

Who was Samson in the Bible?

Samson's life is one of contradiction. He was a man of great physical strength yet displayed great moral weakness. He was a judge for 20 years and "a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth" (Judges 13:5), yet he continually broke the rules of a Nazirite. The Spirit of God came upon him many times, giving him great strength to fight the Philistines, the oppressors of the Israelites. This in spite of the fact that Samson was a womanizer and a vengeful man. Samson's life illustrates the necessity of saying "no" to fleshly temptation, God's use of even flawed, sinful men to accomplish His will, the consequences of sin, and the mercy of God.

The life of Samson - his birth

Samson's story begins with the announcement of his birth. A Danite man named Manoah was married to a woman who was unable to have children (Judges 13:2). The angel of the Lord visited the wife and told her, "You are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son" (verse 3). The angel also commanded her to follow the rules of the Nazirite during her pregnancy—no fermented drink, nothing made of grapes, and no non-kosher food. The woman told Manoah, and he prayed that the angel would pay them another visit and give more information about their future son's upbringing (verse 8).

God answered Manoah's prayer. The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife again, and she ran to get her husband. The angel then repeated his message to Manoah, who asked the angel's name. In response, the angel said, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding" (Judges 13:18). Manoah then sacrificed a goat on a rock, and "as the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame" (verse 20). Only then did Manoah realize whom they had been speaking to: "'We are doomed to die!' he said to his wife. 'We have seen God!'" (verse 22).

True to God's word, Manoah's wife gave birth to a son, and they named him Samson. The Lord blessed him as he grew.

The life of Samson - from temptation to sin

The book of Judges then jumps ahead in Samson's story to his search for a wife. He wanted to marry a Philistine woman despite his parents' protests and in violation of God's law against intermarriage with pagans. His mother and father accompanied Samson to Timnah to make the arrangements for his betrothal. On the way a lion attacked Samson. "The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands" (Judges 14:6). Later, Samson passed by the carcass of the lion and found it filled with a honeycomb, which he ate. This was a violation of the Nazirite law: "Throughout the period of his separation to the Lord he must not go near a dead body" (Numbers 6:6). Samson seemed to know he had done wrong because, when he gave the honey to his parents, "he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass" (Judges 14:9).

The customary wedding feast described in Judges 14:10 was, literally, a "drinking party." As a Nazirite, Samson was to "abstain from wine and other fermented drink" (Numbers 6:3). Although the author of Judges does not indicate whether Samson personally drank wine or fermented drink at this feast, it was yet another occasion that led to sin. During the feast, Samson offered a wager: whoever could solve his riddle would receive thirty changes of clothes and thirty linen garments (Judges 14:12). Samson's new Philistine wife betrayed him and gave the answer to his riddle to her countrymen. Furious, Samson killed thirty Philistines and gave their possessions to those who had "solved" the riddle. Samson's wife was then given to another man. The whole sordid

matter was used by God for His purposes: “This was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines” (verse 4).

The life of Samson - God will use even flawed, sinful men to accomplish His will

Samson willingly went into situations that led to sin, but, each time, God used him for His glory. Even our sin cannot prevent God’s sovereign will from coming to pass. Samson, full of anger and vengeance, swore to “get even with the Philistines” for stealing his wife from him (Judges 15:3). He burned the Philistines’ crops (verses 4-5) and, later, after the Philistines murdered his wife, “attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them” (verse 8).

Samson hid out in Judah for a while, but the Judeans, worried that Samson was worsening their situation with the Philistines, tied him up and delivered him to the enemy (Judges 15:8-13). As the Philistines approached their incapacitated prey, “the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon [Samson]. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands” (verse 14). Samson picked up the jawbone of a donkey and slaughtered 1,000 Philistines with it (verse 15).

In Gaza, Samson hired a prostitute. That night, the people of Gaza learned that Samson was in their city, and they lay in wait to kill him at dawn. Samson escaped by rising in the middle of the night, when “he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron” (Judges 16:3).

The life of Samson - sin has consequences

God’s purpose of defeating the Philistines was advancing through Samson, but Samson was

still held accountable for his sin, and he experienced consequences for his foolishness and disobedience. Samson met and fell in love with a Philistine named Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines bribed Delilah to discover the secret of Samson's strength and betray him into their hands (Judges 16:5). Delilah began to beg Samson to know the secret of his strength. After telling her some lies, Samson finally revealed that his strength was due to his separation to the Lord; specifically, the fact that his hair had never been cut (see Numbers 6:5). Delilah informed the Philistine rulers of Samson's secret and then waited until Samson was asleep, and she called for someone to come shave his head. She woke him with a cry: "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" (verse 20). Samson stood up to fight, "but he did not know that the LORD had left him" (verse 20).

Samson's continual, willful disobedience had reached an end. He had grown confident in his strength to the point that he felt he could spurn any law; it seems he finally reached the point that he thought he did not need God. As a result, "the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison" (Judges 16:21). Samson finally had to face the consequences of his actions.

The life of Samson - God is merciful

The Philistines thought they would celebrate their great victory over Samson, and the rulers assembled in the temple of their god, Dagon, to praise him for delivering Samson into their power (Judges 16:23). During the festivities, they brought Samson from prison to entertain them. Leaning against the support pillars of the pagan temple, "Samson prayed to the LORD, 'O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes'" (verse 28). God mercifully granted Samson's request. Samson "pushed with all his might,

and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it” (verse 30). Samson killed more when he died—about 3,000 Philistines—than while he lived.

Samson was a man of faith—he is mentioned in the Bible’s “Hall of Faith” (Hebrews 11:32). At the same time, he was a man of the flesh, and his many mistakes serve as a warning to those who would play with fire and expect not to get burned. The life of Samson shows us the importance of relying on God’s strength, not our own power; following God’s will, not our own stubbornness; and seeking the Lord’s wisdom, not our own understanding.