

THE HOLLOW HERO

by Steve Zeisler

This past week our home was the scene of the making of one of America's 5 funniest home videos of recent vintage, I'm convinced. My sixteen-year-old son and a friend of his had been given an assignment in Spanish class to do a project that would show that they had learned some Spanish, so they decided to make a video on how to cook quesadillas. They got the video camera out, went to Safeway, and videoed one another wandering through the store picking out cheese, tortillas, tomatoes, and so forth; describing what they were finding; bumping into other poor customers; and creating havoc. Then they came home, and we videoed them making the quesadillas and sitting down to eating them, all the while describing what they were doing in Spanish. Part of it was intended to be funny, but of course some of the funniest parts were unintentionally funny.

It struck me that there was an analogy between the video they made and the text we'll be studying today. The video purported to be a lesson on how to cook quesadillas, but if you stumbled across it wanting to improve your culinary expertise, you would not be well served. The point of making the video wasn't really to teach people how to make quesadillas; the intention, based on the teacher's assignment, was actually to focus on the players in order to demonstrate that they had (or hadn't) learned Spanish. So the story line was less important than what was taking place in the characters themselves.

That same phenomenon exists in the passage of scripture we're going to look at this morning, Judges 13 and 14. We've been studying the book of Judges together in recent months and have now come to the last judge in the book, Samson. His story is the longest in the book and in some ways the most difficult. Samson is a very odd fellow! If you read much of the Bible, you have probably heard of Samson and know that his story is not one that inspires righteous living. His life was characterized by lust, anger, petulance, and revenge.

SEARCHING OUT SAMSON

It says in Proverbs 25 that it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but it is the glory of kings to search a matter out. Finding the point of Samson's story is an important search for us. Why is he listed in Hebrews 11 among the heroes of faith in the Bible? It will not be until the end of his story that we can make sense of some of these things. I want you to think about why his story is placed in the Scriptures the way it is. We'll find the reason for Samson's story has to do with things that are beneath the surface. Let's begin reading with verse 1 of chapter 13:

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, so that the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years.

And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had borne no children. Then the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman, and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren and have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines." Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, "A man of God came to me and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. And I did not ask him where he came from, nor did he tell me his name. But he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and now you shall not drink wine or strong drink nor eat any unclean thing, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'"

There are a number of subtle indicators in the opening paragraphs of this story that something is askew,

suggesting that we should begin asking deeper questions about what the point is. Consider the introduction. We are told that the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, as they had done before. Rebellion is part of the typical cycle we see in Judges, in which the people are rescued by God, have a time of peace, fall into sin, are conquered by an enemy, and so on. But every other time a judge was introduced at this point in the cycle, we would read that there was repentance, a national outcry to God begging him to deliver them from their suffering. And there is no repentance here. Never once in this story is there a cry for help, a recognition of their downfall, or a public acknowledgement of the need for God. This story immediately proceeds to God's action to create a deliverer.

NAZIRITE RESTRICTIONS

Another indicator that this picture is a bit askew is the reference to Nazirite vows. In Numbers 6 God provided a special opportunity for Jews who wanted to dedicate a period of time in their life to prayer and service to God, to spiritual cleansing, to doing something that would allow them uninterrupted focus on the person and work of God. The Nazirite vow served that purpose. We find an example of it in Acts at the end of Paul's second missionary journey, when he makes a vow and doesn't cut his hair until the purpose of the vow is completed.

There were the provisions for Nazirites, and they're all mentioned here. They were not to touch a dead body or any unclean thing. They were not to drink any alcoholic beverage (abstain from all products of the vine, in fact). And they were not to cut their hair. Now, Nazirite vows were meant to be temporary. They were to be made because somebody loved God and wanted life to be filled with focus on him, with the recognition that it should be a time of cleansing and then should come to an end.

But nobody in this story showed an interest in the things of God. There is no mention of prior prayer or a cry for help on the part of the parents, and certainly none in Samson's life. So this Nazirite vow was brought about by God alone, rather than being the response of someone's heart, and it was for a lifetime rather than temporary.

It says in verse 5 that as a judge Samson would begin to deliver the children of Israel from the Philistines. That, too, makes him different. The other judges accomplished deliverance for their generations, but Samson wouldn't. He was only a partial deliverer.

Let's continue on with this account. Verse 8:

Then Manoah entreated the LORD and said, "O LORD, please let the man of God whom Thou has sent come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born." And God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again to the woman as she was sitting in the field, but Manoah her husband was not with her. So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "Behold, the man who came the other day has appeared to me." Then Manoah arose and followed his wife, and when he came to the man he said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" And he said, "I am." And Manoah said, "Now when your words come to pass, what shall be the boy's mode of life and his vocation?" So the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Let the woman pay attention to all that I said. She should not eat anything that comes from the vine nor drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing: let her observe all that I commanded."

Then Manoah said to this man, "Let us offer you some hospitality; let us prepare a meal for you." And the angel of the Lord replied, "No, I don't want your hospitality, but if you're going to prepare an animal as you would for a meal, prepare it instead for a sacrifice to God." Then we're told that this remarkable individual became even more remarkable. He did wonders in the presence of Manoah and his wife. The sacrifice was burned, and the angel disappeared in the smoke of the sacrifice. Verse 21:

Now the angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah or his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD. So Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." But his wife said to him, "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not

have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have let us hear things like this at this time."

A MIRACLE BABY

Now, there are a number of places in the Bible where childless couples are by God's miraculous intervention allowed to have children. That's an important theme that runs through the Bible. And this is in some ways the most remarkable of all these stories. The angelic visitor is a bit unusual. An angel came to Abraham and told him when Isaac would be born, in answer to their prayer. It also happened to Zacharias in the New Testament when an angel appeared to him, answering his prayers for a child. But this is a longer story than either of those. There are more miraculous details---this angel's doing wonders and ascending in the flames. The story's content, length, and everything about it suggest that something important is happening. God is going to send a baby, and you would expect the baby to turn out to be somebody especially wonderful. But it turns out that he was exactly the opposite. Samson was sort of the Mike Tyson of the ancient world: a very powerful, threatening, out-of-control, and self-centered man. The Nazirite restrictions (mentioned repeatedly in this chapter) were not connected to any kind of relationship with the Lord; they were given merely as externals. The angel didn't tell the parents to teach the child to walk in a loving relationship with his God, but merely to teach him to observe the external aspects of the ritual, which, except for not cutting his hair, he broke throughout his life, whether it was drinking, killing people, or whatever. This story of how he came into being suggests one thing, but we're given something else. Again, it makes us wonder why.

Manoah strikes me as a bit of a dim bulb. That God should pick this man to be the father of the hero says something about the hero, doesn't it? This morning we read in Proverbs 4 of a father who raises his child to know wisdom and teaches and encourages him from youth to know the things of God and to care about and follow what's true. But Manoah had very little sense of what it meant to be a father. He asked in verse 8 and again in verse 12 that he be taught what to do for the boy who was to be born. That surely is a legitimate and praiseworthy prayer, but it also gives us the sense that Manoah really didn't know what to do, that he didn't have a biblical world view that he could impart to his child.

It is significant that the heavenly visitor appeared directly to Manoah's wife twice, and appeared to him only with her introduction. And it wasn't until verse 21 that Manoah realized he was dealing with an angel. Up to this time he had assumed the individual was a man, though his wife could tell he was an angel from the beginning. You can imagine her impatience when she had to correct his frightened analysis of what would happen next. "Look, we've just been told we're supposed to have a child. God wouldn't have accepted our sacrifice if he was going to kill us!" The angel's presence in this story suggests something remarkable was to come and Manoah's contribution was to make us wonder why.

When the angel appeared to Zacharias and said, "You shall have a son" (who would be John the Baptist), he said of that boy, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God." But why the remarkable birth of Samson? God picked these people and orchestrated these events. And the man he chose to be the last of the heroes in the book of Judges is as oafish and bad an example of what it means to be a mature man as you can find anywhere, let alone in the Bible.

THE LESSON OF SAMSON'S LIFE

I'm convinced that the Lord intended Samson to be an object lesson for everyone who would read his story and to anyone in his generation who would look clearly at him. The nation's character was distilled to a single person in Samson; he was living

out the thinking and the spiritual insensitivity of the entire nation around him. The fact that God would choose this man to be their leader was saying something about the people: that they were out of control that they were protected by the power of God who was faithful to a faithless people, that they did not love righteousness. He was teaching them to see themselves by focusing on this individual.

That's not such a strange thing when you stop to think about it, is it? We often find a nation personified in an

individual. During the Desert Storm war it was comforting (in a simplistic way) to citizens of this country to see Saddam Hussein on the one hand contrasted with Norman Schwarzkopf on the other. The contrast in their military abilities, what they stood for, and the kind of people they were helped us believe in the rightness of our cause.

It's consistent with our psychology to focus on an individual heroic figure to try to gain insight about who we are as a people. That's why the Lord brought Samson into being, to be a picture of what the nation was really like.

This phenomenon ought to make us think a bit, and it is one of the reasons why moral, thoughtful people are so concerned about our nation. What quality of leaders are rising to the forefront? Which people do young folks in this nation look up to as heroes to be emulated? The political figures in a democracy represent the people who elevate them higher and higher and establish them with more and more power. What do our political leaders say about who we are as a nation? What are their values? This is one of the reasons it's important and totally legitimate to ask questions not just about the political positions of individuals, but about what kind of people they are. A candidate's character says something about the electorate who will raise him or her to office.

The church needs to ask hard questions. Why have so many of our public leaders and clearly identified spokespersons turned out to have so much ugliness in their private lives? The individuals who receive the focus say something about the general condition of life in the larger group. And the church as well as the nation has a great deal to be concerned about, it seems to me, given the quality of people who are being raised to leadership.

I'm convinced God deliberately put Samson in leadership as a hollow man, a man who was all externals, a man of power and authority who had absolutely no control of his inner life. He was buffeted by his appetites and whims. Until the last chapter of his life he never knew anything of humility or a knee bent before God, never knew anything of wisdom, never loved anything but himself and never cared for purity. He was a man who was telling the nation what it had become. He also serves as an important way for us to ask questions about ourselves. Are we, too, people whose relationship to God has everything to do with externals and nothing to do with internals? Are we, too, impressed by dramatic displays of power that never result in formation of character? These questions are well worth asking.

Let's read a bit more and consider these things. What will Samson teach us? Verse 24:

Then the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the LORD blessed him.

This blessing is evident in Samson's extraordinary physical prowess.

And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

The Hebrew word to stir is an interesting word. It originally meant to tap or agitate something. It could be used of the way a cowboy in a rodeo gouges his bronco with his spurs to try to make him buck harder and higher so he gets more points for riding him. This is not a word that suggests God was wooing Samson, teaching him, and persuading him. Samson was stirred into action, but not as a partner in God's plans.

Chapter 14, verse 1:

Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, "I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife." Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me."

[This pretty much summarizes Samson's approach to life.] However, his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines. Now at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel.

A PHILISTINE WIFE

Samson's statement, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me," suggests something about his captivation with things Philistine generally. Over and over again we find Samson enthralled with Philistine women, Philistine parties, and the Philistine life-style. He was periodically enraged with them and killed them in whole-sale lots as well, as it turns out, but he preferred them to his own people and his own traditions, and he was mirroring the nation of Israel in these matters. They, too, were captivated by the godless things of the world and loved the lifestyle of the unfaithful.

It might be a good question to ask ourselves: Is there anything here for us to learn from? How much do we love the things of the world? How enthralled are we with the proposals, the ideas, and the payoffs this world has to offer? Have we drifted from concern for God and his purpose?

I think it's worth making the simple point that Samson's story talks about the power of God. Time and again, the power of God would descend upon Samson to do remarkable physical feats unequalled in history. He may have been the most physically powerful human being who ever lived. But the power of God didn't do anything for the inside of the man. It didn't break his arrogance, teach him to think of eternity, promote prayer in his life, or teach him kindness. It didn't produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness. It was always power working on things external to the man.

Let me recount the rest of the story in chapter 14 so you can have it in mind as we conclude. Samson had seen the woman in Timnah. His ineffectual father was not able to talk him out of marrying her. On one occasion, traveling alone to Timnah, Samson was attacked by a lion. The power of the Lord came upon him, and he tore the lion apart. When the carcass dried, it became the home of a swarm of bees. He later married the woman and held a seven-day feast with his Philistine friends and his new wife. (This was a drinking bout, not just a nice reception in the church fellowship hall, honoring a Nazirite who wasn't supposed to touch any alcohol.) He propounded a riddle to them, saying, "If you can tell me what the riddle means, I'll give you thirty new suits of clothes. And if not, you have to give me thirty. The riddle is this: 'Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong some\thing sweet.'" He was talking about the lion he killed and the bees that were in its carcass.

They weren't able to answer the riddle; they didn't know what he was talking about. So they threatened his wife, and she continually badgered him, until finally at the very end of the week-long party he told her what happened to the lion, and she passed the information on. And as the sun was going down on the last day of the feast, they answered his riddle, and he became indignant with them. Furiously he said, "You have plowed with my heifer, you have compromised my wife. That's how you found out my story." He marched off to Ashkelon, another Philistine city, killed thirty men there and took their clothes, came back, and paid off his debt. Then he abandoned all in Timnah with no indications of his future intentions. Note well the thoughtfulness, wisdom, and maturity with which Samson approached life!

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

I want to recommend Disney's recent animated version of Beauty and the Beast if you haven't seen it. The first man you meet in the story of Beauty and the Beast is Gaston square-jawed, huge, and stronger than ten ordinary men. Gaston is a hollow man—all muscles, bluff, noise, anger, and immaturity. He is good-looking, but there is nothing on the inside. Then the beauty, Belle, goes into the forest and meets the Beast, who is crude, ugly, unpredictable, and terrifying. Yet she befriends him, and later she's singing about the Beast:

It's new and a bit alarming, who'd have thought that this could be, True that he's no Prince Charming, But there's something in him that I simply didn't see.

The appearance of the Beast belies what's inside him. There's something in him that it took her a long time to

see, but it's very important. In the Disney version, the Beast dies and comes to life again as a handsome prince, and all that was inside is finally visible. The story ends, of course, on a wonderfully happy note, as fairy tales are supposed to.

Samson's story faces us with the same issues. Samson also was a hollow man. He was someone who had nothing on the inside, and God is calling for our attention in this story, I'm convinced. Is our concern for God's work in our lives focused only on the outward and tangible things? I think some of the modern fascination with miracles, healings, and all those kinds of things can at times be a desire to keep God away from attending to renewal of the inner man.

Mary Verschuyl talked this morning about "Search for Significance" groups, cell groups where fellow believers can know you well enough to help you face difficult realities. She said there's sort of a search and destroy mission to them, where we trust the Holy Spirit to search out those things that have made us less than what God wants us to be, and by the grace of God see them destroyed. That's what the power of God is for, what he cares the most about.

There was another miracle baby born just about the same time Samson was born. A barren woman named Hannah prayed to the God she loved that she might have a child. That request was granted by the miraculous intervention of God, and she had a son, whom she also dedicated to the Lord from his infancy. We have the one birth (Samson's) that was to begin the deliverance

from the Philistines, and we have the other quieter birth, heralded not by angels ascending in smoke, but by the word of a priest saying God would grant Hannah her wish. That child never had the physical power of Samson, nor was he a military figure. He was a prophet and a judge, a spokes-man for God who eventually turned people's hearts back to the Lord as he preached, encouraged, and taught the truth. Samuel was the greater figure; the power of God was more clearly displayed in him.

The opening words of Jesus' first and most famous sermon (Matthew 5:1-12) have to do with the inner qualities of the heart as opposed to the externals we might want to pursue. In conclusion, let's read these words to remind ourselves of the things God cares most about:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Tenth Message
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