

Samson

by: W. Kelly

Judges 13 –16

In the next chapter (13) we begin a new kind of instrument God raised up for His purpose ; and in this case the state of the people was such that God severs him to Himself as a Nazarite. A stronger proof there could not be desired, that the people, as a whole, were far from God. In all ordinary cases a Nazarite was one who had taken a peculiar vow of separation to God, but lasting only for a short time. In the instance before us it was an extraordinary Nazariteship, stretching through the whole life. But what a Nazarite was Samson! Outwardly indeed he was separate. We have here one of the strangest and most humbling of histories recorded in Scripture, and withal singularly marking that very truth that we have so often ere this referred to: how little moral strength keeps pace with physical power as it wrought in and by Samson. Of all the deliverers that grace ever raised up, there was not one who for personal prowess was to be compared with Samson; but of all those, where was the man who fell so habitually below even that which would have disagreed an ordinary Israelite? Yet was he a Nazarite from his mother's womb! It seems therefore that the two extremes of moral weakness and of outward strength find each its height in this extraordinary character.

But we must look a little into the great principles of divine truth that meet us in weighing the history of Samson. His very birth was peculiar, and the circumstances too before it; for there never had been as yet a time when Israel had been so enslaved; and undoubtedly the deliverer, as we have traced regularly hitherto, so here again to the last, is seen to be according to the estate of the people, with whatever might or success God might be pleased to clothe him. *"And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Yahweh; and Yahweh delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years."*

It was a long time, we might have justly thought, in the days of Gideon, to have known seven years' subjection; but we hear of a far longer period in the case of the Philistines, the hottest and most pertinacious of the hostile neighbours of Israel, and so much the more galling as being within their border. For forty years the people groaned under their hard mastery. We shall find too, that Samson's feats of power, great as they were, in no way broke the neck of Philistine oppression. For on

the contrary after Samson's days, the sufferings of the children of Israel reached even a higher degree than they had ever attained under Samson or before.

However this may have been; we may notice first the quarter whence deliverance was to come: *"There was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites."* It was ordered of God that it should spring from that tribe, which was more than any other marked, not merely by a weakness that portended danger to themselves, as we shall see, but by a moral laxity which would finally afford a suited subject, as indeed from the beginning it had been intimated prophetically in the last words of their father Jacob a-dying, for the fatal result of departure and apostasy from God. Of this tribe Samson was born.

The circumstances also were highly remarkable. *"His wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of Jehovah appeared unto the woman"* with the promise that a child should be born, at the same time enjoining that she was to drink no wine nor strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; and that, when the child was born, no razor was to come upon his head. *"For the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."*

There was another whom God would employ at a later date to destroy the power of the Philistines, a man of another spirit, and of a hand very different from Samson's. I speak of course of David, the son of Jesse. Whatever might be wrought now was but the beginning of deliverance for Israel. God would magnify His power, but only as a witness now and then; nothing more. Anything like full deliverance must await that day, itself a type of the day of Jehovah.

The woman then tells her husband of the angel's visit, and they both entreat Jehovah, Manoah particularly, that the man of God might be sent again. Jehovah listens, and His angel appears to the woman, who summons her husband, when both see the angel as he repeats his message with its solemn injunction. Separateness from what was allowed to an Israelite was not only commanded but made life-long in Samson's case, as I cannot but believe it significant of what was due to God in consequence of the state in which the people of God then lay.

In due time the child was born, *"and the Spirit of Jehovah began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol."* His chequered history follows. *"And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines, and he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife."* (Chap. 14.) His father and mother remonstrated in vain. *"Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?"* Samson was just as self-willed as he was strong. *"And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well. But his father and his mother knew not that it was of Jehovah, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines."*

Now that the occasion calls for it, one may notice by the way the transparent boldness of Scripture, as wonderfully instructive as the reserve we have already remarked. If man had the writing of the story, would he have dared to speak out thus plainly? I doubt that any believer, without inspiration, would have felt it desirable to write that verse, and many more, as God has done it. If unveiling the fact at all, he would have apologized for it, denounced its evil to clear himself, spoken much perhaps of God's permitting and overruling. Now I am far from denying that it is right for us to feel the pain and shame of Samson's ways. But there is one thing that God's Spirit always assumes—the perfect goodness and the unswerving holiness of God. And this, beyond all doubt or fear, we are entitled always to keep before our hearts in reading the Bible.

Never then let the breath of suspicion enter your soul. Invariably, when you listen to the written word of God, range yourself on His side. You will never understand the Bible otherwise. You may be tried; but be assured that you will be helped out of the trial. The day may come when nobody appears to lend you a helping hand. What is to become of you then? Once allow your soul to be sullied by judging those living oracles, and real faith in the Bible is gone as far as you are concerned. If I do not trust it in everything, I can trust it in nothing.

So dangerous is apt to be the reaction against one ever so honest; the more you have trusted, when you begin to doubt, the worse it is apt to be, even with poor erring man, who knows not what a serious thing it is. Nor ought any one to allow a suspicion until he has the certainty of that which can be accounted for in no way save by guilt. And this, I need scarce say, is still more due on the score of brotherly relation and divine love, not merely on the ground of that which we might expect for our own souls.

But when God and His word are in question, it ought to be a simple matter for a child of God. How often it is ourselves who make the difficulties of which the enemy greedily avails himself against our own souls and His glory! For objections against scripture are always the creation of unbelief. Difficulties, where they exist for us, would only exercise faith in God. The

word of God is always in itself not only right, but fraught with light. It makes wise the simple; it enlightens the eyes. *"The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple."*

Undoubtedly there are many things in scripture of which we are ignorant; but then we are not entitled to interpret the word of God by ourselves. There is such a thing as to be taught of God. The Holy Ghost is given for this as for other purposes. It may often be doubtless that we are obliged to wait, and a wholesome thing too for our souls it should be. It is well sometimes for all those who teach that they should be obliged to learn; well that they should be forced to feel that they do not know; an excellent moral lesson that they should confess it—not only be conscious of it, but own it; for indeed the necessary claim of scripture is that it be confided in as the word of God, though it does not thence follow that we are competent to explain all. By the Holy Spirit only can we enter in and enjoy.

It is not here meant that there is any special difficulty in that which has been the occasion of these general remarks; still less is it implied that he who speaks makes any pretension to know anything as he ought to know, more than those he sees around him. If through the unction from the Holy One we know all, it is equally true that we all are but learners.

Again, it is not of course any attainment of mine that leads me to speak as I have done now. If I have spoken strongly, it is only, I trust, what becomes every believer. I have taken no ground beyond your own, my brethren; but surely this is a ground that calls you to assert the very same inestimable privilege that I boast as by grace a man of faith. It is not the vanity of setting up oneself as possessed of exclusive powers or special means of attaining or explaining anything; for I should distrust any one who pretended to anything of the sort, no matter who or where he might be. But that which does good to every saint and to every soul is the unqualified confidence in God and His word, which, if it does not reproduce itself in hearts purified by faith, at least deals with the consciences of all others till utterly blinded by Satan. Nor are you thus called to believe anything like an extravagance, though it surely would be so if the Bible were a human book, and so to be treated like any other, which after all even infidels do not: witness their occupation with it and zeal against it. Who troubles himself with the Koran or the Shastres, save their votaries?

But scripture claims always to be the word of God—never the word of Isaiah or Ezekiel, of Peter or Paul (1 Cor. 14. 37; 2 Peter 3. 15, 16); for, whatever the instrument may be, it is as truly God's word as if the Holy Ghost had written it without a single instrumental means. If this be submitted to (and you might more consistently reject the Bible altogether, if you do not submit), one sees the hollowness and falsehood of sitting in judgment upon it; for who can question that to doubt that which comes directly from God Himself would be to take the place, not merely of an unbeliever, but of a blasphemer or an atheist? And if unbelief be

probed home, it comes to this: it is a virtual denial of God's veracity, of His revelation, if not of His being.

But returning from this to the simple tale of Samson's life, I take it as the plain fact that God meant us to learn that He saw fit at that time to deliver by an unworthy instrument, by a man who showed how low he was, if only by the moral incongruity of an Israelitesh Nazarite seeking a wife from the fiercest of Israel's uncircumcised enemies. The grossness of such conduct is left to tell its own tale; and yet God, by the man that was thus pursuing his own self-willed course, meant to overrule the occasion for His glory, snapping the more violently the ties which Samson's ungoverned passion and low thoughts induced him to form. The descent is great, when one bearing the name of the Lord slights His word and seeks a path of his own. If God permits him for a season to do his own will, what shame and pain he must reap ere long!

Meanwhile the man, morally speaking, is ruined - his testimony to His name being worse than lost. Even if God interfere and produce the direct opposite of the fleshly enjoyment which self-will had sought, it is in no way to the man's praise if God effects His purposes by his acts, spite of wrong and folly. Never indeed is good the fruit of man's will, but of God's. This only gains the day; for it alone is as wise and holy as it is good. I take it therefore, that in the present case there is nothing to stumble the simplest believer, though no doubt there may be to one who knows not God and His word. Alas! How there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion. So his father went down unto the woman: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do. Then follows the story of his companions and the riddle a riddle which he was clever enough to put, but which he had little faith to understand or appropriate himself. Is it not evident that Samson feebly knew what God was teaching him by the lion which he slew, and by the lion's carcase which he found with the honey in it? Carried away by his uncurbed feelings (to whatever end God might turn all, for He always governs), he was mighty to act; but as to intelligence, little more than an unconscious instrument. Yet did he propose a most instructive riddle, which set forth justly the then condition of the people of God.

In that image we have the enemy in great power, but God infinitely above him, able as well as seeing fit to use the least worthy vessel of His power, and out of the slain enemy to furnish the sweetest refreshment. How triumphantly has it been done in Christ our Lord, but in how different a way! Absolutely immaculate Himself, He was made sin for us, that we might become God's righteousness in Him who for us by death annulled him that had the power of death, and gave us out of that defeat our unfailling comfort. Bright contrast between Samson and the man that overthrew Satan on that cross

where He Himself reached the very climax of weakness! For He won by no external strength but by suffering. He was crucified in weakness, but rose in the power of God; but there, instead of folly, instead of shame, instead of unhallowed alliance with the enemies of God, how does unsullied perfection shine in Him of whom we boast! The result in the type, alas! is that, whatever might be the victory over the lion, and whatever the sweetness of the honey, the effort to connect himself with the woman of Timnath turns out no small trouble to the man of might, whose anger was kindled at the treachery which sold his riddle, and, when his wife was given to the companion he had used as his friend, issued in such vexation for the Philistines as is known to us all. (Chap. 9. 4, 5.)

This again leads to a bitter vengeance of the Philistines on those of Timnath who had served him so ill - the very fate befalling them at last, to escape which at first the woman had lent herself to the basest treachery. (Compare chap. 14. 15 with chap. 9. 6.) Now it was that God wrought for His glory. He extricated failing Samson from the direct consequences of his sinful association; but He dealt retributively with treachery by the hands of their own people. For "*the righteous Lord loveth righteousness;*" and in its measure it is very striking to see the way in which this came out even in the case of the worldly uncircumcised enemy. We can all understand righteousness where the ground is clearly sanctioned of God; but is it not also strengthening to our hearts to find that, even where all was dark and faulty, God knows how to give effect to His principles? He has no doubt secrets of grace above all difficulties and wrongs: of this we cannot doubt for a moment; and indeed we have abundant proofs of it here. The earth is destined to be the theatre where God will display righteousness reigning; but even now, while things are out of course, and His enemy is in power, He holds to His own character, owning and using all He can.

After this we see the Philistines the object of the severest chastisement from Samson, who "*smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter, and went down and dwelt at the top of the rock Etam.*" There he encounters a new trial, which sets before us the state Israel in the most painful light. Is it not increasingly true that we can go no lower, whether we look at the people of God or the last deliverer in the book of Judges? Is it possible to conceive a conjuncture of its kind more humiliating? Not till they desired a king like the nations. But alas! even when God gave them one in a man after His own heart, we then trace greater abominations under the lines either of those who broke off in self-will or of those who turned the line of promise to nothing but corruption. We are arrived at the end of this sad history. Picture in imagination, if you can, how God could descend more to meet a degraded people; yet was it just then that the outward exploits against the foe were so brilliant. But if God's people have got into subjection to the world, none are so heartless about if not bitter against him who breaks fully with the enemy.

Samson is now absolutely isolated on the rock Etam. There is not a man that sympathizes with him, not even in Judah; yet Judah, we know, was the royal tribe in the purpose of God from the beginning, as in fact its type followed in David. This makes their behaviour the more remarkable here. *"Then the Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi. And the men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us? And they answered, To bind Samson are we come up, to do to him as he hath done to us. Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?"* Judah! is this the tribe for the praise of Jehovah? is this the tribe that men praise? Could, at the beck of the Philistine, there be found at once three thousand men so willing and prompt to betray the champion of Israel? three thousand men of Judah! One could understand three thousand men of the Philistines; but to what a deplorable pass in Israel were things come, when three thousand men of the worthiest tribe were thus obedient to the Philistine, and joined against the strong deliverer to hand him over, bound a prisoner, to the tender mercies of those that hated him and despised them! Is it they who say to Samson, *"Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?"* Not only were they in slavery, but content to be slaves, yea, traitors. Could a people descend lower in human things?

Alas! it is no new thing to faith; Jesus knew it to the bottom. It was His brethren who sought to lay hold on Him as beside Himself, His brethren who did not believe on Him. It was not for their lies, but for the truth He confessed, that His own people would have Him die.

"What is this that thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them." There is little moral elevation in Samson, little in any way to command respect or love. *"As they did unto me, so have I done unto them."* We see a man, not without faith indeed (Heb. 9.), though his confidence was largely in the strength with which God had invested him, rather than in Him who would yet prove Himself the sole source of it; a man who was roused by personal affront and desire of vengeance, not by a solemn duty; a man who slowly and weakly wakes up to any sense of his mission, who is ever, too ready to sink down again into the lowest indulgence of fallen nature among the enemy. In short Samson appears to me a man with as little, or as low, an appreciation of what it was to fight the battles of the Lord, as God had been pleased to use in any epoch throughout inspired history. *"And they said unto him, We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines. And Samson said unto them, Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon, me yourselves."* What an opinion he had of them! And as naturally as possible too they take it. They have no shame nor resentment on their part at this accusation of treachery. Their moral condition indeed was the very lowest, below nature itself, toward their deliverer, *"And they spoke unto him, saying, No; but we will bind thee fast, and deliver thee*

into their hand: but surely we will not kill thee. And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock. And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands. And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith. And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men."

Nor was this the only intervention of the Lord, but personal succour follows at His hand. For *"it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking, that he cast away the jawbone out of his hand, and called that place Ramath-Lehi. And he was sore athirst, and called on Jehovah, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised? But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water there out; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof En-hakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day."* We have seen before, from the earlier part of the book, the remarkable manner in which, either personally or in the weapons that were employed, God was acting mysteriously at this period of Israel's history. To those who discern what a witness it is that the people were far gone from Him, here the principle reappears in all its strength—the isolation of the man himself, the circumstances that had brought about the rupture with the foe, the mind of Judah, if not treacherous to the Israelite, cowering before the uncircumcised, and now the strangest of weapons for war that Samson uses against them—the jawbone of an ass.

Never was there failure of divine power with Samson against the foe; but moreover the pitifulness of Jehovah is marked towards His poor servant (for did He disdain when the thirsty man called on Himself, as he cried to God in his distress?). Bad as were the features we have seen, we have to see even worse still; yet he was heard and answered when he called.

We do not find in Samson the generous disinterestedness of grace that could suffer affliction with the people of God, and is willing to be a sacrifice upon that faith. We have nothing like a Moses in Samson. Not without faith, he was a combatant ready to fight the Philistines at any odds. No doubt it was a wonderful display of physical force on the one hand; as on the other those he vanquished were the unrelenting enemies of God's people. Still the overt thing to Samson seems to have been that they were his enemies. This certainly stimulated him, though I am far from insinuating no better underneath. But the good was hard to reach or even to discern, the evil abundant and obvious. *"And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years."* It appears to me that the Spirit of God brings in this little notice of his judging

Israel here in order to show that this is the normal close of his history. Nor should we wonder at it. Not that God did not work mightily afterwards, and even more in his death than in his life. But it need surprise none that the proper history of this judge terminates according to the mind of God here; for what has the Lord to tell in the next chapter? We have seen how grace overruled, broke up an evil association before it was consummated, and gave him righteous ground to take vengeance on the Philistines, followed by his judging Israel for twenty years.

"Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot;" yet here, though fallen lower than ever, we find power put forth under these deplorable circumstances. *"And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him. And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron."* The man thus went forth in the confidence of his strength, and to outward appearance did things just to make the enemy feel what he could do, with as little exercise toward God as could well be found in one that feared Him.

But again, *"And it came to pass afterward that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah."* And here we confront not simply the old offence repeated, and in the grossest form of fleshly corruption, but along with it an infatuation as extraordinary as his degradation. This indeed becomes distinctly the moral of the tale. Delilah sells herself to the Philistine lords to entangle the champion of Israel, now beguiled by his lusts: else the various efforts to seize him must have otherwise opened his eyes to her guile and their murderous malice. But the wages of transgressors are hard, and the guilty man falls under the strange woman's spell again and again. Such is the blinding power of sin; for was he ignorant of her vileness or of his own danger? But the crisis came; and we see that at last, pressed by the harlot's toils, he tells out the secret of Jehovah. On his unshorn locks hung his invincible might by divine will. There was but one thing really involved-obedience. Alas! he fell, as did Adam at the beginning, and all since save one-Christ. But how perfectly He stood, though tried as none ever was or could be but Himself! Do we know what a thing obedience is in God's eyes, even though it may be displayed in the simplest manner? It is the perfection of the creature, giving God His place, and man his own; it is the lowliest, and withal the morally highest, place for one here below, as for the angels above. In Samson's case, tested in a seemingly little sign but a sign of entire subjection to God, and this in separation from all others, it was obedience; not so in our case, where we have the highest treasure in earthen vessels, but obedience in everything, and this formed and guided by the Spirit according to the written word, now set in the fullest light, because seen in the person, and ways, and work, and glory of Christ. It is no mere external sign

for us who know the Lord Jesus. But the secret of the Lord in our case involves that which is most precious to God and man. We are sanctified bath by the Father's word and by Christ glorified on high. But we are sanctified by the Spirit unto the obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus, and are called to obey, as the wife her husband. Therein are involved thus the very highest and deepest privileges that God could communicate to the souls of men on earth.

To Samson, as we see, it was far different. His secret was to keep his hair uncut, with all strength annexed to it. But if it was his hidden power, it acted also as a test; and now the enemy possessed it, disclosed to a harlot, who had wrung it for gold from his foolish heart. Whatever might have been his low state through unchecked animal nature, whatever his delinquencies before, so long as he kept his secret with God, strength never failed him from God, De the strain what it might. Jehovah at least was - could not but be - true to the secret. But now, as we know, the one whom he had made partner of his sin wheedled it from him that she might sell it to the Philistines.

Degraded to the utmost, Samson becomes their sport as well as their slave. But God. was about to magnify Himself and His own ways. *"And it came to pass when their hearts were merry that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto Jehovah, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."* Again we see the man, and his character in its weakness is before us, even at that solemn moment.

I am far from doubting that God wrought in him whom He had made the champion of His people. Let no man question that Samson was in prison or that he lost his eyes for nothing. I feel pretty assured that he saw clearer morally without them than he had seen in any sense with them. He had far too often made a wretched use of them in times that were past; and even now, in spite of the work of God in his soul, was there nothing weightier, was there nothing deeper, was there nothing to lament over more than the loss of those two eyes? It was Samson feeling for himself, yet not un-pitied of the Lord; for there was one above Samson who heard. And this is the great point for us that we can and ought to count on. Let us not forget that we have got a nature exempt from nothing we deplore in Samson, and the person that does not believe it may live to prove it, especially if a believer, who should know himself better; whilst he who does take it home to his soul is

thereby enabled to judge himself by the Spirit, before God.

But what a God we have to do with, as Samson had! and how He magnified Himself in that hour of supreme chagrin and of his deep agony, when he was made to sport before those uncircumcised haters of Israel, and the witness, as they fondly hoped, of their idol's triumph over Jehovah. Samson felt it easier to die for His name than to live thus in Philistia. But God reserved great things for his death. What a figure of, but contrast with, His death, who only pursued to that final point His absolute devotedness to the will of God, not doing it only but suffering it to the uttermost, and thus righteously by His death securing what no living obedience could have touched!

Nevertheless, I have little doubt that, though the dying hour of Samson brought more honour to God than all his life, its manner was in itself a chastening in its character; and in this, too, may one discern a representation of the condition to which Israel had come similar

to what was noticed in the life and person of Samson. For what can be more humiliating than that one's death should be more important than one's life? Such was the point to which things had come (an inglorious one it was for those concerned), that the best thing for Israel and Judah, the best thing for God's glory and for Samson himself, was that he should die. *"And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life."* And his brethren, as we find, came up, took him away, and buried him. *"He judged Israel twenty years;"* is the repetition of the word at this point.

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