

WHEN HEROES FAIL US

Are there any heroes left? Do you have anyone in your life you would consider a hero? Are there men or women who you look up to?

Our children and teenagers look up to a variety of stars as models to follow. Miley Cyrus and the Jonas Brothers have captured the younger hearts. Others look to professional sports for their heroes and with good reason. When a young person achieves a goal at a young age it amazes us, be it the popular attention of Hannah Montana or the exploits of Sidney Crosby. They have excelled beyond what their age expects.

Eventually heroes will fail us. Their claims of purity are washed away by the tabloids exploiting their broken vows. Athletes are revealed as steroid users and running gambling rings. Peel away the veneer of any hero and you will see things that are less than admirable.

My silver screen hero has always been John Wayne. He was a larger than life kind of person. When he entered a room he commanded the attention of everyone present. Because of him my heroes have always been cowboys.

But did you know that his real name was Marion Robert Morrison? Marion? What kind of a macho name is that? And did you know that he hated horses? What kind of cowboy hates horses? He had a stunt double do most of his riding. It was thought that John Wayne won World War 2 all by himself, at least if you watched "Sands of Iwo Jima" or "the Fighting Sea-Bees." Did you know he refused to enlist so he wouldn't ruin his career? Wayne was a great pretender.

Heroes will inevitably fail us. But that's okay for a number of reasons. One is that they are human and humans fail. Second, it puts the responsibility for right living back on us and asks "what will you do with this situation?" And ultimately it asks us what it takes to be a hero of the faith.

Let's look at the failings of one hero, Samson, and learn together what God wants of his heroes.

1. From Great Potential to Great Pretending

Samson was born with the potential to be absolutely great. We saw in Judges 13 how his barren mother was promised a child by none other than the Angel of the LORD. Samson was to be a Nazirite, a man set apart from others for the special purpose of delivering his people.

Samson's biography is taken up in Judges 14 when he is around twenty years old. His childhood is not revealed to us and so we begin to know him as an impetuous young man.

The writer of Judges reveals a lot about Samson in very subtle tones. Five times the expression "went down" is used in this chapter. "**Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman**" (v. 1). There is more than geography involved here; this is more telling than a man descending from an elevated town to a town in the valley. What the writer wants us to understand is that Samson was going down in a moral sense. He went to a Philistine town, in itself a clue, and began a spiritual descent into sin. We know this because he went down to the Philistines, political and spiritual enemies of Israel, not to war on them, but to visit.

Here we see our second subtle clue into Samson's personality. Why was he visiting with Philistines? Samson had what I call "Philistine envy." Philistines were technologically more advanced than the Israelites. Their civilization was more established and therefore more attractive. Philistine women also seemed to be more attractive, at least to Samson. He came back from Timnah and said to his parents, "**I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife**" (v. 2).

Samson's parents try to talk him out of this obsession. He has only seen this woman and thinks he loves her. His lust is based only on what he has seen since he has not talked to her. And worst of all, she's a Philistine. Her godlessness will surely drag him down in his faith. Samson ignores his parents' warning and persists, "**Get her for me. She's the right one for me**" (v. 3). So under Philistine envy we

find out two more things: Samson does not listen to Godly counsel; and he is driven by what he sees and lusts for.

Thirdly, our story offers a final subtle clue into Samson's personality. He is a Nazirite, but he doesn't take this vow seriously. A Nazirite was a person set apart for God and according to Numbers 6 was not to touch a dead body, was not to drink alcohol, and was not to cut his hair. These commitments were symbols of where the heart was at.

Now look at what Samson does. A young but mature lion attacks Samson and Samson tears him apart like Kleenex. Later some bees make a hive in the dead lion and Samson, visiting his great victory, discovers honey in the dead lion. He takes the honey out of the dead lion and eats it, even giving some to his parents, who didn't know it came from a dead thing. Later, Samson makes a bet with his thirty companions concerning this lion and the honey. Here's a riddle he says, "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet" (v. 14). When the Philistines can't answer the riddle, they threaten his bride-to-be and find out the answer. Samson loses the bet. But he has to pay up with thirty suits of clothes according to the wager. Samson kills thirty other Philistines and takes their clothes. How does he get the clothes? He has to touch dead bodies to retrieve the clothing.

Let's not forget that this wager was made at a feast in his honor as the groom of the wedding. The word for feast in Hebrew suggests that it was a drinking party. So two of Samson's vows are shattered in lust and rage. All he is left with is his long hair, the only outer sign of his vow.

Samson was a man of great potential to do amazing things for the LORD. Instead of living up to his billing, he became a great pretender of the faith. His hair said he was special on the outside, but inside his heart he had divided loyalties, lust, and a personal ambition that drove him down the moral slope into spiritual depravity.

2. What was God's purpose for Samson?

If we summarize the life of Samson we would probably agree that he was not a great judge. He never led an army to victory over the Philistines. He did not lead his people politically or spiritually in terms of reform. He did not act as a judge but rather acted independently and selfishly.

And yet more space is given in the book of Judges to this judge than any other. Still more perplexing is his inclusion in the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11:32. He is among the greats of our faith. How could this be? What could God possibly do with this Samson?

I want to propose this solution to you: Samson was the perfect lesson to Israel. He was a living lesson, an example, a parable if you will. Samson represented Israel and showed Israel how corrupt they had become.

Samson is captivated by all things Philistine. He is enthralled with Philistine women, Philistine parties, and Philistine lifestyle. He was periodically enraged with them and killed them in wholesale lots, but he preferred them to his own people and his own traditions, and he was mirroring the nation of Israel in all these things. For Israel was captivated also by the godless things of this world and loved the lifestyle of the unfaithful.

We can see the resemblance now, can't we? Samson went down spiritually; Israel went down spiritually. Samson had Philistine envy; Israel had Philistine envy. Samson broke his vows to God; Israel forgot the covenant they had with the LORD.

Here was a man of incredible birth and giftedness. He had the Holy Spirit come upon him in power to do amazing feats, yet he was carried away with the world. That was Israel. And my friends, that is us.

We have been given an incredible new birth through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received gifts to do his work. And he has given us the permanent indwelling of his Holy Spirit, where Samson only had him temporarily. And yet we suffer from Philistine envy.

We cannot seem to help ourselves as Christians. If the world has something shiny and new then we want it too. We are partying with the Philistines and not just condoning their lifestyle but indulging in it too. I don't want to get legalistic and start bashing our possessions or our liberties as we understand them under grace. I do want to ask this open ended question: What makes us different from our world?

3. Empowered but not controlled by the Holy Spirit

Despite Samson's seeming unfaithfulness God used him. Three times in our present chapter we see the LORD's involvement in his life.

When he sees the Philistine woman and desires her, his parents are appalled. But we read, "**His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines...**" (v. 4). God used Samson's lust for his own purposes. Now we don't want to get carried away with the false idea that we should sin so God can use us. This was a specific plan for a specific time and person. Nevertheless, God used this opportunity to his advantage.

When the lion attacked Samson as he was going "down" to Timnah, "**The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power...**" (v. 6). We read the same expression when Samson went to Ashkelon to kill 30 Philistines, "**Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power...**" (v. 19).

These three occasions lead to an important question: Is it possible to be empowered by the Holy Spirit but not controlled by the Holy Spirit? Samson clearly was not controlled by the Holy Spirit. He made his own decisions and the Holy Spirit worked within those decisions. It's scary but true – we too may be empowered by the Spirit to do great things, but other evidence in our lives will suggest we are not always controlled by the Spirit. I only need to look at my own life to know this is true.

That word "controlled" may be confusing to us. Romans 8:6 tells us, "**The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...**" Our NIV Bibles give us that word and it helps somewhat to understand the idea behind Paul's words. But that word "controlled" is not in the Greek. We may understand "controlled" as having some alien force enter our bodies and take over our actions so that we no longer have to worry about what we do or say. That is not what Paul is saying.

This is why it is good to check out different translations if we want to understand fully what is said. The NASB says it like this, starting from v. 5, "**For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not able to do so; 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit...**" (Romans 8:5-9a).

Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set your mind is to focus, to determine to live and think and speak a certain way. This is what it means to have the Holy Spirit in you. It is not that He takes over; it is instead that you start listening to him. The responsibility to live in the Spirit falls back on our shoulders. We are responsible to obey God in his Spirit and not just wait for the Spirit to act in us.

Helen Keller was afflicted at an early age and became deaf and blind as a result. She overcame this disability and actually learned to read and communicate and even write books. But she said this, "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."

You and I will not be empowered the way Samson or other heroes of the faith were. But we can live in the Spirit, listening to him as he reminds us of who Christ is and wants us to be, and do these humble things as though we were killing lions.

To be a hero today in our community, all we need to do is live consistently with the Gospel we profess to believe.

Finally...

Some heroes stand out and prove that they are of honorable character. Alvin York was one of them. A devout believer in Jesus, he was also a conscientious objector during World War One. On October 8, 1918 Sergeant Alvin C. York single handedly capture 132 German soldiers which earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor. Definitely, he was a hero to be honored. In this battle he displayed courage and selflessness that is required of heroes. Today's society doesn't know truly what a hero is. We found out a little bit about heroes during the World Trade Center Bombing. But in Sergeant York's case, the reason that he was a hero in many peoples mind was not the way he carried himself during the battle but how he lived his life. Listen to a quote that he made in his diary of his experience in World War II, On July 1st, 1918 he wrote: I carried a Testament with me. I have the Testament I carried with me during all my fighting at home now. I read it through five times during my stay in the army. I read it everywhere. I read it in dugouts, in fox holes, and on the front line. It was my rock to cling to. It and my diary. I didn't do any cursing, no, not even in the front line. I cut all of that out long ago, at the time I was saved. Sergeant York lived his life in Humble, Submissive, Obedience to the Lord. A hero is someone who does much more than just an amazing thing. A hero is someone who reflects heroism in his life. A hero is someone who does heroic things because his character demands it.

These days we need heroes more than ever before. But the heroes we need will live lives consistent with the heroic things they do. Heroes of the faith are people who listen to the Spirit of God. We can be those people.

AMEN