

## *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*

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### DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

*All the world is but a cookie jar, and everyone a crumb. I just happen to be a chocolate chip!* I think it was Garfield who said that – but I am not entirely sure! Winston Churchill put it this way: “We are all worms. But I do believe that I am a glow worm!”

A multi-millionaire called Nicholas van Hoogstraten started building a house for himself near Uckfield: Hamilton House. He began building it in 1985 and by 2006 had spent in the region of £ 40 million on it. The unfinished house has a copper dome and is larger than Buckingham Palace. He has built into the building his own mausoleum – to remember himself. Under English law, perpetual trusts are only allowed in the upkeep of monuments and graves. Could this be his bid to be remembered in perpetuity?

King Nebuchadnezzar walked on the roof of the Royal Palace of Babylon and surveyed his kingdom. He came to this conclusion: “Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the Royal residency, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4 v 30) Turns out he was wrong, very wrong, and it almost cost him his kingdom.

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world is the hanging gardens of Babylon. Some historians credit King Nebuchadnezzar with building the hanging gardens of Babylon. Monuments like the hanging gardens of Babylon had everyone in awe and were meant to last forever.

The other wonders of the ancient world were:

The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus

The Statue of Zeus at Olympus

The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus

The Colossus of Rhodes

## The Lighthouse of Alexandria

In their day, these were awesome; today they are gone, you can't see a single one of them. Truth is, kingdoms come and go and even great monuments don't last. The man who declared himself to be the greatest thing that ever lived, died on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2016: his name was Muhammad Ali.

Samson, it turns out, also seemed to think he was the greatest!

### Samson's Vengeance on the Philistines

**15** Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.

<sup>2</sup> "I was so sure you hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your companion. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."

<sup>3</sup> Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." <sup>4</sup> So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, <sup>5</sup> lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

<sup>6</sup> When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion."

So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. <sup>7</sup> Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I swear that I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." <sup>8</sup> He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

<sup>9</sup> The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. <sup>10</sup> The people of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?"

"We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."

<sup>11</sup> Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?"

He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me."

<sup>12</sup> They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines."

Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves."

<sup>13</sup> "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. <sup>14</sup> As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. <sup>15</sup> Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

<sup>16</sup> 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."

<sup>17</sup> When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.

<sup>18</sup> Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" <sup>19</sup> Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.

<sup>20</sup> Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

Samson and the Philistines just want to get even. That is not a good way to live, and here it leads from one disaster to another. The Israelites in their comfortably numb state decide the best thing to do is to hand Samson over to the Philistines and be done with him. Somewhat bizarrely, Samson allows himself to be tied up with a rope by the Israelites and handed to his enemies... on the promise that the Israelites won't kill him themselves.

The excited shouts of the Philistines as they come to get him seemed again to cause Samson to be stirred by God's spirit. The ropes fell from Samson easily, and suddenly, endowed with this immense strength, he took the path of

vengeance once again. What happens is as frightening and unsavoury as it is extraordinary.

This part of the story is violent and ugly, and quite humanly impossible. We've all probably seen films or read stories where one man or woman manages to defeat enemies who outnumber them. Mostly we watch thinking: "that would never happen." But we are able to suspend belief because we are, in fact, watching a film or reading a book.

No film or book would have one man or one woman, fight in hand to hand combat and at the same time 1,000 enemies. That would simply be ridiculous. No-one, however good they were and however highly trained in the art of hand to hand combat, could defeat 1,000 enemies. They would, in truth, simply be overwhelmed.

So, what is slightly unsettling is the truth that it appears something supernatural is going on here. You notice too the text tells us Samson used the jaw bone of a donkey. By doing that he again technically broke his Nazarite vow (can't touch a dead thing!) This is challenging, isn't it? Samson breaks his vows again and God seems to be involved in his victory. This is nothing like what we think of when we think of being Christian is it? (Although, of course, technically Samson wasn't Christian – but you get the point!)

Perhaps to make it even worse, the Christians – in this case in the form of the 3,000 men from Judah – simply stood by and watched the slaughter unfold, and absolutely no comment in the text is made about that! You'd have thought they'd have wanted to help Samson defeat the Philistines – but they make no move at all.

Our 'Christian' sensibilities probably persuade us to think they maybe should have stopped the slaughter. Samson fought, quite alone! That, of course, is not true! But it is what Samson appears to believe about what happened. He thinks he's the greatest.

<sup>16</sup> 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.” (verse 16)

Samson takes all the credit: “I am the greatest!” He even names the hill after his victory: Ramath Lehi – Jawbone Hill! (v17) Samson never mentions God! Samson names a monument to himself.

How do you live?

When we live to make our mark, to impress others with our words or our deeds, or to impress others with our gifts or our talents, maybe without realising it, we find ourselves living the story of Samson.

When we feel like we’re on a stage and we spend our time performing; when we become bitter and envious because we are not noticed; when we find ourselves doing things simply to prove we can; when we take credit for what, in truth, God has done, then perhaps we find ourselves living in the story of Samson, and we live to build something to ourselves.

Here’s, I think, a challenging thought: Perhaps too, we live to build something to ourselves when we form relationships on the basis of our being able to minister to others, while believing others can do little for us.

In the end, this is about pride. Samson really thought he was something, and it even comes out in the prayer he prays! He’s thirsty after his victory so he now cries out to God – demanding a drink! What’s interesting is that he doesn’t want to fall into the hands of the Philistines...because he is quite happy to marry one – and later he’ll be happy to visit a Philistine prostitute! And, shockingly, God continues to bless Samson! He gives him a drink.

What appears fascinating here is that by calling himself a servant of the Lord, Samson likens himself to Moses and, it appears, God responds to him as he did Moses: by pouring water from a rock (Exodus 17 v 5-7).

Samson on Jawbone Hill, naming it after himself, being given the power of God, Samson crying out in prayer even if it’s solely about himself and experiencing the miracle of answered prayer, and all the while Samson taking pride in himself. This really is extraordinary.

Standing on another hill, another man whose mother was visited by an angel and who was set apart before his birth, one who would give his life so that others would be saved...taught a different way of living.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught that there is a much better way to follow God and live significantly. As he talks about giving, praying and fasting he teaches that what is really important is to live before an audience of one. When we live before, and for, an audience of one, we live in the far bigger and far better story of God's gracious love.

I so often find myself living the story of Samson, when in truth, I am not called or invited to follow him – it's much, much better than that. I am called and invited to follow the other man on the other hill – Jesus! When I walk his way and live in his story, I live with no delusions of grandeur, but I live as one of whom he says: "I am especially fond of this one!"

I live in the truth of the far bigger and far better story of the kingdom of the heavens. Maybe when we live in the bigger and better story, it begins to look more like this:

*You know, when we met, I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth and a lack of pretence that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit – no sign of internal stagnation anywhere. I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw that you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure and financial gain. And I had never met anyone like that before.*

*I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn't judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity – and not just to me, but to other people as well.*

*And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for those reasons and a whole host of others, I found myself really wanting what you had. Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived out your Christian life in front of me.*

Live significantly, not with delusions of grandeur, but in the far bigger and far better story where there is an audience of one!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2018, by Rev. Ian Phillips.