

THE FIERCE JUDGE IN ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

The story of Samson is difficult to evaluate because he had such contradictions in his life. He was physically strong, but morally weak. He judged Israel, but failed to judge himself. He fought against the Philistine men, but was attracted to Philistine women.

Samson was given many blessings from the LORD. He was given godly parents: they believed the LORD answered prayer; they wanted the LORD to teach them; and they trusted Him to keep His promises (13:8). Samson also was given a healthy body and a good sense of humor. Above all, he was given supernatural strength from the Holy Spirit to judge the Philistines. But he had spiritual problems.

Samson's spiritual problems began with disrespect for his parents. He overruled the objection of his parents when he chose a daughter of the Philistines to be his wife (14:2, 3). After the defiance of his parents, it was not long before Samson was disregarding God's laws and defying Him (cf. 14:8-9 with Num 6:6-9). The binding, blinding and grinding power of sin (16:21) is a testimony to the tragic end of believers who will not let the LORD have His way with them.

I. Samson Dedicated to God — 13:1-25

13:1 — "Philistines" - they were Greek in origin and culture. They had invaded Egypt, but were driven out by Ramses III about 1200 B.C. Then they settled in Canaan along the Mediterranean coast.

"Forty years" — the Philistines oppressed Israel until the reign of David when he subdued them.

13:2 — "Danites" - Samson's family did not join the Danite tribesmen that moved north of the Waters of Merom (18:1-29). Samson's home was about 13 miles west of Jerusalem.

13:3 — "The angel of the Lord" - this is the pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, the second Person of the Godhead. He appeared twice to Manoah's wife (cf. v. 9).

"You shall conceive and bear a son" — Samson's birth was foretold in the same manner as Isaac's, John the Baptist's and Jesus Christ's. It was unique. Samson's birth account was unlike that of any of the other judges, except that of Samuel. However, Samuel's birth was promised not by an angel or by God, but by Eli, the high priest. Samson's birth was special. God had a unique ministry for Samson in Israel.

13:4, 5 — "Nazarite" - Samson was to be a life-long Nazarite from his mother's womb to his death. Special rules were required of those who were Nazarites (cf. Num 6:3-6). Most Nazarites were such for a month to six months, but Samson was dedicated to God for life. It seems that Samuel and John the Baptist were the only other Nazarites for life. Outward regulations were given to represent an inward dedication. Those who were Nazarites had a high and holy privilege, but also a heavy responsibility.

"Shall begin to deliver Israel" — Samson was responsible for a partial deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. Samuel would also do much to deliver Israel from this enemy, but it would not be complete until David accomplished it after he became king.

13:8 — "Manoah" - he was Samson's father. His spiritual life is seen in his earnest prayer. He wanted to be sure he did the right things in raising this special child. God answered his prayer (v. 9). He also showed his faith by acknowledging that the child "shall be born," even though his wife had been barren up to that time.

13:16 — "Knew not" - Manoah had no idea that he had been speaking to God (Christ in His pre-incarnate state).

13:17 — "What is your name?" - Manoah wanted to honor this prophet when his prophecy came to pass. It was the mark of a true prophet to have his prophecies fulfilled.

13:18 — "It is secret" - this is an unusual translation for the Hebrew word. Better to translate it "wonderful" as done in Isa 9:6. The word for "wondrously" (v. 19) has the same root as "secret" in this verse.

13:19 — "Meat offering" - in the time that the KJV was translated, "meat" meant "meal." This was a meal or grain offering.

13:20,21 — "Ascended in the flame" - when their Messenger ascended up in the flame of the offering, Manoah and his wife realized that they had been speaking to God Himself.

13:22, 23 — "We shall surely die" - Manoah was afraid they would die because they had seen God, but his wife assured him that this would not make sense if they were going to have a son who would begin to deliver Israel as God had promised them. It is true that no man can see God in His pure spiritual essence and live, but when He is clothed in a body, it is possible. That is why Jesus Christ could be seen and touched, even though He was God.

13:25 — "Spirit of the Lord began to move him" - this, no doubt, speaks of his spiritual birth, development and usefulness in the childhood and teenage years of his life.

II. Samson Defied His Parents — 14:1-4

14:1 — "Timnath" - this Philistine town was located about four miles southwest of Zorah, Samson's birthplace.

14:2 — "Get her for me to wife" - Samson had seen a daughter of the ungodly Philistines that he wanted for a wife. This was a breakdown of his spiritual separation from the world. If she had become a convert to God as Ruth did, such a marriage would be acceptable, but it was not right in this situation (cf. 2 Cor 6:14-7:1).

14:3 — "Uncircumcised Philistines" - Samson's parents objected to Samson's desire to marry a girl from a heathen home.

"She pleases me well" — Samson was concerned for his own pleasure, not his parent's or his God's. This selfish desire was a definite weakness in his life.

14:4 — "It was of the Lord" - it was not right for Samson to marry this Philistine daughter, but the Lord would accomplish His purposes in spite of Samson's sinful desire.

"He sought an occasion against the Philistines" — the pronoun, "he," can refer to Samson or to the LORD, but the latter is preferable. The LORD would provide situations which would give Samson opportunities to attack the Philistines so that Israel could be delivered from them in due time.

III. Samson Disregarded God's Laws — 14:5-18

14:5 — "A young lion" - it was not a baby lion, but one in the prime of life.

14:6 — "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him" Samson had strength from the LORD for all occasions, but he was given extra strength for special occasions.

"Rent him as he would have rent a kid" — Samson tore the lion in pieces just as an ordinary man would tear a young goat in pieces when preparing it for a meal.

14:8 — "Carcass of the lion" - it is most likely that animals and birds had cleaned the skin and meat off the bones of the lion so that all that remained was the skeleton.

"A swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion" — bees would not have chosen a place of decaying flesh for their nest, but bones of the rib cage that had been dried in the sun would be ideal.

14:9 — "He took thereof in his hands" - Samson's desire for honey was normal. It was a special treat before the days of refined sugar. However, it seems quite clear that he violated his Nazarite vow when he touched the dead body of the lion to get the honey (Num 6:6). The reason he did not lose his power can be attributed to the mercy and grace of God.

14:10 — "Samson made there a feast" - the word "feast" indicates it was a drinking feast, but a Nazarite was forbidden to drink wine. It would put Samson in a rather awkward situation to provide a feast of such a nature and not partake of it. However, he may have disciplined himself from drinking the wine and drank the grain beer which was a common drink among the Philistines. Then again he may have excused himself from all alcoholic beverages. Nevertheless, Samson's social association with the Philistines created a temptation for him that put him in questionable circumstances.

14:12 — "Riddle" - this was a common form of entertainment, but it was much like gambling or betting in today's society.

"Thirty sheets" — these were linen undergarments worn next to the body.

"Garments" — these were festive robes.

14:17 — "Wept before him the seven days" - Samson's wife was pressed hard by the thirty Philistine men who attended the wedding that she find out the answer to Samson's riddle and tell it to them or be burned along with her father's house (v. 15). From that time until the seven days of the wedding feast were completed, she cried and pleaded with Samson to tell her answer to his riddle. Finally, he gave in and told her the answer.

"She told the riddle to the children of her people" — her fear of the Philistine threat to burn her was greater than her faith in Samson to protect her. From this experience Samson should have learned that heathen Philistines were not to be trusted.

14:18 — "Plowed with my heifer" - this was a reference to the thirty Philistines who threatened his wife to get the answer to his riddle.

IV. Samson Destroyed Many Philistines — 14:19-15:20

14:19 — "Ashkelon" - this was an important city of the Philistines on the Mediterranean Sea coast, located about 23 miles from Samson's home. He chose that city to expose the wickedness of the Philistines. There he killed thirty men and took their undergarments and robes to pay off his debt to those who cheated him at his wedding feast. Philistines had to pay with their lives and property for the wickedness of their fellow countrymen.

"His anger was kindled" — literally, "nostrils heated." Samson was so angry that he left his wife with her father and went home until he cooled his temper.

14:20 — "Samson's wife was given to his companion" - the best man that Samson had used as his friend at his wedding, married his wife. Samson's father-in-law jumped to some wrong conclusions. He thought that Samson hated his wife when she told the thirty men the answer to his riddle and then did not take her home after the wedding. So he gave her to the best man (15:2).

15:1 — "Wheat harvest" - this was May or June the beginning of the hot season in Israel.

"Samson visited his wife with a kid" — Samson intended to make peace and claim his wife. He had not heard that his wife had remarried until he was told by her father.

15:2 — "Younger sister" - Samson was offered the younger sister of his wife to compensate for the loss of his wife.

15:3 — "Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines" - Samson was not pleased with the turn of events and the compensation offered, so he used it as an occasion against the Philistines as a whole. It was their corrupt way of life that he opposed. He did not attack his wife, her new husband or his father-in-law as such, but the country as a whole. It was a carefully planned reaction to their unjust ways.

15:4 — "Caught three hundred foxes" - foxes were probably jackals which ran in packs and would be somewhat easier to find and catch. The Hebrew word can be used for either a jackal or a fox. In any case, Samson would have needed extraordinary speed to catch these animals.

"Firebrands" — torches (cf. 7:16); probably long sticks dipped in tar or resin.

"Turned tail to tail" — tying the animals together made certain that they could not hole up, but would run all over the countryside dragging the torches behind them. Fires were started everywhere that they ran. It was a most unusual attack and very difficult to stop.

15:5 — "Burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn" - the corn is really wheat (15:1). Corn that is grown in North America was unknown in Israel at that time. The burning of the grain was humiliating to their god, Dagon. Dagon was the grain god, who guaranteed good harvests if he was pleased with them.

"Vineyards and olives" — the main sources for their food were being ruined by these animals dragging torches across the land of the Philistines.

15:6 — "The Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire" - when the Philistines found out that Samson was responsible and why he had done it, they did not dare to attack him, but they attacked his former wife and father-in-law. The very thing his former wife had tried to avoid by telling the answer of the riddle to Samson's companions was the thing that eventually happened anyway (cf. 14:15).

15:7 — "I will be avenged of you" — Samson used the unjust attack on his former wife and father-in-law as another occasion to expose the wickedness of the Philistines and to weaken them.

15:8 — "Smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter" - this is a wrestling term indicating a ruthless slaughter, using great force. It means "very severely, completely or entirely." This is what happened to those that burned his former wife and her father.

"Dwelt in the top of the rock Etam" — this rock is unknown today, but it provided a vantage point from which Samson could see the plains below where the Philistines lived, and note their reaction to his latest judgment against them.

15:9 — "The Philistines went up and pitched in Judah" - Samson had become too much of a problem to the Philistines, so they sent an army to capture him. No doubt, these soldiers represented their best soldiers. They could not let one Israelite do so much damage to them and go unpunished. After all, they were the rulers and he had to be subdued. So they went up to Judah, the largest tribe in the area.

15:10 — "Judah said, Why are you come up against us?" - Judah had once been a strong tribe, but now it was weak and fearful of the Philistines. When the Philistines explained that it was Samson they sought, the men of Judah were very cooperative to help them get their man.

15:11 — "Three thousand men of Judah" - it was a shameful day for Judah when they sent 3,000 men to capture and bind one of their own brethren and turn him over to the enemy. They should have followed Samson's example, but they feared the Philistines' power.

15:12 — "We are come down to bind you" - it must have been a disappointment to Samson to have his fellow countrymen turn against him.

"Swear unto me, that you will not fall upon me yourselves" — Samson did not scold the men of Judah for their lack of faith. He simply asked if they planned to kill him. He did not want to defend himself against them and kill them. It was a commendable spirit by Samson.

15:13 — "They bound him" - when the men of Judah promised not to hurt him, he allowed them to bind him with two new ropes and deliver him over to the Philistines. Samson's faith in the Lord was never greater than to allow himself to be bound and then delivered over to a large army of Philistine soldiers. If 3,000 men of Judah were afraid of these soldiers, it must have been an imposing army for one man to face.

15:14 — "Lehi" - means jawbone.

"Philistines shouted against him" — they were excited to see their enemy in bonds. They thought their mission had been successful and they had done it so cleverly that not one drop of blood had been shed.

"Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him" — this was the third time that God gave him extra power for an exceptionally difficult task (cf. 14:6, 19).

"As flax that was burnt with fire" — the power of Samson was so powerful that the cords were broken easily. When the Philistines saw what Samson did to those new ropes, their heart must have been paralyzed with fear.

15:15 — "New jawbone" - Samson found a fresh, supple jawbone of a donkey to use as a weapon. With it he slew 1,000 of the Philistines' prized soldiers. It was a humiliating defeat for an army to suffer, especially when he had been delivered to them in bonds.

15:16 — "Heaps upon heaps" - evidently the Philistines fled when Samson broke the cords that bound him. When he chased after them, he easily overtook them by his great speed (cf. v. 4), where he killed them. It appears that he encountered some resistance from small groups of soldiers at different places where he caught them. Thus heaps of dead Philistines were found here and there over a large area.

15:18 — "He was sore athirst" - this battle had been fought in the hot summer and Samson was desperately in need of water to stay alive.

"You have given this great deliverance" — Samson acknowledges the LORD as the source of his strength and victory. Then he asked for the LORD to provide him water on top of a rock.

15:19 — "God clave a hollow place" - literally, God "split the mortar-cup- holes." These mortar holes were places in the rock which had been used for grinding grain. God split these cup-holes and caused a spring of refreshing water to gush forth. It was a testimony of God's approval of Samson's work, a reward of his faith, and a rebuke of the Israelites' fears. It appears that God allowed the spring to keep running to remind the Israelites that He was able to care for them if they would believe in Him as Samson had done.

"The jaw" — it is literally; "Lehi." It means jaw, but it was also the name of a place (v. 14). The water did not come out of the jaw, but out of the rock at Lehi.

15:20 — "He judged Israel... twenty years" -this victory over the Philistine army was so significant that they were unwilling to risk any more attacks on Samson or on the Israelites for a period of almost twenty years. During this time Samson judged Israel. This conclusion is derived by the fact that this statement is made here and in 16:31. It is the only time that the length of judgment is

placed in the midst of an account concerning a judge. No doubt it is given in 15:20 to show that the main period of Samson's judgment began with this victory. Samson's judgment of twenty years may include a year or two before this victory and the year or two involved in chapter 16.

V. Samson Dabbled with Sin — 16:1-22

16:1 — "Samson to Gaza" - this was the southernmost city of the five principle cities of the Philistines. Samson's trip to Gaza is pure speculation, but maybe he was there to accept the challenge of the Philistines who wanted to fight him, i.e. Goliath later became a champion among them.

"Saw there a harlot" — Samson had control of his physical power, but not of his moral passions. In a moment of weakness, he yielded to sin. Few passions are stronger than sex.

16:2 — "We shall kill him" - the Philistines locked Samson in the city and intended to kill him in the morning. How they planned to do it when a large army was unable to do so is not clear, but this was their plan.

16:3 — "Took the doors of the gate of the city" - Samson had sinned, but God mercifully allowed him to use his power in spite of his sin. Gates were symbolic of a city's strength. It must have been humiliating for them to lose one of their gates and find it some distance from the city. Gates were heavy, and for Samson to dismantle a gate was a demonstration to all that he was no ordinary strong man.

"To the top of a hill that is before Hebron" — Hebron was almost 40 miles away and mostly uphill. However, this statement may mean that Samson simply carried the gate to the foothills on the way to Hebron which was still a significant feat of strength.

16:4 — "He loved a woman...Delilah" - Samson's sinful passions were still uncontrolled. He had no discernment for judging a good woman. This woman lived close to his home in Zorah.

16:5 — "Lords of the Philistines...said to her, entice him" - the Philistines changed their tactics. They lost every battle where they pitted their strength against his. Now they determined to trick him into telling them the secret of his strength. They decided to use Delilah to help them.

"We will give you every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver" —there were five lords of the Philistines and each one was willing to give 1100 pieces of silver for a total of 5500 pieces. There have been various estimates for the value of this amount of silver. Whatever the amount, it was huge when compared with the pieces of silver mentioned in 8:26 and 17:10. This amount of money shows the desperate desire of the Philistines to be rid of Samson. Note also the character of Delilah. She betrayed Samson for money just as Judas later betrayed Christ.

16:7 — "Green withes" - fresh cords made of twisted gut, used to string bows.

16:9 — "Thread of tow" - this is raw flax fibers which were used for wicks in lamps.

16:13 — "Locks of my head" - Samson was getting closer to the truth when he mentioned his hair.

16:16 — "She pressed him daily" - Delilah's persistence was stimulated by the prize of money. Nothing would stop her. She would find out the secret of Samson's strength somehow. Samson had defeated the strong men of Philistia, but was defeated by much weaker women. He lived carelessly by continuing to meet with Delilah after she had tricked him three times. How could he be so naive? He probably presumed on the blessing and strength of God to get him out of trouble no matter what he did. He enjoyed the thrill of winning against great odds. Physical strength does not guarantee moral or spiritual strength.

16:17 — "He told her all his heart" - Samson told his secret for strength to a Philistine woman who was ready to betray him. It was foolish, but sin blinded his judgment.

16:20 — "I will go out as at other times" - Samson was confident in spite of his sin, and did not realize that he had lost his power. The cutting of his hair was the final act that cut off his power with God, but certainly not his only act. His sin was being practiced without sorrow so God finally determined that it was enough.

"The Lord was departed from him" — Samson sold his blessing of power and spiritual usefulness for a few moments of pleasure with Delilah. He loved the pleasures of the world so much that he failed to realize that he was losing the presence of God.

16:21 — the blinding, binding, grinding effects of sin are seen in the last days of Samson's life in the hands of the Philistines.

VI. Samson Died In Captivity — 16:23-31

16:24 — "Praised their god" - the Philistines praised their god for delivering Samson to them, but Samson prayed to his God for one more opportunity to be used by Him in bringing deliverance to Israel from the Philistines (v. 28).

16:26 — "Pillars whereupon the house stands" - these were two wooden pillars supporting the flat roof of the temple.

16:28 — "Remember me" - this prayer was also prayed by Hannah (1 Sam 1:11) and by one of the malefactors on the cross (Luke 23:42). It is a simple sincere request.

16:30 — "Let me die with the Philistines" - God restored to Samson his strength and once more he was useful to Him. This was done through God's mercy according to his request. More were killed in his death than in his life. It made a solemn impact upon the Philistines and no doubt put fear in their hearts whenever they faced a judge of Israel. It may have been a contributing factor to the defeat of the Philistines at the battle of Mizpah when Samuel was judge (I Sam 7:7-13).

16:31 — "He judged Israel" - Samson did much to destroy the Philistines, but he could have done more, if he had been self-disciplined.