

THE FOWLER'S SNARE

I once asked a friend of mine who was a Vicar this question: “What is the hardest part of your job?” He answered without hesitation: “Oh that’s easy, the hardest part of this job is working with, and trying to help, people who do not want to change.”

It was the same Vicar who I spent many hours talking to over a number of years about all sorts of things. It was the same Vicar who taught me many things about myself which were extraordinarily helpful in me learning about who I am.

It was the same Vicar who would phone me the evening before the start of a new school term, when I was teaching. When I asked him why he did this, he said: “I know what you’re like Ian. You’ll be sitting worrying about the first day of term when there’s nothing more you can do to be ready. I phone you so you won’t be sitting worrying, you’ll be talking to me!”

It was the same Vicar who helped me understand that I would be much better off going out and doing something the evening before term started because otherwise I simply worry about the next day.

It was also the same Vicar who one day in our conversation said to me: “You do realise Ian, there are things about you that will never change?” He helped me to understand that because of life’s circumstances and because of the particular way I’m wired up, I will always find some things easy and there are other things I will always find hard, some of them, very hard.

God’s greatest desire for those he loves is that they reach their full redemptive potential. God’s greatest desire for you is that you reach your full redemptive potential. That’s another way of saying that God’s greatest desire for you is that you become the best person you can be. The truth is that God loves you just the way you are. He looks down on you and he nudges Gabriel and he

says: "I am especially fond of this one." There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less.

The story of Samson is challenging, sometimes frightening, ugly and certainly violent. Samson appears to get many things wrong. He lives in a way that we mostly find hard to understand, and yet, the Lord blessed him, and the Lord loves him. So even when you find yourself in the story of Samson, you are greatly loved by God.

Does that mean that Samson grew to reach his full redemptive potential? We've already seen that it may be that Samson was totally oblivious to what God was trying to do through him. Perhaps Samson never reached his full redemptive potential because he was foolhardy and reckless and spent his time pursuing happiness... rather than giving himself to the agitating pull of God's spirit within him.

For Samson to have reached his full redemptive potential, there were some things about him that really needed to change. And that will be true of me and of you. You are greatly loved by God! You are! But he loves you far too much to leave you the way you are. His greatest desire is that you reach your full redemptive potential, and the truth is, some things will need to change.

So, perhaps the question becomes: Will you live like Samson, or will you respond to and follow the pull of God's spirit within you?

Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her.² The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.
(Judges 15 v 20 - 16 v 3)

It appears that by the time we get to chapter 16 of Judges, Samson has been leading Israel for twenty years. He's not been a leader in a way that we would

recognise and he's not been a Judge in a formal sense, and he's been a leader in the days when Israel was ruled by the Philistines.

Perhaps, at best, Samson's leadership was the inspiration he gave with his skirmishes with the Philistines at various points. After twenty years though, the Philistines were still in control.

Some commentators want to add the word 'then' at the beginning of chapter 16, as a more accurate translation. If you take out the chapter break (which wasn't in the original text) and add 'then', here's how it reads: Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines. Then one day he went to Gaza where he saw a prostitute...

Some things about Samson haven't changed, have they? Twenty years as some sort of leader and judge and then one day he goes to Gaza and visits a prostitute. He is still being led by his eyes! Perhaps you could say twenty years and nothing has changed. The last Philistine woman his eyes led him to (as far as is recorded) betrayed him!

So will this one. Twenty years and nothing has changed!

Gaza was one of the Philistine's more important cities and was deep in their territory. It begs the question: Why did Samson go all the way to Gaza? Gaza is some forty miles from Samson's home and is deep in enemy territory, but he goes anyway – placing himself in considerable danger. Maybe some things need to change.

Perhaps Samson believes he is invincible – after all he's never been captured... yet! Perhaps being away from home gives him the disguise he wants so that he can follow his eyes one more time. I'm wondering if there's a truth here that is the same for us. It is the truth that we are all victims of temptation: temptation lurks at our door, just as it did at Samson's.

So, Samson goes to Gaza, a long way from home, taking a risk, feeling invincible. Perhaps that's what temptation offers us too: it's different, unpredictable and risky. Temptation draws us to the fowler's snare: the very place change needs to happen if we are to reach our full redemptive potential. Perhaps Gaza represents the fowler's snare in many different places, but mostly, perhaps, Gaza is found within each of us in different ways:

- A foreign city within us with a different moral landscape, a place of spice and adventure.
- A habit we keep to ourselves, but which we know is, in truth, destructive.
- A fantasy we regularly re-visit – something we refuse to change.

Gaza could be the place we go where we are very different to the person we are at home, in church. I had a lovely, deeply honest conversation with a team member of a beach mission over the summer. They recognised it's easy to be a Christian when you are immersed in a beach mission and part of a team, but what they wanted was to be the same person in all the places they go – to live the same way in every place.

Gaza can be the places we go where we are a different person, where we act differently, speak differently or think differently to the person we are in church or in our life group.

How are you doing?

I'm wondering if there are things that perhaps need to change. Samson had led Israel for twenty years and still took trips to Gaza. One commentator writes: "Entrenched sin divides our hearts and minds, confuses us and depresses us; it promises us life and then steals it away."

So I'm wondering: how are you doing?

God's greatest desire is that you reach your full redemptive potential. There is, however, a battle raging, and it's the battle for your heart. There is another who waits to steal your heart away from you reaching your full redemptive potential – one who comes to kill, steal and destroy. And he is skilled in the art and use of temptation, it's a tactic he's used since the very beginning.

"Did God really say?...You will be like God."

He's clever. He knows your weaknesses. His desire is to trap you in his fowler's snare and keep you there. Samson appears to think he can keep escaping, and at one level that appears to be true. But...but he lead Israel for twenty years, and then one day he went to Gaza. Nothing's changed.

Perhaps Satan's greatest asset is that he's patient: He will wait! Just as the hunter sets his trap and waits, so Satan is quite prepared to wait, for you!

I once went on a survival weekend (actually it was more like a survival 36 hours). We had to build a shelter, learn how to make a fire that gave out lots of smoke, ration our food, make a fire and make ourselves easy to find.

At the end of the time we were shown how to build a trap for small animals, like rabbits! The problem, we were told, about building a trap to catch our food was one of time. If you make an animal trap you have to be patient: animals won't go near a trap if they catch any scent from the one who left it there. That's not good for survival, because to survive you need food now – you don't have time to wait. For an animal to get caught in the fowler's snare requires time and patience.

Mostly, if we understood we were headed for Gaza, we would probably do something about it. If we recognised the danger we were putting ourselves in, we would want out. But the one who comes to kill, steal and destroy is clever and patient and he knows where we are weak and vulnerable. He knows that given time we are prone to return to the fowler's snare.

Harry Houdini (real name Erik Weisz) was an escapologist of extraordinary talent. He could escape, it seemed, from anything, whether ropes, chains, handcuffs or straight-jackets. He gained a reputation for being invincible. One night, while in his dressing room in Montreal in 1926, a young boxer asked him if it was true that he could take any punch to the abdomen. Only half paying attention, Houdini said yes he could. As Houdini stood from the couch on which he was sitting, the boxer suddenly unleashed three punches to his stomach. The blows ruptured his appendix. At the end of the show two nights later he collapsed. He died a few days later – the fatal result of blows he was not ready for.

Satan will wait...

You are greatly loved by God: You are – right now in these moments. God's greatest desire for you is that you reach your full redemptive potential, and he loves you too much to leave you as you are, and he does not want you to be trapped in the fowler's snare.

Jesus said: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8 v 36)

We can choose to live like Samson who one day went to Gaza, or we can live in the truth that God longs for us to live in freedom – freedom from those things that lead us to Gaza. We may require the help and the wisdom of others; we may well need to make ourselves accountable in some areas of life. We will certainly need to be honest with ourselves and honest before God, but God has our very best interests at heart, and he longs for us to reach our full redemptive potential. And God in his magnificent love is endlessly patient. He is waiting, hoping and longing that you will turn again to him.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 4th November 2018, by Rev. Ian Phillips.