

Expecting Heroes

Our Upside-Down Series, May 15 & 16, 2021 | Judges 16:23-31
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WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A HERO?

Comic-book heroes are big business.

Forbes magazine reports that in 2019, comic books represented a \$1.2 billion industry.¹

Sales of comic books themselves are just part of a bigger entertainment industry that includes movies, cartoons, toys, and other merchandise.

The movie *Avengers: Endgame* from Marvel grossed \$2.8 billion worldwide in box-office sales alone. Comic-book heroes are big business.

Why do we like heroes?

Heroes inspire us. Comic-book heroes usually have abilities we don't all have, and it's nice to think about that possibility. However, heroes also are flawed and live lives exactly like the lives we face, yet they still do amazing things. Heroes make us realize that we can do extraordinary things as well.

Heroes protect the weak. We like seeing people make good choices, particularly heroically good choices. Research has shown that even infants are drawn to people who help others, particularly those who can't help themselves.²

Heroes fight the big battles. Heroes seek justice and bring people back from the brink. They fight evil, and good usually wins. We like them because we are wired to fight for salvation, redemption, and the Kingdom of God; God just built us that way. Plus, heroes remind us to fight the big battles as well.

Samson the Judge fit the model of a comic-book hero in some ways.

Samson was known for his strength and ability to fight.

On one occasion, Samson went to the Philistine city of Gaza and stayed overnight.

When the people of Gaza realized that Samson was inside the city overnight, they surrounded the house planning to kill him in the morning. Why did they wait until the morning to kill him? Who knows? There are unexplained parts of this story, just like in a comic book.

Samson had other plans. He woke at midnight and walked out of the house. Where were all the people waiting to kill him? Again, unexplained plot holes.

Samson went to the gates of the city that had been closed and locked for the night. He pulled them up out of the ground, put the city gates on his shoulders, and carried them 40 miles away to the Israelite city of Hebron, where he placed them on the top of a hill for everyone to see.

Samson was heroic in the sense that he possessed super-human strength and skill.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2020/10/30/new-sales-data-reveals-how-covid-19-impacted-the-comics-industry/?sh=33f50de4c9c9>

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-016-0037#abstract>

SAMSON WAS A FLAWED HERO.

In Judges 16:23-27 we find our hero in a Philistine prison.

Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained.

Who was Samson?

The Israelites' world had turned upside-down again. Many of them had done evil, so God allowed them to experience 40 years of oppression at the hands of a group of people known as the Philistines.

At some point during this time, the Lord sent his angel to a childless Israelite couple. The angel told the couple that they would have a baby. The child would be set apart for God's purposes. The baby would live according to a special vow called the Nazirite vow; the Nazirite vow included certain practices to emphasize the holy-and-set-apart nature of a person. The angel foretold that this child (Samson) would grow up to begin saving his people from the Philistines. Everything started out according to the angel's words.

Samson grew up to become extraordinarily strong and skilled.

Samson surprisingly fell in love with a Philistine woman and married her. That marriage ended in death and disaster, which led to Samson's killing 1000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone.

After that battle, Samson judged or led the Israelites for 20 years.

Who were the Philistines?

The Philistines lived to the south and west of Israel along the Mediterranean Coast, in land originally allotted to Israel by God.

The Philistines were originally from outside of the Promised Land. It's very likely that they were originally part of a nomadic group of sea people who came from somewhere along the coast of modern-day Turkey or Greece.

They settled in five city-states, each with its own ruler.

They brought customs and knowledge from the edge of Europe. However, they adopted many of the ways of the Canaanites as well.

They were hungry for commerce and expansion, which put them in conflict with Israel.³

³ DeVries, L. (2003). [Philistim](#). In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1292). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Who was Dagon?

Dagon was the Philistines' patron god.

He was a god in the pantheons of many ancient near-eastern civilizations. His worship went back thousands of years but had fallen out of favor in the time of the judges.

Dagon was probably a god of grain and storms; he was the father of Baal.

The Philistines probably found the worship of Dagon when they moved to the Promised Land, and they quickly adopted it and became enthusiastic worshippers.

They were worshipping Dagon in the passage we read in Judges 16.

How did we get here?

After judging the Israelites for 20 years, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah. Knowing that Samson (their enemy) was in love with Delilah, the rulers of the five Philistine city-states approached Delilah with an offer: discover the secret to Samson's strength, turn it over to them, and be rewarded handsomely.

Delilah worked diligently to get Samson's secret from him.

She asked him the secret to his strength three times. Each time, Samson lied to her. Each time she set a trap for him. Each time Samson got out of the trap.

The fourth time, Delilah questioned Samson's love for her.

Samson finally gave in. He told her that his strength came from the fact that, as part of his vow to the Lord, he had never cut or shaved his hair. If his head were to be shaved, then he would have broken his vow, and his strength would be gone.

Then Delilah lulled Samson to sleep, she had his head shaved while he slept, when he woke his strength was gone, and the Philistines were easily able to capture him.

The Philistines were ecstatic that they had finally overcome Samson. They gouged his eyes out, put him in chains, and forced him to work in a prison grain mill.

They kept him alive for their own entertainment.

Now, we've set the scene for what happened in Judges 16:23-27.

The five rulers of the five Philistine city-states gathered for a feast to Dagon.

They were celebrating their victory over Samson. They considered Samson a ravager of the Philistines who had killed many of them. Clearly, he was a considerable threat.

The temple of Dagon was filled. The roof was constructed in such a way that people on top could see down to the entertainment below. There were 3000 people on the roof alone.

At the feast, they wanted Samson to entertain them. In all likelihood, that meant that they were torturing him in some way. It's not clear how he entertained them.

Samson asked to be given a chance to lean on the pillars holding up the roof.

The scene was set for something heroic to happen. However...

BE CAREFUL ABOUT HEROES.

Be careful about the behavior of heroes.

Samson engaged in behavior that broke his most fundamental vows.

Samson was a Nazirite, meaning that he was set apart for God's purposes.

Numbers 6 makes three clear demands of those who are set apart by the Nazirite vow. First, touch no dead bodies. Second, drink no alcohol. Third, leave your hair uncut.

When Samson was preparing to marry for the first time, he killed a lion with his bare hands. Later, he handled the carcass and broke the first part of his Nazirite vow.

As he celebrated his wedding, he threw a party involving extensive drinking. Samson broke the second part of his Nazirite vow.

There is example after example of behavior from Samson that would shock most of us.

However, there's an important reminder: **Heroes cannot live by a different set of rules.**

It's tempting to say that, if heroes are doing big things, then we'll look the other way and allow them to behave according to their own set of rules or (basically) do whatever they want. However, what's wrong for one person is wrong for another. The same rules apply to heroes that apply to the rest of us.

Be careful about the solutions of heroes.

Samson was famous for killing Philistines. God put Samson together to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

However, Samson's solution to the Philistine problem was to kill Philistines in revenge for ways he thought that the Philistines had wronged him.

However, killing even a few thousand Philistines did nothing to deliver the people of Israel.

Be careful about the solutions of heroes. They don't always work.

In reality: **Heroes can prevent us from acting ourselves.**

Many of us are waiting for heroes to come forward. We hope that they have solutions that sound big, bold, and brave.

Have you ever heard a friend talk about a problem and opine, "Somebody should really do something about that!" They're waiting for a hero with a solution.

Many of the problems we face require us to do something ourselves. Waiting for a hero and waiting for a spectacular solution can prevent us from doing the small, significant, but difficult things that are required to make real progress on some of life's biggest problems.

Be careful about the character of heroes.

Samson found himself in the situation we find at the end of Judges chapter 16 because of fundamental flaws in his character.

Samson had a weakness for women, particularly Philistine women. The judge, ruler, and leader of Israel liked to get into relationships with Philistine women. After all the painful episodes in his life, one could easily describe Samson as addicted. He was clearly out of control.

Beyond that, Samson seemed to feel invulnerable. The leader and judge of Israel who was labelled an enemy of the state by the Philistines frequently went into Philistine territory in search of Philistine lovers. He went to Gaza, the largest of the Philistine city-states located on the far side of Philistine territory in search of a lover. One can only conclude that he thought he was invincible and impervious to Philistine attack.

One could note many more character flaws in Samson.

Samson reminds us: **Heroes are always flawed individuals.**

While we like to think that our heroes are different from the rest of us, all our heroes are always human beings. We human beings are flawed. That's our starting point.

Living larger than life lives frequently exaggerates our character flaws.

We need to be careful about the character of heroes.

Many heroes are like *The Wizard of Oz*.

I'm speaking now of the famous 1939 movie starring Judy Garland.

The movie features a fictional wizard, Oz, who appears to be a giant floating head in a kind of temple featuring loud noises and flashing fire. Oz speaks with a booming voice.

Late in the movie, Dorothy and her travelling companions come before Oz. The wizard is trying to put off the requests they have made.

As Oz is speaking, Dorothy's dog, Toto, pulls back a curtain exposing a man running a set of controls and speaking into a microphone.

The surprised man tries to close the curtain, and the voice of Oz booms, "Ignore that man behind the curtain."

Nope. Dorothy opens the curtain and reveals that, in fact, Oz the great and terrible wizard is just a con man from Kansas.

And that's the truth about many of our heroes. Behind the curtain that protects their true identity, they're just ordinary people from ordinary places.

We need to pull the curtains open and see people (especially heroes) for who they truly are.

I'm not against heroes. Normally when I preach, I like to call us all to be real-life heroes. I like for all of us to be heroic people who do heroic things!

However, we must be very, very careful when making someone else our hero. Why? Heroes (like idols) can displace God.

GOD WAS THE REAL HERO.

In Judges 16:28-31, we read about the end of Samson.

Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life. Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.

Samson's death indicated that his faith in the Lord was growing.

Samson prayed to the Lord. To this point we have seen very little that demonstrated that Samson thought about God or his perspective.

He asked the Lord to give him strength one more time. Finally, Samson seemed to realize that his strength came from the Lord and not from himself.

Samson's epic death defined his leadership of Israel.

He grasped the two middle pillars and pushed with all his might.

The pillars came down and collapsed the house.

The Bible notes that the collapse of the temple killed everyone inside.

Given that 3,000 people were on the roof, the death toll was certainly in the thousands—many of whom would have been Philistine nobles and leaders.

In a sad note, though, we learn that Samson killed more Philistines that day than in the rest of his life combined.

In 20 years of judging Israel, his impact was just a start on changing the world.

The Bible contains no note about Samson's life or death producing peace.

The LORD was the real hero of this story.

All along, the Lord is the one acting.

Not only did the Lord cause Samson's birth, but the Lord did so for a purpose. In **Judges 13:5** we read that that angel of the Lord said about Samson:

...he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

God's purpose for Samson's life was that he would start a work the Lord would continue after the judge was long gone.

God was the one who gave Samson his strength and skill. God didn't do it magically because of the length of Samson's hair. God did it because he's the hero of this story.

God was the one who constantly pushed Samson to act to begin delivering his people.

God was the one saving Israel. God was the real hero of this story.

GOD IS THE HERO WE NEED TO TRUST.

The LORD was the hero who continued to save Israel.

The war with the Philistines had just begun.

If you're familiar with the Old Testament, after Samson came the prophet/priest/judge Samuel, followed by Israel's first king, Saul. They both fought against the Philistines.

David, who would grow up to become Israel's second and perhaps greatest king, stepped into the limelight of history when he killed a Philistine champion named Goliath with a sling. David spent much of his life fighting with and against Philistines.

Other kings fought against Philistines as well.

The Lord was still in the process of saving Israel.

Back at the beginning of the book of Judges, it became clear that the Israelites were not ready to push out all of the people who would be a danger to them.

Therefore, the Lord decided to leave them in place. That included the Philistines. God explained why in **Judges 2:21-22**:

"I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not."

The Philistines were more than a simple test of Israelite faithfulness. God wasn't just *testing* their faithfulness to him; he was *shaping* it. God was turning Israel into a nation, a people, that belonged to him.

The LORD was the hero saving Israel.

The LORD is also the real hero saving us.

The LORD was shaping Israel so that, when the time was right, they would be the people through whom Jesus would come into the world. We can easily look at all human history as an arc that leads to Jesus. The migration of people, the development of cultures, the advent of technologies, the rise and fall of empires all prepare the world for Jesus. God is truly heroic.

Beyond that, as we look at Jesus, we find that the LORD is undoubtedly our hero.

Jesus set aside the rights and privileges of divinity to take on human flesh.

Jesus the Christ took on the full weight of human sin and bore that on the cross. He allowed all the wrath of God the Father to be poured out on him. He took it all. And he died.

Then Jesus rose again, victorious over sin. He brought us forgiveness, adoption, new life, and eternal life.

Jesus is coming again. He will speak a word and death and evil will be no more.

The LORD will cast sin, death, evil, and all who belong to it into a lake of fire.

The LORD will resurrect heaven, earth, and us so that we might live with him forever in a place he has prepared.

If that's not heroic, I don't know what is. The LORD is the real hero saving us.

God is the hero we can trust.

Psalm 20:7-8 helps explain what I mean.

Psalm 20:7-8 is the pair of Bible verses we are memorizing together right now. The verses say:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.

Verse 7 tells us what we do with heroes: we trust in them. We trust in chariots, horses, and heroes.

As we've looked at the book of Judges so far, we've seen that story. We've seen people trust in chariots, camels, large armies, false gods, and (now) heroic, strong, skillful leaders.

We are frequently no different. We trust in our tools, our celebrities, our wealth, our insurance policies, our vacation plans, our jobs, and ourselves.

Verse 8 tells us the outcome: the world turns upside-down. (I'm paraphrasing.)

Then Verse 7 tells us what the life of Samson clearly calls for from us: trust in the name of the Lord our God. He's the hero we need.