

WHAT IS A PERSON LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

Judges 16:23-30

(Sermon idea from Brian Harbour, *Preaching Today*, September/October 1998)

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I was attending a Baylor Regents meeting in Waco one weekend, and was riding on the elevator with Dr. Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston. Duane and I were going to the Student Life Center to work out before dinner. As usual, I was busy talking to Duane and not noticing anything or anyone around me. I realized that Duane wasn't listening to me but, rather, he was staring at an African American gentleman who was standing in the center of the elevator. As the elevator came to a stop and the door opened, Duane quickly said to the African American gentleman, "Are you who I think you are?" Until that very moment I hadn't even noticed who was standing right beside me.

There is a side lesson here – the babbling fool (me) will miss the world as it passes by.

When Duane asked the question, "Are you who I think you are?", I looked up to see James Earl Jones standing right beside me – within inches of me – on the elevator. I'll never forget his answer. You know the voice. "Yes, the name is Jones," he replied. That's the voice of Darth Vader. That's the voice we all know from Alex Haley's *Roots*. James Earl Jones is "The Voice." (Fifty-one movies, including *Clear and Present Danger*, *Hunt for Red October*, *Field of Dreams*, *Return of the Jedi*, *The Sandlot*, *Patriot Games*; the voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King*, and *This Is CNN*.)

Now, what are the chances of standing six inches from James Earl Jones in an elevator in Waco? I wanted to ask him, "What's a person like you doing in a place like this?"

Perhaps the real question is not "What is a person like you doing in a place like this?" Perhaps the real question is Duane Brooks's first question to James Earl Jones: "Are you who I think you are?"

Sometimes the question, "What is a person like you doing in a place like this?" has embarrassing implications. It did for Samson, and it did for a man whom Brian Harbour had previously pastored. Brian calls him "Bill" so that he can remain anonymous.

Dr. Harbour said he was shocked when he heard the story, and everyone else was shocked as well. A man died – a member of a church which he formerly pastored. It was not the fact that he died that was shocking. We're all going to die. Everyone will eventually go through the valley of the shadow of death. Nor was it the way he died that was so shocking. He died of a heart attack – a common cause of death in our country. The shocking thing was where he died.

He died in what Dr. Harbour calls a XXX theater, a store which featured pornographic literature, videos, and even live models. An active member of the church, a married man, a Christian, had a heart attack and died in a adult theater. As people discussed the event, the question was expressed over and over again: “What was a person like him doing in place like that?”

The two questions walk hand-in-hand: “What is a person like you doing in a place like this?” and “Are you who I think you are?”

You remember the story of Samson, one of the judges of Israel. He judged Israel for two decades. He was a miracle boy. Manoah and his wife had hoped for a baby for so long. The announcement of the birth of Samson comes from a divine messenger. Israel is in spiritual decline, and everybody was doing what was right in their own eyes. The announcement of Samson’s coming birth was accompanied by instructions from the angelic messenger, the angel of the Lord. Manoah’s wife was to have no wine. She was not to eat anything ceremonially unclean. And her son’s hair must never ever – never ever – be cut.

All this is a sign that Samson is going to be consecrated, or set apart for God.

But as you fast forward to the end of Samson’s life – a life that began with so much promise, a life that began really in a divine way by divine pronouncement – you find a very sad story. See Samson now. He’s just like an ox. He pushes the grinder that turns the grain into flour.

Look at Judges 16:21.

Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison.

You see Samson pushing the grinder like an ox, moving the millstone, and you want to say, “Samson, what’s a guy like you doing in a place like this?”

Fast forward even more to the very final day of his life. The Philistines called Samson out in order to humiliate him. They think Dagon, their deity, has been more powerful than the God of Samson because Samson has been delivered into their hands. They made sport of Samson, sightless as he was. He was like a circus bear being baited. He is mocked and provoked. His God, too.

The building is packed with all the socialites of Gaza and probably Philistia. Thousands gathered on the roof to get a good look at their defeated enemy. The noise of praise to Dagon mixes with the guffaws and the contemptuous laughter at Samson’s expense. He is forced to act the role of the clown for the delight of the crowd.

You remember that strategic point in the break of the action when Samson asked if he could rest against the support pillars of the great theatre? Look at verse 26. “Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, ‘Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them.’”

You want to say to Samson, as he is there as a spectacle in front of all of the Philistines, “Samson, what’s a guy like you – a guy with so much promise and so much blessing from God – doing in a place like this?”

You remember the end of the story. He prays. His hair has grown again, and he prays that God will give him strength just one more time (verse 28), “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” He pushes the pillars, the main supports of the theatre, over and he dies. So it ends with him killing more Philistines in his death than those he killed during his life.

Even as Samson pulls the building down on himself, you want to shout out, “Samson, Samson, what’s a guy like you doing in a place like this?” Life shortened prematurely by his own foolishness.

I. How did Samson get into such a predicament?

A. It wasn’t his birth. Some people do excuse their actions by declaring they didn’t have a chance from the very beginning. They claim they were born into poverty or they were genetically programmed for sin or failure or hardship. They feel like they are born to lose, and they choose to live their lives that way.

Surely Samson couldn’t say that. Samson was set apart by God. Samson wasn’t born to lose. Samson was born to win. It was told by the divine messenger that Samson would deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Turn to chapter 13, verse 24. “And the woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson; and the child grew up and the Lord blessed him.” Samson couldn’t say that he was born to lose. Samson was born to win.

B. Others say that their predicament in life comes from their lack of ability. Some people brood in an inferiority complex and say their predicament comes because they weren’t born with the brains or the brawn of their brothers.

But Samson certainly couldn’t say that. He had incredible strength. He had unbelievable superhuman ability. You remember Samson – the one who could rip a lion asunder with his bare hands. Samson – the one who could take the jawbone of a donkey and kill a thousand men. One man against a thousand. Samson couldn’t say he didn’t have any talent. Samson couldn’t say that he had a lack of ability. Samson, with God, was superhuman.

C. Some people say they have hardship because God is not with them. God is absent. God never cared for me or God never blessed me like he cared for or blessed others around me.

13:25; 14:6; 14:19

Samson couldn’t say that. We learn in chapter 13, verse 25 that the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him. In Judges 14:6 it says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. In Judges 14:19 it says again that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power.

Samson couldn't use any of these excuses. He had a remarkable beginning in a family which had dedicated him to God. He had a divine beginning – a divine pronouncement before he was ever born. Samson had strength that none had ever enjoyed before. Strength that he was supposed to use to serve God. He had the Spirit of God coming upon him and setting him apart for the task.

Yet, when you look at Samson pushing the millstone, grinding the grain like a beast, you have to ask the question, “Samson, what’s a person like you doing in a place like this?”

When you see a person like Samson being mocked as a clown, blind as a bat, in the Philistine Civic Center, you have to say, “Samson, what’s a person like you doing in a place like this?”

II. Samson was there because of his choices. Bad choices (14:1-3).

A. Samson’s list of bad choices started when he decided to marry a Philistine woman rather than choosing a wife from his own people (14:1-3). His parents pleaded with him. “Samson, can’t you find a girl that you like from among our own people? Samson, it’s wrong to marry the ungodly. Besides, there are so many beautiful girls in Israel. Marry if you must, but not an ungodly woman.”

But Samson was headstrong, and he wouldn’t listen to his father and his mother. And, in some odd way God uses even our bad choices sometimes to accomplish His will.

B. Samson made another bad choice when he was determined to get revenge against his father-in-law for giving his fiancée’s hand in marriage to another. Look at chapter 15, verse 2: “And her father said, ‘I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion.’” Samson, a man of anger, a man of action, said in verse 3, “I’m blameless.” Then he took three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail, with a torch in the middle, and sent them running through the wheat fields, the olive groves, and the vineyards of the Philistines and destroyed all their crops. His revenge led to more revenge as the Philistines killed his would-be wife and her father.

It’s a story of conflict and escalation, fueled by anger and pride and jealousy and fear.

C. Samson’s other poor choice was that he had a weakness for beautiful, but deceitful, women. It doesn’t matter how strong you are, when you choose unbridled passion, you’re going to fall. You’re going to find yourself in circumstances and predicaments in which you thought you’d never be entrapped.

It’s not the girl from Gaza getting him in trouble – it’s deceitful Delilah. You remember Delilah. She sold Samson’s soul for silver. “Samson, you can trust me. What’s the source of your strength?”

First he tells her, “Seven fresh cords, still green. I’ll never break loose; I’ll be as weak as any other man.” The Philistines bring her seven green cords, and while Samson is sleeping she bound his hands and cried, “Samson, Samson, the Philistines are upon you.” He broke the cords and killed the Philistines.

Then it was new ropes.

She nagged and nagged and nagged, and finally he told her the truth. It was his hair – a razor had never touched his head. Remember, that meant he was set apart for God. She cut his hair. Sheared him – like one would shear sheep. Then she gave the shout, “Samson, Samson, the Philistines are upon you.” He awoke in confidence, thinking he, himself, had the strength, but later realizing that God was his strength. They seized him, gouged out his eyes, and bound him to a grinder in the prison mill. His moral blindness became physical blindness.

A good beginning. Incredible abilities. And even the presence of God in our lives is neutralized by bad choices. It happened to Samson. And it can happen to you. And it can happen to me.

Our life is often little more than the sum total of our choices. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, “Everybody, soon or late, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” Choices have consequences.

Dr. John Claypool said, “Life is not a gamble in the deepest sense of the word. It is an investment with a predictable relation between causes and consequences.”

Dr. Pierce Harris was the long time pastor of the First Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Harris spoke one day at the state penitentiary. He was introduced to the prisoners by one of the inmates. In his introduction, the inmate said, “I want to tell you a story about two boys. They lived in the same neighborhood. They went to the same school. They played together. They went to the same church. One of the boys decided he would be smart, so he rebelled against his parents, quit going to church, did what he wanted to do instead of what was right. The other boy continued to go to church and do what was right and treat other people with love.

“These two boys are now grown men and both of them are here today. The boy who continued down the right path and remained faithful to the things he had been taught – this boy is the great minister who is going to preach to us today. The boy who decided to be smart and rebelled is the prisoner who introduces the preacher to you today.”

Two boys. Same neighborhood. Same school. Same church. Yet two diverse destinations. Choices have consequences.

What is a person like you doing in a place like this? Whatever place you find yourself in, it's probably because of the choices you have made. Your place is a result of the consequences of your choices.

Some of you here today are at that very moment of choice. The choices you make today are literally life-shaping. The choices you make today will alter who you are and where you'll go. Will you choose obedience or disobedience? Will you choose to be faithful or unfaithful? Will you choose what is holy or what is horrid?

The history of Satan's success is the history of getting people to make bad choices. Getting Eve and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree, assuring them that their choice would have no consequences. From that very first Satanic sell job to the very last, the message is the same: Go ahead. Make your own choice. Walk your way, not God's way. There will be no consequences.

But over and over again we see, in story after story, in strong man after strong man, the result is the same. We are the sum total of our choices, because our choices have dire consequences.

What's a person like you doing in place like this?

We all stand today at the place of our choices, the place that is plotted out with each choice that we make. Choice building upon choice until finally the whole structure is too large to change. The edifice is built. The pattern is permanent.

- We need to choose carefully.
- We need to seek wise counsel as we make the key decisions in our lives.
- Most of all, we need to choose (unlike Samson) not from a perspective of the short view of the pleasure of the moment, but from the perspective of the long view – a view that looks into the future and not just at today.

What is a person like you doing in a place like this? Are you who I think you are? Two good questions.