

At the start of the 4 chapters on Samson, the Israelites were in dire straits. They had abandoned God, and suffered for 40 years under the Philistines.

Yet there is no repentance, no removal of idols, no calling out for help. This time, God acts without the usual pattern. He actively selects the last judge in the book by organising a special birth in the tribe of Dan.

Manoah is Samson's father, but his mother is nameless. Jewish tradition calls her Hatzleponi, but the Bible does not. She is simply Manoah's wife, Samson's mother or the woman. Yet, like other unnamed women in the Bible, she is important, and her faith is stronger than her husband's. He does not believe her news of a special birth.

There are parallels to other special Bible births. She was barren (like Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth: the mothers of Isaac, Samuel and John the Baptist). An angel announced the pregnancy (like Sarah, Zechariah and the virgin Mary). The angel gave special instructions (like to Zechariah) but both this mother and child were to be Nazirites. They were not to touch dead bodies, nor drink alcohol, nor cut their hair. She's told that he will deliver Israel, not from their sins (like Mary and Joseph were told about their son), but he had deliver Israel from the Philistines. Instead of believing her (like Abraham), Manoah wants the angel visit repeated, which God graciously does. We are told that (like Jesus) God blessed him as he grew, and God's Spirit stirred in him.

With such a start, we may expect Samson to be a marvellous judge. Would he be another Moses, who would falter and need a second chance, years later? Or would he be like Joshua, and courageously lead his people?

Sadly, our hopes are dashed by his actions, even before his very first fight. This strong young man fell for a Philistine woman. One rabbi has said that here was the first Jewish dad grieving over his son saying "So you can't find a good Jewish girl to marry?" Samson insisted, and the marriage was arranged.

On the way to and from her place we find his first recorded feat of strength. Near a vineyard he killed a lion with his bare hands. On the way to the wedding, he broke his Nazirite vows by touching the dead animal to retrieve honey from inside the carcase. He shared it with his parents, not telling them where it

was from.

Yet the Lord did not take his strength away.

During the 7 day wedding, he broke his vows again by drinking with the guests, and bet with the guests on a riddle which involved the honey and lion. The bewildered guests threatened to burn Samson's bride and family if she did not tell them the answer, so in an ominous foretaste of his future, she nagged him into submission. Enraged by her betrayal, Samson killed 30 Philistines to pay his bet then went back home. His father-in-law promptly married Samson's bride off to the best man.

Some months later Samson came back to collect his bride and realised what had happened, he was offered her sister instead. But vengeance flared. He captured 300 foxes, tied their tails in pairs with 150 torches, lit them and let them go among their grain fields, vineyards and olive groves.

The Philistines responded by burning Samson's ex-wife and her father. Samson fled, and when the Philistine army entered Israel's territory to capture him, the Israelites found Samson.

So did the Israelites join Samson and urge him to lead them into war to defeat the enemy? No. As usual, they blamed Samson for the trouble, and did not see God's hand in the rash actions. They did not realise that God's Spirit had stirred Samson to do those things as the way to free them from the Philistines. So they bound him and handed him over.

In all of Samson's life he never led the Israelites into battle. He fought alone. He broke the ties that bound him, and slew 1000 Philistines with the jaw bone of an ass. This brought peace for a while.

But then his lonely heart yearned again. He went to a Gaza brothel.

Surrounded, he vandalised the Gaza city gates to avoid capture, carrying the whole gate and framework for a fair distance before throwing it away.

Then, in the most well-known part of his life, he fell to the temptations of a Philistine beauty, Delilah. Under threat from the army, she nagged Samson to reveal the secret of his strength. Eventually he did, and after a haircut he was blinded, imprisoned and tortured. He broke all of the Nazirite vows. This ancient combination of Rambo and the Hulk was

impetuous, conceited, boastful, boorish, a lone ranger..

And yet, even with all these problems, we are told that God's Spirit had led him. It culminated in his destroying the temple of Dagon, killing more of the enemy in his own death than he had in his life.

For many, Samson is a great hero who delivered God's people from the Philistines. Yet at the same time, Samson seems to have embodied all that was wrong with the Judges. He had all their weaknesses.

After him, the book of Judges dissolves into leaderless debauchery. Everyone did what they thought was right in their own eyes.

Samson appeared to head that way. Yet there are constant references to God's Spirit coming on him just before he slew the Philistines. We're not simply seeing an evil beast creating havoc and destruction. His personal motives may have been self-centred and vengeful, yet God worked with him and through Him to achieve His purposes.

I am constantly amazed at how Samson, who was so unlike Jesus, is so like Jesus. They both had a special birth. But Jesus wasn't self-centred, boorish, brutish, nor Hulk-like; yet one man without an army, in dying, conquered our greatest enemy. Deserted, alone, all Israel thought he was futile and had failed. But the stone that the builders rejected surprised them.

As Jesus' arms stretched out, like Samson's, he did not destroy a pagan temple full of people, but the Jerusalem Temple curtain ripped, showing the effects of sin have been dealt with. Access to God is now open to all believers. Forgiveness is available. Through a brutal death we have life. By one man's death, our enemies are defeated.

Thank God that our Saviour is not flawed like Samson.

This is our last sermon on Judges. We have seen the spiral get worse, yet God's grace is still there even if it appears very odd to our much more refined Christian view-point.

Through the series we have seen that we cannot toy with God, thinking we can fool him with a part-time version of faith, while turning away from him when we think He is not needed anymore. God is no fool. Let us not treat Him as one. For He knows us and

understands us perfectly. And let us keep praying that our society turns back to God, so that the Judges-like messes we find our world in will be avoided by the return of the gracious mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

As we pray for that, let's also continue to work for that. Chat to the people you know. Do not be afraid to point out the wonderful news of what Jesus has done. For the benefits are great, as our gracious God rescues people. and the benefits are not only for this life, but also for eternity.