

FROM RUIN TO RESTORATION

Hebrews 11:32, Book of Judges

Good morning! In 2008, Will Smith starred in a blockbuster movie called Hancock. It is the story of a guy named John Hancock who is an unlikely superhero. He is an alcoholic who possesses superpowers, including flight, invulnerability, and superhuman strength. However, he causes more collateral damage than the criminals he's trying to stop. Unlike other fictional superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Spider-man or Captain America who instinctively understand that with great power comes great responsibility, Hancock is a reckless, irresponsible, inebriated jerk who disappoints and disenchants the citizens he is supposed to be protecting.

In other words, he's a lot like Samson. Samson was the original superhero. Blessed with ridiculous super-human strength, Samson was chosen by God as one of his divinely appointed judges and commissioned to save his people from the oppression of the Philistines. Like Hancock, however, Samson's weakness seemed to overshadow his strengths. Samson was a childish, womanizing brute and why God chose him is somewhat of a mystery. But he did. And somehow, somehow Samson managed to get his name listed among the greatest heroes of all time. In fact, he appears in the Bible's Hall of Faith. In Hebrews 11:32, and please open your Bibles to that verse, it says, "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,..." And you ask, he is included because of his strength? Of course not, it was because of his faith. Keep that in mind as we consider his life.

So, what can we learn from Samson's life? How can he be a model for us?

Probably, he is most known as having a wife named Delilah who caused his downfall but other than that and, of course, his superhuman strength, is there anything about him that we can like or admire?

We're on the fourth part of our series on "Journey to the Center of God's Will". We looked at Moses, then Ruth, then Daniel. We saw how faith, obedience, and a deep prayer life can make someone embark on a journey towards fulfilling God's purpose for his or her own life. Today, I'd like to talk about finding strength in God despite our weaknesses. Because it is a fact that sometimes we are our own best enemies. We struggle daily with temptations. We do things that we don't want to do. But, in the end, God is there to redeem us.

Today, I'd like to focus on things we need to avoid to not get derailed as we pursue God's will for our lives. So, get your pens and outlines and get ready as we look together at the fascinating life of Samson.

Samson's story is set during the period of the judges. His story begins in chapter 13 of the Book of Judges. Please turn to Judges 13. Judges is the sixth book in the Bible. This is what we read, "*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.*"

The story of Samson begins much like the story of the other judges of Israel. The nation was in misery because of the domination of a rival nation that was oppressing them. That nation was the Philistine nation. Interestingly, the word Philistine is where we get our word "Palestinian," so this story, and the clash between these two nations, is as modern as today. The Philistines were originally from the area now known as Greece and the islands of the Aegean Sea. They were forced out of their homeland around 1200 B.C. and decided to look for a new home. They initially attacked Egypt, but were repulsed. From there they went further up the coast to what is now Israel and settled along the sea.

They were a seafaring people and fierce fighters. They had become skilled in the technology of making iron and used it to make chariots and swords. It gave them a distinct military advantage. The Israelites were so subjugated that they even had to go to the Philistines to get their axes, plows and other farm implements sharpened. Blacksmiths were not allowed in Israel, and no one was allowed to own a sword.

The interesting thing is that this is the one place in the book of Judges where we do not read about the people crying out to God to deliver them from their oppression. That is primarily due to the most important weapon the Philistines used: intermarriage. The Philistines conquered their enemies by assimilating them. They enticed them with their gods. They gave their daughters to them in marriage. They were patient as they watched the religion and culture of Israel slowly disappear as they became more and more one with the Philistines. Israel had actually become comfortable with this silent form of enslavement which had continued for forty years.

For this reason, God had to break through. He miraculously appeared to Manoah and his wife and told them that they were about to have a son. God's purpose was that his Spirit would be upon Samson so that he would deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. God, in his mercy, was going to deliver Israel even before she asked.

The instructions from God on how to raise the boy were that he was to be a Nazirite his entire life. We first read about being a Nazirite in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. The word Nazirite comes from the Hebrew verb nazir: "to separate, consecrate, or abstain." Nazirites made a special vow to the Lord, observing three main practices: 1. They were not to drink wine or other fermented drink. They could not even eat any part of the grape. 2. They were to grow their hair without cutting it. 3. They were not to touch a dead person or even go near a corpse.

This was a special type of vow meant to be temporary for a specific purpose, but in Samson's case it was to be a life-long observance.

God had a special purpose for Samson's life. He had plans to use him in a powerful way. God was not only going to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines, he was going to purge them of the Philistine gods. But, as you know, Samson's life was a huge disappointment. He never really fulfilled God's plan for his life. He was wild and uncontrollable.

In spite of the outward sign of his long hair, there was no other indication that Samson was a man of God. He had gone through the ritual of dedication, but it had never become a reality in his life. The Spirit of God came upon him, but it never seemed to affect the way he lived. Samson walked down the road to ruin and never seemed to see the signs along the highway.

What was Samson's problem? What caused him to self-destruct in such a disappointing way? There were several reasons, but the first of them was,

1. He loved the world.

After the birth of Samson, the first words we read about him are: "Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, 'I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife'" (Judges 14:1-2). His first recorded act was an act of disobedience. His mother and father were against it, and God had forbidden intermarriage with the other nations. The Lord had warned about this back in the book of Deuteronomy saying, "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). But Samson was thinking only of himself.

The very people that God had warned about, the very people who were oppressing Israel, the very people that would take Samson's life, are the very people he wants to be with. His relationship with the Philistines was marked by bitter events, but he did not seem to be able to keep away from them.

A lot of people today are attracted to the wrong kind of people, even though the relationships are destructive.

Samson was called to live a life of separation, but he was living a life of fraternization — he had befriended the enemy. How often is this the case of people who call themselves Christian? They are called to live lives of separation, but they are still friends of the enemy. The idea here is not that of separating yourself so that you never associate with the world, but that you not become friends of the world and influenced by it. It is not a separation from the world, but a separation to God. Jesus prayed for us saying, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified" (John 17:15-19). Paul said, "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world" (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). We are not to live in monasteries, but we are to keep ourselves from being like the world and corrupted by it.

When you are impressed by the things that the other people of the world are impressed with: wealth, fame, position and power, then you have been corrupted by the world. We all have friends who are not Christians, but if they are having more influence on us than we are on them, then we have been corrupted by the world.

If there is no difference between your behavior and the behavior of those who do not know Christ, then you have been corrupted by the world. The Bible says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15-16). James puts it more forcefully when he says, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

We are not to be like the enemy and his followers, we are to be like God, and there should be a stark contrast. Jesus said that we were to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He says, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

The second thing that Samson did to self-destruct was

2. He wasted his strength.

The problem with Samson was that his life was such a disappointment. It was a life of missed opportunities and wasted effort. What was God’s purpose for Samson? God intended to use him to deliver Israel from the oppression and the corrupting influence of the Philistines. But outside of a few flourishes, Samson never lived out God’s dream for him. He fought a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. Samson secretly raided a Philistine town. But other than that, he never really delivered Israel.

At the end of the story of most of the other judges it tells how many years of peace the nation enjoyed because of their leadership. Those words are missing at the end of Samson’s biography. A man of Samson’s ability and strength could have led Israel to a permanent victory over the Philistines.

The interesting thing about this story is that all the other judges of Israel mustered armies to fight Israel's enemies, but not Samson. Anything he did, he did by himself. He was deluded by his strength and thought he did not need anyone else. He was sure he could do it on his own. But his strength was wasted on petulant schemes of revenge and self-serving objectives. Jesus says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). God had given Samson great physical strength, but there was very little return of God's investment. By way of contrast, Gideon, another judge who ruled before Samson, did not have nearly the strength of Samson, but he did far more. He fought more battles and gave Israel peace for forty years. Strength, money and looks are no substitute for obedience and character.

There is no better illustration of this than what happened after the airing of the reality show "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?" on February 15, 2000. The special was structured as a beauty pageant-like competition in which 50 women (one from each U.S. state) competed to be the bride of an unknown multimillionaire, whom they did not see except in silhouette. The competition included a swimwear portion and a question-and-answer portion. The millionaire, ultimately revealed as Rick Rockwell, selected Darva Conger of California and married her on the spot. In addition to the television wedding, Conger also received a three-carat (600-mg) diamond ring and more than \$100,000 in prizes. But it was all a waste of money. You know why? Because questions were raised whether Rockwell was actually a millionaire. He had an ordinary-looking home which had a discarded toilet in the backyard. His former girlfriend had filed a restraining order against him for domestic violence in 1991. Worse, his real last name was not Rockwell. Conger quickly expressed regret for taking part in the show. After returning from their honeymoon in Barbados, she told Good Morning America,

"I am not married to him. In my heart I'm not married to him." Conger said that the marriage was not consummated, and they stayed in separate cabins during their honeymoon. After the honeymoon, Conger sought an annulment.

That's what happens when we become self-absorbed, when we are preoccupied with satisfying our selfish desires.

Samson's strength was given to him so that he could lead an army and give courage to the other troops. His strength was meant to bring relief from oppression. His strength was meant to enable Israel to worship her God with freedom. His strength was meant to give Israel back her self-respect. But none of that happened. He used his strength to carry off the gates of a city in order to escape, after his enemies found out he was visiting a Philistine prostitute there. He used his strength to pay a gambling debt after challenging the Philistines with a riddle. He used his strength to fight the Philistines after they came to kill him for setting their wheat fields on fire. But he never rallied the warriors of Israel to join him in battle against the enemy.

No one was encouraged by these little skirmishes of his. We actually are told more about his sexual exploits than his military adventures. He was sort of a biblical Evander Holyfield. Holyfield is one of the few men in the world who could beat Mike Tyson. Before their famous heavyweight fight, Holyfield was shown in his dressing room singing Christian praise and worship songs. He was a part of a good church and frequently talked about his faith. But reports came out afterwards that he had fathered several children by other women while being married to his wife. He is a man of great strength whose life is out of control. He is built like a mountain, but he is too weak to control his own passions. On his web site he quotes the Scripture that says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). But it is wasted and unused strength — a pathetic, self-centered, misuse of the gift of God.

But there are many people like this. It is not just physical strength, it is the power of prestige, the power of money and the power of influence that is wasted. Their lives could be powerfully used by God, but they are so wrapped up in self-centered living and selfish purposes that their strength is wasted. Their lives are little skirmishes rather than the great victories that God has called them to. They have wasted their strength on the world and the pursuit of pleasure rather than making their lives count for God. They are busy with everything but the things of God.

The final point is this: Samson self-destructed because:

3. He was deluded by pride.

The most memorable story about Samson is his tryst with Delilah. He is enormously attracted to Delilah, even though it is a dangerous relationship. She tempts him to give up the secret to his strength, and he still stays in the relationship. After constant harping, Samson finally gives her an answer. It is the wrong one, but he gives her an answer. When she starts in again, he tells her that if his hair is woven in a loom that he will be as weak as any other man. But when the Philistines come for him he breaks free and demonstrates his strength once again. He is getting closer to the truth, but he is still toying with her as well as his future. Finally, he tells her that if his hair is cut he will be as weak as any other man. And then, as she sings him to sleep on her lap, she cuts off his hair and lets in the men who will gouge out his eyes and take him to a Philistine prison. This is just the last in a series of compromises in Samson's life. He broke his vow of not touching wine at his wedding feast. He was not to touch anything dead, but he took honey from the carcass of a lion and used the jawbone of a donkey to fight the Philistines. Now the last vestige of his vow is gone. It was not the cutting of his hair that made Samson weak, it was the breaking of his vow and relationship with God that made him weak.

Some people wonder why he told her about shaving off his hair, when he knew from experience that she would try cutting it off to see if it were true. It seems so foolish. We know the result, but I believe he told her about his hair because he did not really believe it would affect him. Nothing else had affected him. He had broken his vow in other ways and was still as strong as ever. He really believed that his strength was his and not from the Lord. He failed to understand his dependence on God and how far down the road to ruin he had gone.

This is the road to ruin. You begin by making a single compromise and you are a little surprised that nothing happens. It is easier the second and third time, and even though there might be a few problems they don't seem that serious. You can say that the problems were caused by other people. But the day comes when you have made one too many compromises, and without even realizing it, you find that your strength is gone. The enemy has you in his clutches. You have stayed too close to the enemy and strayed too far from God. You have wasted your strength and deluded yourself with pride, and all at once you find yourself in a prison of your own making. Blinded by the compromises you have made you find yourself disgraced, debased and enslaved.

Samson did not escape the consequences of his own sin. As we know, he succumbed to the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—and bore the full earthly consequences of those sins. Judges 16:21 records what happened to Samson at the end of his life: "But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house." Those eyes that had lusted were gouged out. The flesh that had caused him to stumble was bound with fetters of brass. And the pride that had so often troubled him was finally humbled, so that Samson became a grinder in the prison house.

But in the end of his life, even as the Philistines were putting Samson to death, God enabled Samson to perform his greatest feat of strength ever, and used that tragic situation to bring about the greatest victory of Samson's life.

This is the great lesson of Samson: God is sovereign, and He can use even our most pathetic failures to bring about His greatest victories. All the credit for victory goes to Him, and all the blame for failure goes to us. Samson stands as a great illustration of this truth, and a reminder that God is working all things together for good—our good as well as his. And even when we fail Him, he remains faithful. He cannot deny Himself.

Ultimately, these truths point us to the gospel, by reminding us that we need salvation from our own sin; that God is a redeemer; that He is sovereign over evil; that no one can thwart his ultimate purposes; and that He can use even the most sinister evil in the universe to accomplish eternal good.

That is precisely what happened at the crucifixion of Christ—the most evil act ever perpetrated by the hands of wicked men. And yet through the cross of Christ God Himself atoned for our sin. The guilt of others' sin was laid on Christ and He suffered for it, so that His righteousness might be given to those who believe.

And those who do believe are granted forgiveness, cleansing, and eternal life. In Jesus own words, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." That's John 5:24, and that very promise is the reason why despite his many failures, Samson ended up in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith rather than in the flames of eternal judgment. He believed. He trusted God for deliverance. When disciplined, he repented, and though he still bore the earthly consequences of his sin, he was delivered from the eternal judgment he deserved.

That same promise holds true for you and me and anyone who feels the guilt of sin, turns from the love of sin, and trusts in Jesus as Lord and savior. Romans 10:13: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

The dying moments of Samson's life are a perfect illustration of that promise. Judges 16:28: "Then Samson called to the LORD and said, 'O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once.'" God heard and delivered him, not from the temporal consequences of sin, but from eternal judgment.

If you're not a believer, or you don't know if you have been redeemed, you too can renounce your sin, call on the name of the Lord, and claim that promise of salvation. There's no ceremony or formal prayer you need to learn. You just need to believe in Him with a whole heart, confess that you are a hopeless sinner, unable to save yourself, and seek His grace. You can do that right where you sit.