

THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

Everyone Needs Help

On the piece of paper I've given you this morning, I want you to have a go at drawing Samson! It doesn't have to be a piece of art, just a guess at what Samson might have looked like! Ok... now take a moment to share your pictures with those next to you.

So, what have you come up with? What do you think Samson would be like physically? I'm guessing that one of the main attributes we give to Samson is that he was strong! We know that because we are familiar with the story, or at least some of it, that at times he was enabled with great strength. We then carry in our minds a picture of what 'great strength' looks like.

We know he kills a lion with his bare hands because the story tells us. We know he caught 300 foxes and tied them together in pairs by their tails because the story tells us. We know that when he was caught and tied with two new ropes he was able to break free as if the ropes were made of charred flax, because the story tells us. We know that he simply picked up the city gate in Gaza and carried it on his shoulders, because the story tells us. We know he was able to destroy the temple by pushing apart two of the supporting pillars, because the story tells us.

We know that Samson was, from time to time, filled with great strength, because the story tells us. My best guess is that we carry in our mind the image of a man who looked physically strong. If you met the winner of Mr Universe or the world's strongest man... you'd expect to see a physique with bulging, rippling muscles, wouldn't you? When we think of Samson being strong, that's how we think of him. But here's a thought...

If you ever met Mr Universe and saw his bulging, rippling muscles you'd probably think: "Wow! He must be strong, look at those muscles!" You would have no doubt why he was strong – you'd be able to see it! The Philistines had no idea what gave Samson his strength. We know that because the story tells us.

Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. ⁵ The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."

⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

⁷ Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."

⁸ Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. ⁹ With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied."

¹¹ He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man."

¹² So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

¹³ Delilah then said to Samson, "All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied."

He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric ¹⁴ and tightened it with the pin.

Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

¹⁵ Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.” (Judges 16 v 4-15)

So, here’s the question: If Samson looked like a strong man, don’t you think the Philistines would have attributed his strength to his muscles and physique? Point is, they didn’t know why he was strong – but it probably wasn’t because he looked like a strong man.

We have images of what it means to be strong, don’t we? Perhaps though, in truth, Samson doesn’t match up to our imagination of what it looks like to be strong! Perhaps Samson looked a bit more like me...in an Old Testament, Hebrew sort of a way! (I’m hoping you understand what I mean!)

Perhaps Samson looked like most normal men of his time. And here’s a slightly provocative thought that is probably mostly speculation but that I love: what if Samson looked more like a wimp than a strong man. Stay with me because that is not perhaps such an outrageous thought as it might at first appear, and it might point us to a deep, deep truth in the story of Samson. It might point us to a deep, deep truth about us, you and me. It might also point us to a deep, deep truth about this church – especially today as we celebrate our church anniversary, and commit ourselves to following God again, together, over the coming year.

The deep, deep truth about Samson is this: no matter what he looked like, Samson was called to experience great strength that came from God. Whatever he was like physically, and he may indeed have looked like a strong man, the ultimate source of his strength was not found in him – it was found in God alone!

Samson was called to walk in a strength that came not from within himself, but from the breath of God within him. Perhaps another way of saying that is this: “Not by might or by power, but by my spirit,” says the Lord Almighty.” (Zechariah 4 v 6)

There are different ways that we use and understand the word strong. It doesn’t only apply to physical strength, sometimes when people suffer a painful or debilitating illness, we describe them as being strong in the way they bear it: “She is so strong despite the pain.”

Sometimes when we face a difficult situation, we remind ourselves and each other to be strong: “You can do this, be strong, remember who you are.”

When life gets tough, when tragedy strikes, when life takes an unexpected turn, we all want to be strong. We want others to look at us in these times and say of us that we are strong. We want to be strong in the face of fear and uncertainty, and we hope that if something ever does happen that shocks us, surprises us, disappoints us, or if our worst case scenario becomes a reality... we hope that we will be strong and we hope that if, one day, we are ever caught up in an act of terror, we will be strong and find it in ourselves to help others rather than run.

We all, don't we, aspire to be strong? None of us, I doubt, want to be a coward...do we?

Here perhaps is where the story of Samson becomes such a challenge to us today, as followers of Christ. Samson was called to walk in a strength that came not from within himself, but from the breath of God within him. I suggest that if you remember nothing else from this series in Samson, that deep, deep truth is what you want to hold on to.

Friends, the truth is simply this: as a flawed, fallen human being you cannot, however strong you might be, live the Christian life. Jesus said: "Love one another." (John 13v34) Paul said that love is two things: "Love is patient, love is kind." (1 Corinthians 13 v 4) I am doing ok until I put my name here: "I am patient, I am kind." Now I'm struggling! Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Mathew 5 v 3) I say: "Hey, I want to be the hero of the story!" Jesus told people that their righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees (Mathew 5 v 20) and everyone knew that was impossible.

And that's the point...exactly!

It was for Samson and it was for the people in Jesus' time, and it still is today: humanly speaking, the Christian life is impossible! Samson's great strength came from the breath of God within him. To live the beatitudes is not to live up to an external set of rules...but to have the life of God within, changing us to live more like Jesus.

The Christian life is not followers being strong enough to live well: it is a transformation of a life that comes from the breath of God within. Which is, actually, really, really good news for people like me, because it means that I can give up trying to be strong on my own and live a life worthy of the gospel in my own strength, because quite simply, it's impossible! Neither is it what

God asks or expects! He doesn't ask it or expect it of you either, however strong you think you might be!

Samson probably makes many mistakes, but perhaps his most significant comes when he has killed 1,000 Philistines with the jaw bone of a donkey. Then Samson said: "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men." (Judges 15 v 16)

Samson believes he did it! Samson announces his faith in his own abilities, he celebrates only himself and he makes no reference to God whatsoever. It's probably true to say that even the Philistines didn't believe Samson did it all on his own. When they finally captured him, they celebrated by praising their own gods. Even they believed they had help far beyond themselves – however misplaced that belief actually was!

Maybe his own self-belief is what led to Samson's downfall – why would he tell the secret unless maybe he thought it really was his own strength? But then, maybe, in his last act, he got it right. As he stood between the pillars of the Philistine temple he asks for God's power and strength one more time. This time he recognised he couldn't do it on his own.

Friends, every one of us needs help to follow Christ and live a life worthy of the gospel. Our strength comes ultimately from the breath that comes from God's divine presence within us, and to live well in God's bigger and better story, we would do well to cultivate ways to find our strength in God alone.

Please don't misunderstand me: we are all people with strengths. But because we are all flawed, fallen human beings, we are also all people with weakness. And sometimes we are weak precisely because we are also strong...and then we fall for Satan's lie and we try to do it on our own. The truth is, in strength and in weakness, we need the breath of God within us.

So, how are you doing friends?

Today, on this anniversary day, I think it would be good for us to ask this question: How are we doing friends? We are a church, a community of the people of God with great strengths. We are also a church, a community of the people of God with weaknesses, and we need the help of the breath of God within us.

The moment we stand on a hill and announce: "Look at what we've done!" we are in trouble! The minute the Vision becomes about what we want to do or

see or achieve, we have a problem. The moment we set our plans in stone and close our eyes and ears to what God is doing, we have a problem. As a community of the people of God we need help: we need help in our strength and we need help in our weaknesses.

I would like to be part of a church that understands and works through its strengths, and I would like to be part of a church that is honest enough to acknowledge and face its weakness.

I would like to be part of a church that:

- Is led by leaders who lead diligently
- Grows effective ministries working in our strengths
- Has life groups that bring life
- Has open and honest worship focusing on God and his word
- Is full of people fully devoted to following Christ day by day
- Genuinely seeks to be so much more than Sunday
- Has a desire to serve the community
- That values and supports families and family life
- Is a place of transformation
- Has people that are fulfilled through serving in their gifts
- Reaches the lost
- Seeks first the kingdom of the heavens.

That kind of church is one that, I think, honours God. But we need help to do any of that, or be any of that. That is why we have set aside this next week for prayer. Paul urges the Colossians to be devoted to prayer (Colossians 4 v 2). Why? Because he is aware they need help! So, we are going to spend some time, together, seeking God and asking for his help.

I'm really hoping that you will find it in your heart to join us, whether in the church here, or at a time set aside in your home, or workplace – or wherever it might be.

God sent Samson, told a young, barren wife she would have a son who would be special... because Israel was asleep! Israel desperately needed God's help, and Samson desperately needed God's help because, quite simply, without God, Israel and Samson could do nothing.

God breathed life into Samson and gave him great strength to do something impossible – rescue Israel.

And God wants to breathe his life into his church. Friends, let us not be asleep to the life that God wants to breathe into his community for the glory of the kingdom of the heavens.

Let us open ourselves to his divine presence and his divine help over these next few days, and let's discover together what God has in store.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 16th September 2018, by Rev. Ian Phillips.