

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“No Direction Home: Fallen Heroes”

Dr. Jay Howell

April 3, 2022

This is the second to last week in our series “No Direction Home,” this walk through the Old Testament book of Judges. Throughout it, I hope you’ve been able to gain at least some sense of the desperation that the people of Israel faced, even if they didn’t realize it themselves. The entire book describes what happens when a people seeks after what they want first, rather than seeking after God, and as a result their very judgment, their vision is clouded, and their story becomes trapped in a downward spiral. Occasionally God would raise up someone known as a judge who would deliver them from their oppressors, but even those judges became less and less reliable, another reminder of the great need Israel had for God’s deliverance—and in turn, a reminder of how great our need is.

We’ve heard about Ehud and Deborah and Barak and Jael and Gideon and Abimelech and Jotham, and I’m guessing that for at least some of those names, it might have been the first time—or maybe the first time in a while—that you’ve thought much at all about them. But today we come to a name that might be the most familiar in all of Judges, a man named Samson, but even he ends up being a colossal disappointment. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Now the governors of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to celebrate, for they said,

“Our god has handed Samson our enemy over to us.”

When the people saw him, they praised their god, for they said,

“Our god has handed our enemy over to us,

Even the destroyer of our country,

Who has killed many of us.”

It so happened when they were in high spirits, that they said, “Call for Samson, that he may amuse us.” So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them. And they made him stand between the pillars. Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, “Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.” Now the house was full of men and women, and all the governors of the Philistines were there. And about three thousand men and women were on the roof looking on while Samson was entertaining them.

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes.” Then Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” And he pushed outwards powerfully, so that the house fell on the governors and all the people who were in it. And the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed during his lifetime. Then his brothers and all his father’s household came down and took him, and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. So he had judged Israel for twenty years.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

George Washington. His face is on the one-dollar bill and chiseled into Mount Rushmore, a monument in his honor one of the features of the skyline of our nation's capital, the paragon of dedication and selfless national service. American hero. He was also a selfish jerk. Don't think so? Here I'll prove it.

You know the crossing of the Delaware River? You know, when he bravely led the Continental Army in a daring surprise move from Pennsylvania into New Jersey to attack the city of Trenton, boosting the morale of the army with the bold success, not to mention restocking stores of munitions and supplies captured from the British.

But you know why he really did it? Well, it turns out ol' George had forgotten to do his Christmas shopping for Martha, and something she wanted was only in a shop in Trenton, so off the entire army goes on Christmas day, so George Washington could get his wife a Christmas present.

Still not convinced? What about just about a year later, when the army is encamped at Valley Forge for the winter. Famously riddled with disease, contending with freezing temperatures, and nearing starvation, the army was held together only by the steady determination of their general. One night, a man named Isaac Potts who himself was a Quaker, a pacifist, comes across General Washington out in the snow on his knees, kneeling in prayer for his army's protection. The encounter inspired Potts to embrace the revolutionary cause, and in part served to inspire others to endure the harsh winter.

But you know what really happened? Washington wasn't on his knees to pray. He was digging up a secret store of food he had buried in the ground that he didn't want his soldiers to know about, and he was hungry for a snack that night.

Or maybe years later, after the United States had won the war and our freedom, Washington was elected president, twice. And coming up to the possibility of a third term as president—this was of course before there were term limits on presidents—he does what no one expected and retired home to Mount Vernon in Virginia, because he wanted the nation to see that they hadn't exchanged one tyrant for another. And in so doing, he set the stage and precedent for the peaceful transfer of power of the highest office in the land, even among political rivals.

But you want to know why he really did it? Well, it turns out he became aware of a significant investment opportunity, one that wouldn't be available to him if he were president, so he decided to quit so that he could get even richer than he already was.

Anyone out there thinking about George Washington any differently now? Does that fact that he did those heroic things for selfish reasons change how you think about the man? Endangering the lives of his men, withholding precious stores of supplies, leveraging political influence for self-enrichment, not exactly the sort of stuff that heroes are made of. Okay, I'll spoil the suspense. None of that was actually true. And you probably caught on pretty early, but on the chance that even for a second you found yourself thinking, "No way. George Washington couldn't have been like that. If he was, I'm not so sure I think of him so highly as I thought I did," if for even a second you flinched at the possibility that George Washington could have been that self-serving, just know that that is precisely the kind of person that Samson, mighty Samson was.

We come to Samson's story at the end of his life, brought out in chains, eyes gouged out, dragged out for the amusement of his enemies, Israel's enemies, the Philistines, there in the house of their god Dagon. It seems a heroic end. Placed between two central pillars holding up the roof of the place, he prays to the Lord for one last blessing of strength so that he could vanquish his enemies, and then with one last strain, the pillars collapse, the

house falls in, killing thousands who had gathered there, including the lords and leaders of the Philistines, and Israel was delivered from its oppressors. But you want to know why he really did it?

Mighty, mighty Samson. If you grew up going to Sunday School, it's a name you might recognize, maybe the most recognizable in all the Book of Judges, a Bible hero, strong and powerful who cut down hundreds upon thousands of the Philistines. You see even Samson's birth was a miracle. His parents had prayed to God to bless them with a child, and an angel of the Lord appeared to them, telling them they would indeed be blessed with a child. And afterward when his parents offered a sacrifice to the Lord, a pillar of flame shot up to heaven consuming the sacrifice.

Then, certain preparations had to be made. You see their child was to be someone known as a "Nazirite," which was someone specifically consecrated for service to the Lord, including among other things, no drinking, no touching dead bodies, and of particular note, no cutting your hair. A Nazirite was meant to be set apart for holy service, as one who would model the sort of life dedicated to the Lord that could inspire the people, and in particular, this Nazirite, Samson, would be blessed it seems with supernatural strength, empowering him to overcome astonishing odds in defeating Israel's enemies the Philistines. Pretty impressive stuff. Makings of quite the hero. A miraculous child, set apart for the Lord, endowed with astonishing strength to defeat Israel's enemies and deliver God's people.

What a disappointment he ended up being. In fact, when you get into it Samson might be one of the most disappointing figures in the whole Bible. Not a lot about him that's all that redeeming. Wasn't for lack of notoriety. Some of his exploits are the sort of thing you write songs about.

One time, he single-handedly caught three hundred foxes, tied them together in pairs, and then tied a flaming torch to each pair and set them loose in fields and stores and vineyards and olive groves of the Philistines, destroying their food supply, a crippling blow. Poor foxes, first of all, but that's not the point of the story. The Philistines respond, pressuring the people of Judah, so Samson willingly lets himself be bound by his own people and be turned over to the Philistines. But once handed over to the Philistines, the ropes binding him astonishingly caught fire, he breaks free, picks up the jawbone of a donkey from the ground, and uses it to kill a thousand men, all by himself.

Heroic stuff. You might think, first, what a smart tactical move, burning their food stores. Can't sustain an army without food for them. Then, what a selfless thing to do, allowing himself to be bound and turned over. And finally, what heroism, what strength and bravery, using just a bone on the ground to vanquish Israel's enemies. But you want to know why he really did it? To deliver the people of Israel? To put himself in harm's way to protect them from the Philistines' assault? No. It was because he didn't get the girl he wanted.

Another time, the Philistines were laying siege to a town, circling all around it, thinking we'll wait until Samson comes out of the city gates to ambush him in the morning. So what does Samson do? He doesn't open the gates, but in the middle of the night, he actually lifts up the very doors of the gates, posts and all, and uses them to break out of the encirclement. But you want to know why he really did it? To liberate this town from the Philistine threat? No. It's because he had gone into the town to visit a prostitute, and afterward he wanted to go home.

What finally did him in was falling in love with another woman named Delilah. The Philistines get to her and pressure her to find his weak spot, to find out what would neutralize his strength. Three times, they ambush him in the night, and three times he fights through the ambush, each time having told a lie to Delilah as to how

his strength could be taken away. He wasn't too quick on the uptake, as each time he would tell Delilah something, that night he would find himself in that exact situation with Philistines coming to take him. Never quite figured that one out.

But the fourth time, he tells the truth, that if his hair were cut, because he was a Nazirite, he would lose his strength. So after he falls asleep in her lap, the Philistines come and cut his hair and, when he wakes up, easily overpower him, gouge out his eyes, and take him away. That's what brought him to that temple among the Philistines. Now without his strength, eyes gouged out, beaten and bound, brought out in chains to amuse a mob, he asks God to restore his strength one last time and with a mighty push, brings the temple down upon the Philistines. But you want to know why he really did it? To sacrifice himself for the sake of his people? To offer up his own life so that his people might live without fear of this ruthless enemy? No. Instead all he says is, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes." "For my two eyes." It was all just for personal vengeance.

And that's our hero. The mighty Samson, who never once did anything for any reason other than for himself. And this is the hero God raised up to deliver his people. Does that change how you think of him? Some of us may recognize the name, but I'd guess the biggest reason we know about Samson is for his mighty feats of strength and bravery, maybe not quite as aware that the reason he did all those amazing things wasn't because he was being heroic, but rather because every step of the way, he was being selfish.

Perhaps it's not all that unfamiliar to us. We all have fallen heroes in our lives. Whether it was a public figure we admired, maybe an athlete or elected official, or even a family member, there's something of a let down when we discover their true motives weren't so noble, when our heroes fall before our eyes.

We're at the stage in life right now with our two boys when I get to be Superman pretty much, when in the eyes of my sons I can do no wrong. I don't know quite how long that lasts, and I know if you're a parent you may have felt the same thing, but I know the day's coming when my sons won't see me quite as much as the hero they think me to be. They will become quite aware of my flaws, quite aware of how selfish I can be, and that terrifies me.

We all have heroes who have fallen in our eyes, and in many ways each of us may be a fallen hero to someone else.

But take heart, still God used this fallen hero, this selfish man, to accomplish his purpose. And all along the way there are hopes and echoes and longings for someone who actually would fit the bill.

Because many years later, another man would come, another whose birth was miraculous, whose feats would be shared far and wide and made into songs, and who would be betrayed, beaten and bound, arms stretched out, and who would sacrifice himself to deliver God's people.

But instead of saying, "Let me have this one act of revenge," he would say, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are doing."

And that is the one upon whom our hope can rightly rest and not be disappointed.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.