set for the coming of a faithful king who will restore moral order. (ESV SB)