

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

Moses and Samson

IN THE LIVES of these contrasting characters, as portrayed in Scripture, we see the glory and the tragedy of the subconscious mind. There is more sound psychology in these Old Testament stories than in some college text-books.

William James used the concept of the "subliminal" or sub-conscious self to suggest the area of human experience in which contact with the Divine may occur. [1]

He does not, however, deal with demonic influence on the sub-conscious mind. We are so apt to forget that there are supernatural forces beneath us as well as above us. Modern psychologists might find striking illustrations in the Bible for some of their theories.

In Exodus 34:29 we read: "**Moses knew not that the skin of his face shone by reason of God speaking with him.**" And in Judges 16:20 we read: "**And Samson awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times and shake myself free. But he knew not that the Lord was departed from him.**"

Here are two statements (of unconscious glory and unconscious impotence) in the lives of two men, both consecrated from birth to the Lord, both distinguished for service to Israel and both recorded as heroes of the faith. "**For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.**"

No two characters are greater in their contrast or more obviously an example and a warning.

The gateways to our sub-conscious mind are open when we close our eyes in sleep or when we day-dream our desires. As D. L. Moody used to say at Northfield, "Character is what we are in the dark." Or in Bible language, "**As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.**"

Moses knew not that his face shone. Samson knew not that the Lord was departed from him. Yet both were men of faith.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews Moses has seven verses that record his greatness (11:2 3-2 8). Only Samson's name is mentioned with those of Gideon and Barak, Jephthah and David and Samuel. Yet anonymously his career is put in the record of the unknown heroes at greater length. Who but Samson "**stopped the mouth of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness was made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens**"? (Hebrews 11:33-34).

Milton chose Samson for his greatest tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*. But Michelangelo chose Moses for his greatest piece of sculpture in the Church of San Pietro, Rome. When G. T. Watts painted a fresco for the Hall of Justice, Lincoln's Inn, he gave the central place to Moses represented as head and shoulders above all the law-givers of the ages.

Carlyle in one of his letters, after portraying all the obstacles and difficulties of life, says, "all that is as the gates of Gaza which a right Samson, duly surveying the strength of them and well considering himself, has to walk off with and carry away on his shoulder!"

Moses and Samson! What a contrast in their strength, vocation, talent, character, destiny and influence on life and literature. Some would say that they had nothing in common, although both had godly parents and were consecrated in infancy. And they do present a marked contrast.

- One was the man of brain, learned in all the wisdom of Egypt.
- The other was the man of brawn, up to all the tricks and sports of a giant.

Moses' life is one long epic; Samson's a brief tragedy. Moses was the man of GOD; Samson the man of the people. One was an Apollo; the other a Hercules. Moses was legislator, redeemer and leader of his people. His rod wrought miracles by the hand of GOD and his pen wrote the laws of Israel for all ages.

Samson appears suddenly as a grotesque figure, a solitary individual always waging his conflict against the Philistines alone and generally actuated by personal motives of caprice or humor.

Samson died with a prayer for vengeance on his lips; Moses, with a prophecy for Israel. Moses wrote the Pentateuch; Samson gave us a riddle. Moses lived one hundred and twenty years, founded a nation, and his laws remain their legacy for thirty centuries. Samson's brief career ended in a local catastrophe without permanent success or memorial. The Nazarite of Dan, by his exploits, only began to save Israel from the Philistines. Moses, the Levite, was the greatest prophet of Israel and their supreme law-giver. Moses (although he lost his temper and never entered the Land of Promise) "**was faithful in all his house**"; while Samson betrayed his trust and lost his power.

So different are these two characters! Yet, one thing they had in common - the same faith but not the same faithfulness. It was in the realm of the sub-conscious that victory began and defeat found its origin.

All modern psychology emphasizes the supreme importance of the sub-conscious mind in the formation or the disintegration of character. Here Freud and Jung, Dewey and James agree. Our sub-conscious mind is the indelible and infallible record of our actual and deepest desires. **"Out of the heart are the issues of life."**

The unconscious influence of any man is, therefore, always greater than his conscious influence whether for good or evil. This is the glory and the tragedy of everyday life. A mother in her home, a son at college, a pastor in his parish exert a constant influence and we are unconscious of it most of the time. So it was with Moses and Samson.

I. Consider first the Beauty of Holiness.

"Moses knew not that his face shone" after he had tarried in GOD's presence on the Mount for forty days. It all began with Moses' great decision in Egypt. Moses there and then had chosen **"rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt."**

And then it was that his face began to shine. It was Moses, also, who caught a glimpse of GOD's glory in the desert of Midian.

"All earth was full of heaven
And every bush afire with GOD."

Like Isaiah after his vision in the Temple-court or Paul after his vision on the road to Damascus, so life for Moses was never the same after that mountain experience. Once again Moses was called to higher service. Forty days and forty nights on Sinai's top **"he neither ate bread nor drank water"** - but his soul was satisfied with marrow and fatness in close fellowship with GOD.

Still discontent, his deepest desire and earnest prayer was, **"Show me Thy glory."**

And when, by GOD's command, he stood in the cleft of the rock while the Ineffable passed by, he heard Him say: **"And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty."**

Then it was he made haste to bow down to the earth and worshipped.

Again his face began to shine with the Lord's mercy and loving-kindness, and he knew it not! After he went up to the Mount the second time to receive the Tables of the broken Law, his face shone with a persistently heavenly light.

Paul explains it all to us in his Epistle to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 3:7).

The ministration of the law, he says, came with such glory that the Children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face. **"So,"** he says, under the New Testament **"we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed to the same image from glory to glory even as from the Spirit of God."**

No doubt Paul remembered what it was like when he helped to stone Stephen and **"all who sat in the council fastening their eyes on him saw his face as it had been the face of an Angel."**

Yes, Moses and Isaiah and Ezekiel and Stephen and Paul himself - prophets, apostles, martyrs - men and women of our day in the humblest walks of life who lived in close fellowship with GOD - their faces shone and they wist it not.

When the sensitive dark plate of our sub-conscious mind is daily exposed to the light of GOD's Word, or the light of His glory in the face of JESUS, then, after a shorter or longer exposure, O wonder of wonders! the image of GOD's Son is printed indelibly on our lives and on our faces.

"Walk in the starlight long enough
And the silver will touch your hair,
For the stars will lean from heaven
And be reflected there.

"Talk with the angels long enough
And your very face will shine,
For the peace of GOD will touch your eyes
With radiance divine.

"Only give GOD and the angels time
To burnish what once was dim,
And the glory may rest on all of us
For was it not so with him?"

II. Now let us turn to the other, and very dark picture: The Tragedy of Defeat in Samson, Unconscious of His Lost Power.

"He wist not that the Lord was departed from him."

"I will shake myself free," said Samson.

There is no figure in the Bible or perhaps in all history more pathetic than that of Samson after his fall. The mighty warrior, Samson, the flash of whose eyes had unnerved his enemies, fettered in a Philistine dungeon! Deprived was he of the light of day, set to grind at the mill-stone like a brute beast, and dragged out to be the jest and scorn of his insolent conquerors - going around in a circle like a donkey.

From this tragic chapter Milton got the theme of his *Samson Agonistes*, by some regarded as a greater work of genius than his *Paradise Lost*. Get it down from your book-shelf. It is a glorious commentary on Samson in his blindness by the blind poet. Not only is it an interpretation of Samson's life, but an illumination of his inner character.

Samson, made captive and blind by the cruel Philistines, utters his complaint in Gaza's prison:

“O wherefore was my birth from heaven foretold
Twice by an Angel who at last in sight
Of both my parents, all in flame ascended
From off the Altar, where an offering burned.
Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed,
As if a person separate to GOD,
Designed for great exploits; if I must die
Betrayed, captived, and both my eyes put out,
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze;
To grind in brazen fetters under task
With this Heaven-gifted strength?”

Eyeless in Gaza he asks himself how he lost his power. And when his parents and friends visit him in his desolation he confesses:

"Ye see, O friends,
How many evils have enclosed me round
Yet that which was the worst, now least afflicts me,
Blindness; for had I sight, confessed with shame
How could I once look up, or heave the head
Who like a foolish Pilot have shipwreck't
My vessel, trusted to me from above
Gloriously rigged; and for a word, a tear,
Fool, have divulged the secret gift of GOD
To a deceitful woman." [2]

F. M. Krouse, in his monograph on Milton's *Samson*, points out that we can not understand its theme nor its many allusions unless we realize that it is based on the Biblical narrative as interpreted by the Christian tradition to which Milton was heir.

"Samson stands for more than the victorious Nazarite, the faithful champion of GOD. He brings to the full circle that immense story which Milton took up in *Paradise Lost* and continued in *Paradise Regained*" (p. 132).

- Adam was tempted in Eden and fell.
- CHRIST was tempted in the desert and was victorious.

Samson's real grandeur is interpreted in the epistle to the Hebrews. He is one of the heroes of the Faith.

To the early Bible commentators he was even a type of CHRIST. It was this background of sixteenth and seventeenth century interpretation that made John Donne refer to the brawling warrior of Dan as a saint (Biathanatos III, v. 4).

The climax of Samson Agonistes is that he, blind and defeated, agonizes against his last temptation at Gaza and by faith and prayer obtains the victory.

"The agon against evil and its temptations in whatever form is Man's vocation. And in a state of grace he can be confident of ultimate triumph" (p. 133).

That is why the final chorus of the Tragedy, read in the light of the Christian tradition of Milton's day and his own simple faith, justifies Samson's name on the walls of the Westminster Abbey in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

How did Samson lose his power?

It was the age of brute force, and to deliver Israel GOD raised up a physical giant. His strength was entirely dependent on obedience to GOD and his Nazarite vow. But his very strength proved his undoing. His strength was not as the strength of ten because his heart did not remain pure. Pride and sensual pleasure led to his fall. It was a gradual slipping down along the road that Solomon calls the way of death. Delilah's hands were not the first unholy hands to toy with his long locks. Step by step he went down that road because he held the honor of GOD cheaper than his own pleasure.

Samson is the type of all such who, knowing GOD, slide backward into denying Him.

"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

- The tree, rotten at the core, may grace your lawn until a sudden storm strikes it down.
- The house you built without foundation may look pretty until - the rain descends and the floods carry it away.

"I will shake myself," said Samson, **"as at other times; but he wist not that God had departed from him."**

The strength of his will did not depend on the length of his locks but on loyalty to GOD and his vocation.

Like Esau, Samson sold his birthright; his courage was broken by self-indulgence. He sold his secret to an alien woman. Delilah betrayed Samson as Judas did CHRIST, with a kiss. The road upward to glory and downward to shame and contempt is by gradual stages. Sow an act, you reap a habit; sow a habit, you reap a destiny.

Read the story of Balaam, of Saul the King, of Solomon, of Demas, of Judas Iscariot or of Archippus, pastor of the Laodicean Church (Colossians 4:14-17; Revelation 3:14) and in each case they seemed unconscious, before their fall, that GOD had departed from them. That is the tragedy of the sub-conscious.

Paul puts it, "**Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.**"

There are those like Samson who have lost their first love and their spiritual power; who have neglected prayer and become gradually impotent; whose faith grew weaker as their Bible study was omitted. Such Christians have a name to live but are dead. They may say, "**I will shake myself, I will be a real person**" - but GOD's spirit is not invoked that way.

When a man crucifies his ideals, turns his back on GOD's appeal, sacrifices Christian principles at the shrine of expediency or compromises truth, he follows Samson's downward path. If he dallies with the world or falls in love with money, then his Nazarene locks are shorn like those of Samson.

Which shall it be, Moses or Samson?

Are you being transformed daily into the image of CHRIST, always looking toward Him?

Are men conscious of heavenly beauties in your character of which you yourself are utterly unconscious? "**Now the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness . . .**" - ever more fruit.

And there is the terrible alternative: "**If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered, and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned.**"

Nevertheless, there was hope even for Samson. As Paul said: "**He can graft them in again.**"

GOD restored Samson in his Gaza prison. Samson prayed. He repented. His locks began to grow again and his strength was restored. He learned what repentance is when he leaned against the pillars of Dagon's temple. Around him were three thousand enemies of Israel, men and women, mocking him and his GOD.

"**And Samson called unto the Lord, I pray Thee, O Lord, remember me and strengthen me only this once . . . let me die with the Philistines.**"

What a tragic yet heroic end to a tragic life! "**So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life.**" Samson's name is recorded in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews; and, we believe, also in heaven. "**By faith, Samson.**"

Thanks to GOD's mercy and loving-kindness there is hope for those who stumble, even at the end of the road. Froude, the historian, in describing the tragic martyrdom of Archbishop Cranmer in 1556, compares his end to that of Samson.

Ridley and Latimer were confined with him in the Tower of London and all expected death on the charge of heresy. They were removed to Oxford for a second trial. There Ridley and Latimer were unflinching and were burned at the stake on October 18, 1555. But Cranmer recanted.

The effect in favor of the Romish church was enormous and immediate. However, when he was led out to martyrdom, he surprised everyone by renouncing his recantations and because written by his right hand he thrust that betraying hand first into the fire and held it there as witness, in a repentance not to be repented of.

"So perished Cranmer. He was brought out, with the eyes of his soul blinded, to make sport for his enemies, and in his death he brought upon them a wider destruction than he had effected by his teaching while alive. Pole was appointed the next day to the See of Canterbury; but in other respects the Court had over-reached themselves by their cruelty. Had they been content to accept the recantation, they would have left the Archbishop to die broken-hearted, pointed at by the finger of pitying scorn, and the Reformation would have been disgraced in its champion."

O Thou who dwellest in light inaccessible and full of glory, show us Thy glory in the commonplace. May every bush be afire with GOD and our faces shine in the face of Thine Anointed. When self-confidence makes us stumble and we fall, restore us. Make Thy strength perfect in our weakness for Thine own name's sake. Amen.

1 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 511 ff.

2 *Samson Agonistes*, Lines 13-36 and 193-101.

Cf. *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* by F. M. Krouse, Princeton, N.J. 1949. A masterly exposition of the poem.

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