

SAMSON'S VOCATIO

One of the classic and most frequently used dodges (ways to escape) from the Christian Faith is the simple trick of keeping things general as opposed to specific: God loves us *in general*; we should be good *in general*. Vague generalities are the bane of the Christian Life. If we want to make sure that God never powerfully touches our lives – that we never have to change very much, or do very much that takes us out of our own self-controlled, self-centered living – we merely need to keep everything general: Pray for world peace. Love our neighbor, but without ever naming one. Be good, but without ever trying to comprehend what that might mean in any real situation. Pray, but never for or about anything so specifically that we know for sure whether God answered us, or what that answer was.

One of the reasons many people find God nearer and more real in a time of emergency is because the emergency gets our undivided attention and forces us into passionate caring, and, without even thinking about it, we get specific. Then when the emergency passes, some people drift back away from God. It's not because they are crass or evil; it's because they lose the urgency and focus, and start getting general again. Pretty soon, it puts them to sleep when they pray, and it bores God half to death too.

The Living God is very dangerous precisely *because* he is always personal. In Christendom, the faith (trust) that God loves you *always* means that he is capable of distinguishing between you and everyone else around you. The belief that God also loves all the people around you does not minimize or generalize God's individual caring one whit!

It is at the very core of the Christian perspective that we believe God loves us each personally, and that therefore he has specific plans and purposes for each one of us – different and specific to each one of us. That is very hard to believe, and even harder to trust. But you are not even playing in the Christian arena if you are not dealing daily with such convictions.

We don't mean to be self-centered, but if we don't wake up each morning and turn will and life over to God, then what other center can we have? If we wake up each morning and turn will and life over to a God who does not exist or does not care about us, except maybe in some vague

and general way, then what? Then we are bereft beyond the speaking of it. And that, by the way, is the real obstacle to faith. All the fancy theological arguments are sometimes just a front, our way of throwing dust in the air. Our real terror is the thought that we will give our whole lives to God and then discover that God does not really care. And the terrible truth is, we never know – we can never find out – until we try it.

Some of you are getting old. I am too – a lot older than I ever expected to get. As a friend of mine likes to say, “Hey Bruce, you’re too old to die young.” Any living I do from now on is extra – above and beyond what I ever expected. I have already paid all my dues, put in my forty years of service. From now on, anything that happens is gravy. You would think that would make me courageous, bold, and free of all anxiety. But old habits are hard to break. The truth is, my *life* – not some preset number of years – is given to the Lord. How about yours?

I am trying to pick a quarrel with some of you. Not all of you, but some of you. Some of you think your life is your own, and some of you think your life is essentially over. Either way, that cuts you out of the Christian Faith. God has plans for your life. There is no clause that says “until age sixty-five,” or age seventy, or age ninety-five. Jesus always plays for keeps. Some of you are old enough to remember what that phrase really means.

It will not be the last time you hear such things from me, but if you are converted, then you have “a calling.” God never converted anybody in all the long history of this world without giving them an assignment. Conversions that come with no assignment are counterfeit. God is not into spiritual highs, though it’s hard to not get pretty pumped to discover that the Omnipotent God actually knows who we are and cares about what is happening to us. God is not just love; God is also MEANING. And meaning means PURPOSE, and purpose always has work to do. We call it a VOCATION, from the Latin *vocatio*, which has the same root as *vocal* – like *vocal cord*. A vocation is not something we can make up. It is a *calling* from God. God has a vocation for every single one of you. Some of you have not found it yet. Some of you know it very well but are still running from it. Some of you think that just because you have retired from some earthly company, you can also retire from God. You will make yourself miserable and your life meaningless if you think this, so stop it.

Samson. Why do I want to talk about Samson? Precisely because Samson, among many, many others, illustrates these very things. Some people think he was just a big, dumb strongman and therefore don't pay much attention to his story. But you do not have to want to be like Samson to learn a lot from his story. In the first place, I'm not so sure he was dumb. The way the story is told, he *seemed* incredibly stupid. I mean, Delilah proved she would betray him over and over, so why did Samson still confide in her? Nobody could be that stupid? Have you ever watched a man enamored of a woman? When you stop to think about it, the story is very believable. After every encounter, Samson was probably telling himself that he was an idiot. Yet when he was with her, somehow for a while it didn't matter – he didn't care. He could not think beyond the passions of the moment. This is not Sunday School, remember – this is church.

Samson had always had a problem with women, not just Delilah. You have to read Judges 13-16 for the rest of the story. To be more precise, Samson had a problem with his lust. He was, after all, a very physical person; he had enormous physical prowess. Remember that a great gift has a shadow side somewhere – a great weakness. Anyway, he had a problem with lust, and there always seem to be women around who don't mind helping a man have that problem.

It may also be that Samson and Delilah really liked each other. Maybe this is a Romeo and Juliet plot. Maybe Delilah hated to betray him but her people kept putting more and more pressure on her, saying, "You have to help us – this man is destroying us." Maybe Delilah went months between each betrayal, vowing each time to stay true to Samson, but then felt more and more guilty about deserting her people. After all, if the Philistines were telling this story, Delilah would be a great hero – like Esther, delivering her people.

This may go over your heads, but the entire ancient world thought in astrological terms. Leo and Aquarius are opposites, and opposites attract. Leo is the great leader – the individual of personal prowess. Aquarius is the great humanitarian – the individual who must put the benefit of their community above their own personal desires. Samson *means* "man of the Sun" (or little sun) = Leo. Delilah *means* "woman of Aquarius." This story sets up to tell of a tragic encounter between great opposites.

Of course, Delilah did get rewarded. That was part of the pressure. The Philistine lords promised to give her wealth if she delivered Samson into their hands. Their offer was enough to keep Delilah living in luxury for about five hundred years. (Our Lord was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver; Samson brought in fifty-five hundred, and that was before inflation.)

Nevertheless, and back to the point: However you picture Samson's mentality and personality, his purpose – his vocation, or calling – was to protect Israel from the Philistines. This he did for twenty years. This he did so successfully that his name and story are still remembered over four thousand years later. Even if he was just a big, dumb strongman, he was nevertheless a big, dumb strongman *who saved Israel* (for a while).

Moreover, this was no accident. Of course, you don't have to believe that; it is a faith perspective. But that is the point of the story: This was no accident. This had been the purpose and design from before Samson's birth. The story of Samson's birth even sounds similar to the story of Jesus' birth. Samson's parents were told to raise him as a Nazarite. Samson's mother was instructed to keep a strict diet all through her pregnancy. Samson grew up knowing he had a special destiny, and that his purpose depended upon his keeping holy vows to the Lord all his life. As is nearly always true with human stories, Samson messed it up. And it was not just a personal failure; when Samson went down, all of Israel suffered.

We don't know that very clearly anymore, do we? If I don't find my vocatio – or if, having found it, I neglect it – I am not the only one who suffers. It is not simply a matter of my being unfulfilled (and unfaithful). All my people suffer. They may not realize it, but it is true nonetheless. And indeed, at times, and to my shame, it has been true.

Only, God does not just pick out a few people in every generation to bless with a purpose. And it is not just baptismal verbiage. All of us are specially designed, and all of us have a vocatio. The real reason the world is in such straits – the true reason there is such mayhem here – is that only a handful of people are finding and trying to fulfill their true vocation. That is a big part of the meaning of "sin": we are separated from God; we do not know our own identity, or what we are supposed to be doing here. The church in our time keeps trying to slough over the

real problem by encouraging us to be generous – telling us that it will be a better world if we just all give to the poor. That is never going to work because it doesn't deal with the real issue, and it doesn't take the personal presence of God seriously enough. Rich and poor alike must seek their true identities and dedicate themselves – each and every one – to finding and fulfilling his or her true vocatio.

Just a word about Samson's strength, and his hair. That is important to us also. This is more than a story about a man who was physically well-endowed. Samson was certainly that, but there was a mystique at work which went far beyond that. Samson knew, from the time he was a youth, that God was in his strength. He believed this without a doubt. He supplied whatever physical prowess he could, but he knew that God would back it up and carry it far beyond what he himself could accomplish. It was what God wanted of him, and how God wanted to use him. So it was not just Samson, for instance, who tore the city gates off their hinges and carried them away – it was Samson and God together.

Think about hypnotism. In a hypnotic state, a person turns their will over to the suggestion of a hypnotist. To a large extent, that resolves the inner turmoil. If the hypnotist says you are cold, you shiver. You don't go look at the thermometer or doubt the statement. Under such conditions, people can be enormously strong and perform amazing feats. In the normal state, we are each a walking civil war. Voices within us argue among themselves with everything we decide or try to do. This cuts power tremendously. We have jokes about a camel being a horse designed by committee, but the joke is on us. When we come home from committee meetings, guess what? The committee on the inside is still in session. I decide to go to work in the morning, but if only about sixty percent of me voted "yes," now we can talk about stress, only it's on the inside a lot more than on the outside.

Samson was in a specialized "hypnotic state" with God. Actually, that is the purpose of prayer – to turn our wills and our lives over to God's "suggestion" – so we can get integrated, stop all the inner turmoil, and be our true selves. When it came to physical prowess, Samson did not have any doubts – fear and uncertainty did not cut his power – because God was with him. So he lived like a walking miracle. You can see the same thing illustrated in different gifts with David, Elijah, Samuel, Jeremiah, Paul – and of course, Jesus.

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In Samson's case, however, when the hair got cut, that symbolized a break in the vows, a breach of the covenant. Suddenly, doubt entered the picture. Maybe God wouldn't back him up. And of course, "maybe" is never good enough for a miracle. "Maybe" is never good enough for any level of faith. Faith believes and trusts; "maybe" doesn't make it.

Those of you who have children (of whatever age), I need you to help me. Please go over the story of Samson with them at a more leisurely pace at home. Make sure they get at least three of the lessons we learn from Samson's story. (By the way, do you have an inkling of what your child's true purpose is? If not, why not? You pray, don't you? You are the parents; God thinks you are partners with him in raising and training the children. If you listen, God is at least going to give you some strong hints.)

THREE THINGS:

1.) VOCATIO. We each have a special identity, and we are given special gifts for a special purpose. One of the most important things in life is to find that identity and purpose, and then train for it constantly.

2.) EVERY STRENGTH HAS A CORRESPONDING WEAKNESS. It is important to know what that weakness is and to be careful, and to seek the help of trusted others to help cover for it. Never imagine that Satan and his agents don't know the weakness, even if *we* have not bothered to discover or admit it.

3.) WHAT IS YOUR "HAIR"? What, for you, symbolizes your dedication to God that takes away your fear and the inner civil war, and allows God to work through you?