

Introduction

Many movies have anti-heroes rather than straightforward heroes. These are heroes of a story who are compromised in some way. Rather than shining examples of morality and integrity, for example, they are morally compromised. Their motivation for doing the right thing may be entirely selfish. Sometimes an anti-hero is only a hero accidentally. In the “Pirates of the Caribbean” series, for example, Captain Jack Sparrow—a thieving pirate—is motivated by rum and by women. While pursuing his own selfish ends he frequently functions as the hero of the story—the *anti*hero of the story.

Han Solo is another anti-hero. At end of “A New Hope” Princess Leia awards him the Medal of Bravery while at the Great Temple on Yavin 4 for his heroic actions in helping to destroy the Death Star. Han Solo was not trying to be a hero. He originally agreed to help Luke Skywalker because he was promised money. Han was a smuggler who owed a debt to Jabba the Hutt and desperately needed money to pay that debt. Han was truly an anti-hero. He fought for the Rebel Alliance but his motives were entirely selfish. To be fair, he does show up to fight again *after* he got paid, but the point stands. He was no hero motivated by what is right. We see this in the next movie when he argues with Leia on Hoth and threatens to bail once again.

Many of Israel’s judges are anti-heroes. As the story progresses, they become increasingly anti-hero. They began with Othniel, who was faithful to do what he was called to do. By the time we get to Jephthah, however, we’re left questioning whether they even believed in the Lord, were it not for Hebrews 11. The author ends his list of judges with Samson, holy and consecrated to the Lord from birth, whose birth was itself a miracle from the Lord. Samson is the most gifted and promising judge of all, empowered by the Holy Spirit, yet never seeks to do the right thing by delivering Israel. He never seeks to raise an army to defeat the Philistines. With all his gifts and abilities and resources at his disposal, he seeks only petty, personal revenge.

This morning we will see God is calling us to something more, something greater—something far more *ordinary* than raising an army. We’re in Judges 15.

Jdgs 15:1 After some days, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat. And he said, “I will go in to my wife in the chamber.” But her father would not allow him to go in. ² And her father said, “I really thought that you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please take her instead.” ³ And Samson said to them, “This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm.” ⁴ So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. ⁵ And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well

as the olive orchards. ⁶ Then the Philistines said, “Who has done this?” And they said, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.” And the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire. ⁷ And Samson said to them, “If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit.” ⁸ And he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow, and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

Samson

As we’ve seen, Samson is the ideal Israelite. He is everything Israel was and was supposed to be. Both were set apart because God chose to set them apart. God appeared to Abraham and promised him a nation would descend from him. God appeared to Samson’s mother and promised her a son. Both offspring would be special in God’s eyes.

Both Israel and Samson were to live differently than those around them. Israel had the law of Moses, which insisted on a variety of things, including ritual purity. Samson’s rule for living was more strict. He could not drink wine or any other grape product, could not cut his hair, and could not touch a dead body. In this way both Israel and Samson were to show themselves to be different for having been chosen by God for a special purpose. Israel represented God to the nations and Samson represented God to his fellow Israelites.

Both Israel and Samson failed to live differently than those around them. Rather than shine the light of the Lord in the world, they cast a dark shadow, a mere hint of the Lord. In many ways Israel became Canaanized and Samson truly became the ideal Israelite. He was everything Israel was, and more.

In chapter 13 we read of his birth narrative. His mother was barren yet God was planning to rescue Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. From birth and for his entire life Samson would be under a Nazirite vow and therefore set apart to be holy to the Lord. We read this in chapter 13:

Jdgs 13:24 And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the LORD blessed him. ²⁵ And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Judges 13:24–25

The Lord was with Samson, blessing him. The Spirit of the Lord began to stir him. That is, Samson began to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to begin his task of delivering Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. The stage is set! Samson is consecrated to the Lord. Samson is blessed by the Lord. Samson is being moved by the Holy Spirit. Samson is, as we will see, empowered by the Lord. He is gifted with divine power to do the work of delivering Israel from the Philistines.

With the stage set, what is the first thing Samson does? What does Samson, the consecrated, called, and divinely-empowered deliverer do? He sees a beautiful woman and demands his parents get her for him, to be his wife. They must get her, he says, “because she is right in my eyes”. She looks good, y’all. She’s beautiful. Attractive. Desirable.

Through this we saw last week the Lord was stirring up a provocation between the Philistines and the Israelites. God is seeking opportunity to bring deliverance and since the Philistines are obstinately opposed to the Lord and his people, they must be met in armed conflict. Remember, the conquest of Canaan was not about genocide; rather, it was about removing idolatry from the land. The Philistines are welcome to remain in the land, so long as they get rid of their idolatry. Since they will not, they must be defeated in battle and Israel must destroy their altars and carved images and idols.

Samson can only think of his appetites. He sees a woman who is an idolater and demands she be given to him, as if she were a thing that exists for his pleasure. Dan showed us last week that while Samson was a Nazirite, holy and consecrated to the Lord and forbidden to touch a dead body, his appetite led him to scrape honey out of an animal carcass before spending seven days at a drinking festival. Then, after his bride talked him into losing a foolish bet, he used the divine calling and divine empowerment given him by God himself to murder 30 men and steal their stuff so as to pay off his gambling debt.

After this Samson doesn't go on his honeymoon. Instead, he returns to his father's home, sulking.

Honeymoon

In our text Samson returns to his bride. After some time has passed, whether a few days or a few weeks we don't know, he returns to Timnah to claim his wife. We know it was the time of the wheat harvest. Her father, however, meets him at the door and will not let him go inside.

For one thing, Dad knows why Samson is there. The language used is highly suggestive of Samson's real motive. He is not there because he loves his wife. He is not there because he misses her. His own words reveal his true motive: "I will go in to my wife in the chamber." We saw last week that he called her—his brand new bride—his heifer. During the week-long wedding reception, Samson called his beautiful bride his *heifer*.

Listen up, men. If you're married or planning to get married, listen closely: there are many terms one can use as a term of endearment. Honey. Sweetie. Beloved. Sunshine. Soulmate. Babe. Angel. Sweetheart. You can even get all biblical and say things that are strange to us. The Song of Solomon says, "Your neck is like an ivory tower". Aight. Cool. I promise you this, though, there is no language on earth, no culture in history for which "heifer" is a term of endearment. No bride, no wife, no *woman* anywhere in the world or at any point in human history wants to be called a *heifer*. As Daniel Block put it so succinctly with his incredible expertise in the Hebrew language, but even more, with his common sense,

Samson's reference to his new bride as "his heifer" is as disparaging in the Hebrew as it is in English.

Daniel I. Block, ZIBBC

A heifer is a cow. Not all cows are heifers, but all cows were once heifers. A heifer is a cow that has not yet given birth. Think "virgin cow". It is a very utilitarian way to refer to a cow. A cow serves a purpose: to produce more cows and to produce milk, but producing milk isn't possible until the cow has had a calf. Samson is suggesting his wife, chosen by him

entirely because of her external beauty and sexual attractiveness, has exactly one function. She exists to feed his appetite. She is little more than a possession, a thing to him.

Samson shows up at her father's house with one thing in mind. He has a young goat to give her, which one scholar says was the ancient equivalent of a box of chocolates. Her father breaks the news to him. He thought when Samson stormed off he was unwilling to receive her as his wife. They had not consummated the marriage yet so her father gave her to Samson's buddy. Not much time has passed, mind you. He just spent all that money on a week-long wedding reception. He does not want to spend all that money *again*, so apparently, shortly after Samson runs back home to dad's house, he gives his daughter to a different man.

In an attempt to forestall Samson's anger, he offers his younger daughter to Samson. She's available. Even more importantly, she's *prettier* than her sister!

In the ancient world marriages were usually arranged. Rarely would an Israelite father agree to a marriage contract for his daughter without her consent. The idea that a young woman showed up at her wedding ceremony and met her husband for the first time isn't accurate. Among the Philistines, however, we see a father offer his daughter as a *consolation prize*. Sorry, Samson! The heifer you chose isn't available, but I have an even better heifer for you!

Instead of a honeymoon, Samson realizes he is single. His response in verse 3 is interesting. He says to her father, "*This time* I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm." This time? Remember how he responded to losing the bet over the riddle: he murdered 30 men and took their clothing. When he says he will be innocent *this time* he acknowledges he was not innocent *that time*.

Verse 4 moves rapidly. Samson simply goes out and catches 300 foxes. Foxes are extremely secretive animals and prefer to remain unseen by humans. The underlying Hebrew word may mean "jackal", but they are also elusive and difficult to catch. How does one simply catch 300 wild animals that are elusive and unwilling to be caught? For Samson, this seems to be no big deal. He refers to such a day as, you know, *Tuesday*.

Samson is that guy who is good at everything. There is no sport that he won't excel at. He's the kid in gym class who always gets picked first. The truth is no one fights like Samson, or douses lights like Samson. In a wrestling match no one bites like Samson. There's no one as burly and brawny—he's got biceps to spare. Not a bit of him's scraggly or scrawny and every last inch of him is covered with hair. No one hits like Samson, or matches wits like Samson. In a spitting match, nobody spits like Samson.

Rather than satisfying his appetite by visiting his wife in Timnah, Samson has a new appetite burning in his gut: an appetite for revenge.

Personal Vengeance

We must remember God is seeking an opportunity for Israel to stand up to the Philistines, that God may give them victory over them. God seeks to deliver his people. His default mode is to bless, and the only thing that can interrupt this desire to bless is sin. Enter Samson, the *ideal Israelite*.

His wife's father is the one who chose to give her to another man before Samson could consummate his marriage with her. Her father is the one who wronged him but Samson

seeks personal revenge against all Philistia. The Philistine's economy was agrarian. Their economy was largely based on crops. They certainly had some flocks and herds, but nothing like the Israelites had. They were not pastoral at all. They were far more culturally and technologically advanced than the Israelites. Their economy was largely based on farming so their primary god was Dagon, the god of grain.

Samson takes these 300 foxes and tied them together, two at a time, with a torch tied to their tails. He did this because a single fox might simply run in a straight line so fast that it put out the torch. By tying two foxes together, they would run but in different directions, resulting in a slower movement that was more erratic. He then set them loose in the standing grain of the Philistines.

Standing grain refers to grain that is still in the field. It has not been cut or harvested yet. Harvested grain—the “stacked grain”—has been harvested but not yet collected from the field. Samson released these pairs of foxes into these fields to burn up all the grain. By tying them together as he did he ensured maximum destruction to the crops. He also tortured these foxes to death.

The grain wasn't enough. He also released some of the foxes into their olive orchards. This was their economy! They survived largely through their crops and their orchards. They did not have the flocks and herds that the Israelites had. This was their food for the coming year, and a source of income for purchasing beef and lamb from other nations around them. This was also their *seed* for the coming year, which means they may not have enough to plant the following year. This would impact their economy for years to come, and would cause great suffering and hunger among them.

This is not the deliverance God raised up Samson to pursue. This is Samson's personal vengeance. One appetite was not satisfied so he sought to quench it with vengeance. When the Philistines realized what was happening they asked who did it. Who was the culprit? They quickly learned it was Samson. They don't go after Samson, however. That would be too risky! Evidently Samson's reputation, built largely on his own physical strength but also the divine empowerment given him by God, has given them pause. Nowhere are we told Samson took a small army with him when he killed the 30 men to pay his debt. He did that single-handedly.

Like the kid in gym class who is a phenomenal athlete, the one who injures and maims in dodgeball, who can't be stopped in basketball, who is untouchable in football—you know the kid. No one ever tried to fight that kid. The athleticism and strength and speed and agility that made him such a great athlete translated directly into the ability to fight. You just don't mess with that guy—even when he messes with you.

Rather than enter into a conflict with Samson, they blame his father-in-law. They seem to recognize the injustice of his act in giving his daughter to another man. They fail to recognize their own injustice, however, for they do what they threatened to do at the wedding feast. They burned her and her father with fire. Their own people! Out of anger and rage against Samson, they murdered two people who weren't directly at fault, just as Samson brought great harm to the whole of the Philistines for what one man did.

We see here a cycle of violence and injustice. We see Samson set apart as the ideal Israelite, and he looked just like all Israel, only Israel looked like the nations around them. Rather than living the consecrated lives they were called to live, they lived like the Canaanites.

When he learns they murdered her and her father, Samson vows revenge. He promises he won't stop until his appetite for destruction is satisfied. Verse 8 says "he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow". That expression is an idiom that means something like "with great violence and ferocity". Once again Samson engages in battle single-handedly and defeats the Philistines—but only as an act of personal revenge.

In verse 8 he leaves the area in victory and hides in the cleft of the rock of Etam. The exact location is irrelevant. What matters is Samson, chosen by God to deliver his people, set apart from birth as a Nazirite, consecrated to God for his entire life, divinely empowered by the Holy Spirit to deliver his people, simply retires to live by himself. He has done what he wanted to do, and that was enough for him. Samson has no interest in raising an army and delivering Israel from its oppressor. Instead, despite the obviousness of the outcome of any battle with the Philistines, given the Lord's involvement, the hunter hides from those he should be hunting.

God Binds Himself to Our Decisions

What I find so striking in the story of Samson, from beginning to end, is the Lord's power granted to him in order to accomplish the mission God gave him. That mission was, of course, to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. If the Lord's power rushes upon him in such a way that he can single-handedly destroy 30 Philistines, what might he be able to do with an army to lead into battle?

There seems to be nothing Samson cannot do. When he determines to do a thing, nothing seems to be able to stop him. Challenge 30 dudes to hand-to-hand combat? Alright. Do the impossible by catching 300 foxes? No biggie. Got beef with a bunch of men who killed his wife and father-in-law? Meh. Attack with ferocity. We'll see next week that when handed over to the entire Philistine army he will simply pick up a jawbone from a dead donkey and kill a thousand of them.

What is striking is God's divine empowerment of Samson seems to be a general gift given to him, one that can be used for its intended purpose—or any other purpose Samson deems appropriate. The Spirit rushing upon him is connected directly to his *calling* not to his actual activity. Think of that. He's given divine power by the Spirit of God and though he chooses to use that power for his own selfish purposes, that power remains with him.

When God created man and woman in his image they received delegated authority. They had authority to do and to act. That authority was supposed to be used to honor the Lord rather than be used for selfish purposes. They chose evil rather than what is good. This is what is happening with Samson. As one who is set apart, consecrated to the Lord, empowered by the Lord, he chooses to use his strength and ability, his divinely delegated authority to wield God's power, for his own selfish purposes rather than fulfill his calling by using that power to deliver Israel.

When Samson struck down 30 men, he was supposed to be seeking Israel's deliverance, not seeking resources to pay his debt. When he struck the men who murdered his wife, he was supposed to be pursuing Israel's deliverance, not pursuing personal vengeance. The power he used to accomplish these things was power given him by God. In a real sense he was using God's power and authority for evil.

God often chooses to bind himself to our decisions. He grants power and authority and when we misuse that power and authority he doesn't always interrupt us by stopping us. Think of it this way: every breath you take is a gift from God. Every single heart beat is a gift from God. It is God's power that sustains your life every moment of every day. The energy coursing through your body is energy given by God.

How often do we use our breath, our heart beats, our efforts for purposes contrary to God? What did James say?

Jam 3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.
James 3:10

We use the mouth God has given us to utter curses rather than blessings. We, too, have received delegated power and delegated authority and God often binds himself to our decisions. That is, God often allows our decisions to play out.

One significant difference between us and Samson is the amount of delegated power and authority. Samson had considerably greater power and authority and therefore had considerably greater ability to bring harm. This is like many of Israel's kings. Because of their power and authority the evil they committed was magnified, though it was no more evil than the ordinary Israelite's idolatry. The impact was simply far greater.

Application

Some sermons are easier to write than others. I've shared with you a number of times what I look for when studying a text. First, what does the text say? I can't make stuff up so I have to say what the text is saying. I can't read into a text what I want it to say so I must show you what it's actually saying. However, a text can say multiple things so I must also ask, what is God saying to these people through the things this text says?

The easy answer to this text would be to say don't be a Samson! Don't be like Samson! Samson is an anti-hero. He's morally compromised. Don't be morally compromised. Ask yourself, "Is this something Samson would do?" If it is, don't do that thing. Don't be a man or a woman of violence. Don't be controlled by your desires. Don't be motivated by petty revenge. Don't make foolish bets over stupid riddles. Follow the rules. Et cetera.

The reality is some of us once lived like Samson. We embraced all our desires. We indulged in what we wanted to do. We used the gifts and abilities and life God has given us for our own selfish ends. Many of us can point to things in our life and admit, "Yeah, that's something Samson would have done." Or maybe actually did. Many of us lived like the world, a life of self-indulgence and selfishness, living for pleasure and whatever feels good.

Many of us, however, have a very different experience. Some of you grew up in an ideal Christian home, with a Christian Mom and a Christian Dad. Maybe you went to a Christian school or a Christian college—or both. You might have made a "Purity Pledge" when you were 16 and waited for sex until marriage. You set aside time every morning for your "private time" as you read your Bible and say your perfunctory prayers. You watch your language closely so you don't swear. And you're as much like Samson as the previous group.

The problem for us is we think of the Christian life, the life of following Christ, as a life of sin management. So long as I keep sin mostly under control and so long as I feel really bad when I do give in to temptation, then I'm being a good Christian. We're doing the same thing as Samson, only instead of indulging our sin, we fight against our sin in our own way and in our own strength.

Samson's problem was he relied entirely on himself. Yes, Samson was empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moved him and rushed upon him. He drew on the power of the Spirit to do the things he did, while not realizing every breath was a gift from the Lord. Every heartbeat was a gift from the Lord. The incredible strength and power he really did possess was a gift from the Lord. Because he was relying on himself he could only live for himself. When you and I fight against sin in our own strength, we can only live for ourselves.

By relying on our own strength to fight against sin, to strive to live the life we know we're supposed to live, we are not relying on the Lord. This means we are not trusting the Lord. As Paul said in Romans, whatever is not of faith is sin. Relying on your own strength in the battle against sin is just another way to not believe. This is no different from Samson.

What this brief passage reminds us, as did last week's text and the week before that...well, what the previous 23 weeks have shown us is we need a real Deliverer, a real King, a real Judge, a real Israelite, one who is truly faithful to the end. We need a Divine Rescuer who will rescue his people and who will change them into people who look more and more like him.

This is why the new covenant is so much greater than the covenant Samson was under. The Spirit empowered him from time to time, just as the Spirit would occasionally come upon others who needed to accomplish certain tasks. In the new covenant the Spirit is given to God's people as the mediator of Christ's presence. The Holy Spirit is God with us. This is why Paul could tell the church in Corinth they are the temple of the Holy Spirit: God dwells in their midst. His dwelling is a permanent dwelling, not an occasional dwelling.

Through his permanent presence and activity in the lives of his people, they are being changed and transformed. But just like Samson used his natural strength and was supernaturally empowered but used it for his own purposes and his own selfish ends, so can we. In a much smaller way than Samson, our refusal to walk by faith also has collateral damage, though the damage isn't always immediately obvious. The damage is in failing to participate in the mission of God, a mission we are equipped and empowered to engage in by God's Spirit.

Under the new covenant, the one in which God's Spirit was promised to be poured out, our lives are, both individually and collectively, transformed by the Spirit. Our lives should result in collateral blessing to others, both those in our church and those outside the church. By loving the Lord and by loving our neighbors, we can bring blessing to all, for when others are pointed to Christ they see the greatest blessing they can receive.

New City, God isn't calling us to be heroes. God isn't calling us to be great! He's calling us to be faithful, to use the gifts and resources he's given us for their intended purposes. Whether that is your time and your active presence in the lives of his people or your active love for your neighbor through service or that is the resources given to you that you might share with those in need, God is calling you and me not to greatness, but to faithfulness.

The truth is the Lord Jesus is great enough for us both. We don't need to be the hero in anyone's story. Jesus is the Hero we need. He is the one who can save. He is the one eager

and willing to save. He is the one who accomplished everything necessary for the salvation of the world. Our part in it isn't greatness but faithfulness.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. If you're unfamiliar with Lent or unsure about it, I put out a video about it last week. I would encourage you to check it out. Part of the purpose of the Lenten season is a greater focus on prayer. Hear this: prayer is participation. As we've seen, God often binds himself to our actions. Let us spend time this season of Lent praying, seeking the Lord, asking him to do a great work in our midst. Let us participate with the Lord, asking him to give us opportunities to love our neighbors, to first show them the gospel is true, and then as God gives opportunity, to proclaim that gospel to them. As we pray, know that God sovereignly works through our prayers to accomplish his purposes.

God's desire is to bless. Our selfishness, our self-centeredness, our self-reliance will never lead directly to blessing. Let's participate with the Lord in the work he is doing in our midst, and let us live lives empowered by his Spirit for his purposes.