

ONLY THIS ONCE

"And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once." Judges 16:28.

For approximately forty years the Israelites had been in subjection to the Philistines. During their servitude, and in spite of the apostate times, some of them remained true and faithful to God, who was preparing to deliver them from the hands of their enemies.

In the village of Zorah, nestled among the scenic hills in northern Judah, lived Manoah and his wife, who had never known the joys and responsibilities of parenthood. As old age approached, they were grievously disappointed and truly heartbroken over being deprived an heir.

God sent a messenger to the wife of Manoah to promise her a son. Through this messenger God announced His purpose in giving the boy, namely, "He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." When Manoah heard his excited wife describe the messenger and relate the contents of the message, he wanted to interview him before accepting his remarkable prophecy as being true. Presently the messenger appeared to her a second time, and she immediately called her husband. Manoah came and listened to the messenger and believed his message.

Manoah and his wife were filled with inexpressible joy at the very thought of being the parents of a son by whom the Lord should begin to deliver Israel. They resolved to do their very best to help the boy to achieve God's purpose in his life. They did not want God's gift apart from His purpose. God's messenger told Manoah's wife what to do during the pre-natal period. He commanded her to refrain from drinking or eating anything which would impair the physical well-being of the child. With unquestioning faith, she obeyed the command of God. Her correct living was causally related to the splendid physique and magnificent strength of her son.

Under these delightful auspices the boy was born. He was named Samson, which simply means "sunshine." Truly Samson was the sunshine of that home. No one could have had a better start than he. God gave him a good body, a good mind and the proper religious training. From his infancy he was dedicated to the Lord under the Nazarite vows and it was intended that he should live a godly life. A Nazarite was simply an Israelite who devoted himself to God in an unusual way. He would not partake of anything that came from the vine. He declined to indulge in the pleasures of this world. He refrained from going near the dead. His long, uncut hair was the outward evidence that he was a Nazarite.

Samson grew up in the belief that he was dedicated to God, that there was a specific work for him to do, and that God would enable him to do it. The energies of his body, the faculties of his mind, and the strength of his will were yielded to the Lord. He surrendered himself to go anywhere, to do anything, and to risk any danger for his God.

Viewed as a whole, Samson's life is a sermon in itself, one that is glad in its beginning, but sad in its ending. From the record of his life certain things are noteworthy:

I. The Feats of Strength.

A feat is simply a notable deed or achievement. In his feats of strength three things stand out.

1. He surpassed all others.

From a physical standpoint, the world has never seen his equal. His strength was a gift from God and came as a result of the faithful observance of the Nazarite vow, both by his mother and himself. His unusual strength is explained in the statement, "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him." Samson taught his contemporaries that the strength they needed to fight their battles and overcome their foes came from God alone.

For one's name to live, all that is necessary is to surpass all others in something. Emerson was correct in saying, "If a man write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap than his neighbor, though he build his house in the wilderness, the world will make a beaten path to his door." If you will do something better than anybody else does it, it will become known and the world will never forget you.

2. He slew a lion without a weapon.

As he was going to see his best girl, a young lion, with terrific roar, suddenly sprang at him. Being unarmed, Samson seized the beast by the jaws, and with iron grip, wrenched them apart, leaving the carcass by the roadside. And the record says, "But he told not his father or his mother what he had done." Not only was Samson astonished at this remarkable feat of strength, but probably he thought that not even his parents would believe him should he tell what he had done. When God gave him the victory over that young lion which roared and sprang at him, it was a warning to him that sin lay crouching at the door of his heart like that young lion waiting for his prey.

3. He slaughtered his enemies.

Samson went down to Ashkelon and slew thirty men, and returned with their garments. He then went to visit his wife. Her father would not admit him because he had given her to Samson's companion. He insisted that Samson take her younger sister. Declining to do so, in his anger Samson tied one hundred fifty firebrands to the tails of three hundred foxes and released the foxes in the grain fields, and the fire not only destroyed the grain but also the vineyards and olives. The Philistines retaliated by burning Samson's wife and father-in-law. Samson then avenged the Philistines by smiting them "hip and thigh with a great slaughter." Fearing the consequences of his action, three thousand men of Judah surrounded Samson, bound him with new cords, and delivered him to the Philistines. Immediately, he broke the cords with which he was bound, seized an impromptu weapon, "and slew a thousand men therewith."

II. The Fall of Samson.

There is only one way to fall.. Sin marks that way. No man ever committed a sin and escaped a fall. When Eve sinned she fell. When Adam sinned he fell. Samson's first sin was in affection. He made his own pleasure, instead of God's purpose, the rule of his life. He went to a Philistine town, Timnath, saw a Philistine girl, and decided to marry her. His parents counseled him against marrying the Philistine girl. They pleaded with him to marry one of his own people. They knew it was wrong for him to marry a Philistine, and so advised against it. Samson replied, "Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well." Thus, he answered their plea with the demand of his own pleasure. He made his pleasure greater than God's purpose. He disregarded God's purpose for his life, and his compromising parents accompanied him in the way of disobedience to God's clear leading. And what was the result? The record is a sad one.

His Philistine wife, who pleased him so well, before he got her, promised the Philistine that she would entice Samson to tell her the meaning of the riddle he had propounded to them at the wedding feast. When she asked him what it was he did not tell her. She then began crying and said, "Thou . . . lovest me not." He told her that he had not even told his father or mother, so she should not expect him to tell her. "And she wept before him the rest of the seven days," which was the duration of the feast. Samson could not withstand that feminine argument of tears, so he told her the answer to the riddle. She immediately betrayed him to her people, and then deserted him for another who had professed to be his friend.

Instead of profiting by this sad experience, Samson went to another Philistine town, Gaza, and there found another woman, this time an harlot. She too betrayed him to the Philistines and they compassed him in and laid in wait all night intending to kill him

when it was day. Samson rose in the middle of the night, and took hold of the brazen gates of the city, which had been shut upon him after it was discovered that he was within the city, lifted them with the posts in which they were placed, carried them to the top of a neighboring hill, and left them there.

But still Samson has not learned his lesson. Again he falls in love with a Philistine woman, Delilah, and she causes his downfall. Her people promised her eleven hundred pieces of silver if she would discover for them the secret of the champion's strength. The world is always seeking the secret of the strength of the child of God. It does so in order that it may weaken this strength and make it captive and dishonor its source. Three times she tried to get him to tell her the secret of his strength. Each time he drugged his conscience and told her a lie. Any man who thus dallies with temptation is doomed to fall. With unholy persistence and that feminine argument 'you don't love me any more or you would tell me' Delilah made a supreme attempt to accomplish her purpose. He replied that if his locks were shorn his strength would be gone.

Immediately she called in the lords of the Philistines. Then she made Samson sleep upon her knees and called for a man to shave off the seven locks of his head. When she issued the fourth challenge, "Samson the Philistines be upon thee," he rose with a determination to display again his wonderful strength. His virtue gone, his vow broken, he staggered out to grapple with his foes, and he put forth his hands to fight, "for he wist not that the Lord was departed from him," but the unhappy man found that his great power had gone from him. He handled himself as in times past, but he was powerless. His foes did as they pleased with him. They put out his eyes. They bound his limbs with fetters of brass, thrust him into prison, and forced him to grind at their machines. He provides us one of the most pathetic pictures in the Bible. Now, why should there have been such a tragic end to such a bright and auspicious beginning? Simply because of his falling into sin. Samson thought he could hold to the world with one hand and the throne of God with the other hand. Little by little he slipped away. It all goes to show us that we cannot go to sleep in the lap of the world and hold the smiles and the favor of God.

III. The Folly of Sin.

1. Sin cost Samson his strength.

When the temptress greeted him with the familiar cry: "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson," the hero arose with his old-time courage, but found that his strength was gone. God will not give us power if we refuse to use it for Him. The father loved the prodigal son while he was in the far country, but he could not bless him there. Our Father woos us when we are in the far country, but He feeds us at His own table. Sin cuts us off from His help and strength. It robs us of His power.

2. Sin cost Samson his vision.

His enemies took him and put out his eyes. When he broke with God, he broke with the light. When he went into sin he went into darkness. It is ever so. Sin means moral blindness.

3. Sin cost Samson his freedom.

It bound him with fetters of brass. It set him to working as a slave. That was not what Samson expected. He thought when he left Israel and set out to Gaza that he was going to find a larger life and a fuller freedom. That is the promise which sin has made to its votaries all through the centuries. But it is a promise that has never been kept. Sin never means freedom or liberty. It always means slavery. The very moment you step aside from the pathway of righteousness, you begin to dress your soul in chains. Samson went into the ways of wrong doing to find a larger liberty and a larger life, but he did not find either. He only found fetters and a prison house and a slave's task. It is ever so.

Satan loves to bring down the giant. He has a terrible blinding and binding power. The story of Samson is that of the tragedy of a life rich in possibilities, wondrous in God-given powers, profligate in the use of them, sinful in mind and debauched in body. What a wasted life!

Oh, the tragedy of what might have been! Samson's life is a warning post that God has put up that others might not fall into the same degradation. It is a message from God of warning to your soul.

The Philistines, the enemies of Israel and of God, were having a great celebration at Gaza, the capital of the kingdom. The celebration was in honor of their god Dagon. Their chief theme of rejoicing was that their god Dagon had delivered the mighty Samson, the Hebrew champion, into their hands. This, to them, was proof that Dagon was a mightier god than the God of Israel. When the people were well drunken, they began to shout and call for Samson to be brought forth and to exhibit his great strength. "Bring out Samson, the blind Hebrew giant! Hath not Dagon delivered him into our hands?" And here he comes. Poor, blind Samson, led by a little boy!

The spectators, crowding the roof garden of the temple and palace, commented with amazement upon the magnificent proportions of the blind giant. They began to jeer, and taunt, and mock Samson: "Where is your Jehovah? Our Dagon is mightier than your God and has delivered you into our hands. Now you will slay no more of us with the jawbone of an ass! Today you will be our sport!" But beware, Philistines! Samson's hair has grown long again.

In the open court in front of the temple and palace, in full view of the three thousand people on the roof and the other thousands massed around the courtyard, Samson gave an exhibition of his strength. After a time, he indicated to the lad who attended him that he would like to rest. The lad led him to the arched entrance to the temple. With each hand Samson embraced a pillar, and stood with his head bowed. From the balconies they called down, "Look at the giant! Samson is tired; He has to rest for a while." But Samson was not resting. He was praying. Turning his sightless eyeballs heavenward, he lifted his voice and said, "O Lord, God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once."

Suddenly the two pillars which upheld the roof gave way, and down in one roar of ruin crashed the building, burying the multitude in its debris. When the yellow dust had settled, three thousand of the Philistines lay dead amid the ruins. And there among them lay Samson. God had heard his prayer. "Only this once!" This was the remarkable thing in that final prayer of Samson.