

Using the Ordinary for the Extraordinary

And what more shall I say?

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah...

Hebrews 11:32

I was a competitive swimmer in high school, and at the end of each season, we would swim in a final regional championship meet. The fastest forty swimmers from our region and two others would then get to compete in the district meet a few weeks later. In my senior year, I finally made it to the district meet in one individual event and one relay event with my teammates. After a crowded warm-up early in the morning, the preliminary heats began. Only the fastest forty swimmers in each event from our district and four others would get to compete in the state meet two weeks later.

This meet was the culmination of my entire high school swimming career, and I was determined to make the most of it. I wanted to be that one in a million shot – the swimmer who had no chance of making it to the state meet, but somehow made it. I wanted to be extraordinary.

I wasn't. I had a very bad race, and did not make it to the state finals (which I never really had a chance at making anyway). I felt inadequate and ordinary. But my coach reminded me that day that even though I wasn't the fastest swimmer, and even though I didn't make it to the state meet, God had different plans for me. The local newspaper had written an article on me because I was a swimmer with a life-shortening disease who had made it to the district meet. I was just an ordinary girl, with her own insecurities, challenges, and struggles, but God used me for His extraordinary plans, in ways that I may never fully understand.

I am ordinary, and that's a good thing. Because when God uses my story for His glory, I hope that people see Him instead of me.

As we near the end of our study on the Heroes of Hope in Hebrews 11, we come to two ordinary men – Jephthah and Samson – who, just like me and you, were ordinary men with an extraordinary God.

Jephthah

The Israelites again did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and he handed them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites. When they realized that they were in distress, they cried out to the Lord, and “the Lord replied, ‘When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the

Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!” (Judges 10:11-12) The Israelites continued to cry out to the Lord, and got rid of the idols they had kept, and the Lord saved them because “he could bear Israel’s misery no longer.” (Judges 10:16)

Read Judges 10:17-18

Lo and behold, Jephthah the mighty warrior comes on the scene. He has an interesting familial history – his father was Gilead, and his mother was a prostitute. His half-brothers told him that he wasn’t going to get any inheritance because he wasn’t really their brother, and so Jephthah fled to Tob, where he gathered a following of a ‘gang of scoundrels.’ (Judges 11:3)

Read Judges 11:4-11

So Jephthah goes with the elders, knowing that if the Lord gives him the Ammonites, he will be the leader of the Israelites. Jephthah sends messengers to the Ammonite king, asking him what he had against the Israelites, and why he was attacking them. It turns out that the Israelites had taken some of the Ammonites land when they came up out of Egypt, and the Ammonite king wants it back. Jephthah wastes no time letting the Ammonite king know exactly what happened when the Israelites came up out of Egypt. When the Israelites traveled through the land, they asked for permission to go through different countries peaceably, but the countries would not let them pass. Therefore, the Lord gave the lands over to the Israelites.

Read Judges 11:23-28

The king of Ammon made the same mistake as many kings before him. He didn’t listen to what the Lord was saying through Jephthah, and so the Lord gave the Ammonites over into Jephthah’s hands. Jephthah vows to the Lord, “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes

out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." (Judges 11:30-31)

Read Judges 11:34-40

Jephthah keeps his vow to the Lord in faith, though it was incredibly difficult. How his heart must have broken to give over to the Lord his only daughter. And yet, he kept his vow to the Lord. The Lord used a great warrior, the son of a prostitute, an outcast in His great plan. An ordinary man, used for an extraordinary plan – all because Jephthah followed in faith.

Samson

Samson's story starts as many of our previous stories have: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years." (Judges 13:1) The angel of the Lord comes to Manoah's wife (from the tribe of Dan) and tells her, "Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines [...] The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him." (Judges 13:4-5, 24-25)

Samson grows up and decides that he wants a young Philistine woman for his wife, and demands that his parents get her for him.

Read Judges 14:3-20

Interestingly, Samson's demand for a Philistine bride is from the Lord, who intended to use Samson to confront the Philistines. Samson is cunning, giving the men who come to his feast a riddle. The men at the feast ask Samson's wife to get the answer for them, for they cannot figure it out. Samson finally tells her the answer, and she in turn tells the Philistine men, who relay the answer to Samson. His wife, who is never named, is given to another man.

When Samson goes to visit his wife later, the girl's father tells him that she has been given to another man, and urges her to take her younger sister instead. Samson's anger and desire for vengeance again are displayed, as he catches three hundred foxes, ties them tail to tail in pairs, and then fastens torches to them, lighting them and letting them loose in the Philistine's grain fields, vineyards, and olive groves.

Read Judges 15:6-20

It's clear that the Lord used Samson to lead Israel in deliverance from the Philistines, as He said He would. But Samson's story isn't finished yet. Perhaps the most famous parts of his story are yet to come.

Read Judges 16:1-21. What parts of this story stand out to you as surprising or unexpected?

There are two things in this story that stand out to me: first, that the author of Judges makes the distinction that Samson "fell in love" with Delilah (Judges 16:4); and second, that when his hair is shaved off, not only his strength leaves him, but the Lord as well. I have heard many people say, "It's because I was in love," as their reason and excuse for doing something they knew was wrong. Even for Samson, it is just that – an excuse. Samson's parents would have told him what the angel of the Lord said about him – that he was to be a Nazarite, and no razor was ever to be used on his head. When Samson finally tells Delilah of the source of his great strength, his hair, he forsakes all that the Lord has required of him, and reaps the consequences – and they are dire consequences.

Read Judges 16:23-31

Samson's final act is one of almost-repentance for his previous actions, pleading God to get revenge once more on the Philistines. Much of Samson's actions in his whole life come from a place of anger and a desire for vengeance. 'Anger management issues,' I think a therapist would

probably call it. Samson's not exactly a very likeable, pious guy. It might be hard, at first glance, to understand why he is mentioned in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 at all.

But even though Samson was just an ordinary, angry man, God used him for something extraordinary – freeing the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines. Samson's faith that God would still use him to enact His purposes showed when he stood between the columns in the temple. Revenge and anger may have fueled much of his actions, but his faith in the God of his fathers, slim though it may seem, is what enabled God to use him for His greater purpose.

Imperfect and ordinary though they were, Samson and Jephthah were both used by God in extraordinary ways. Anger management and abandonment issues and all, God used these men in extraordinary ways, and that gives me hope for you and me.

None of us is perfect. We all have our issues, and yet God has chosen to use us, His imperfect children, who, like the Israelites, continue to screw up again and again, for His extraordinary purposes. Take heart today, that even as we walk through life, falling down, stumbling, and struggling, God has chosen to use us and our faith for His glory.