

Evangelizing The Evangelical

by Fred Tomlinson

This sermon delves into the story of Samson from the book of Judges, highlighting his miraculous birth, divine calling, and subsequent struggles with self-indulgence and disobedience. The speaker draws parallels between Samson's life and the state of modern evangelicals, emphasizing the need for true devotion, radical surrender to God, and a genuine response to the gospel message. The sermon concludes with a call to avoid waiting until the last moment to fully commit to God and to embrace His transformative power in our lives.

Duration: 45:46

Scripture: Judges 13:1, Hebrews 11:32, Ephesians 2:4, Matthew 7:13, 2 Peter 1:3, Luke 15:11, John 14:23

Topics: "Divine Calling", "Radical Surrender"

Description

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Transcript

The title that I've given to this message this morning is Evangelizing the Evangelical. I've never spoken under that title in my life before and I'm going to draw from an unlikely biblical passage. I'm not by any means going to try going through the section in a verse-by-verse manner.

This morning I simply want to allow several features in the story that we look at to provide a helpful pathway for the message that I feel God's put on my heart. So if you'd like to turn to the book of Judges, of course in the Old Testament, and the story itself occupies three chapters. Now you can see why we're not going through verse-by-verse.

Chapters 13 through 16 of the book of Judges and basically these chapters record one man's journey through life and as we watch that journey that he takes through life, there's a sense in which it also reflects the story of the nation of Israel at that time as well. And of course the man at the center of the story is none other than Samson. And what we'll do, we'll read just the first several verses of chapter 13.

Can I do that? Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, so that the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years. There was a certain man of Zorah of the family of Danites, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and had borne no children. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold now, you are barren and you have borne no children, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son.

Now therefore be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. I'm going to leave reading at that point.

I want to encourage you to read through the whole three chapters as some time before too long. So what we learn immediately is that Samson was a miracle child, and his birth would be a miracle, and more even yet than that, or more significantly than that, he was a chosen boy of God. He'd been chosen before he was born by God.

And in the context of the text we're told that in God's choosing of him, he was to live and be a Nazarite. That didn't mean he would live in Nazareth. There was a recognition of people who were separated uniquely unto God, and they were referred to, this category referred to as Nazarites.

There was a vow which they would take, and the main feature of the life and experience of the Nazarite was that they would be separated unto God, and that's what we found here in this statement of the Lord, that for the whole duration of their life, they were separated unto God. It would be a man of God. And there were other features.

The individual ordinarily would not actually be a Nazarite for life. More commonly, a person would take a vow at a particular time, and for a specific period of their lives, they would live under that vow, and during that period, they would not cut their hair, and they would not drink strong drink, and they would not come in contact with a dead body. But one of the unique things for this young man was that God had chosen him, and that God was indicating that he would be a Nazarite for the duration of his life.

This was a lifelong business. But for Samson, there was something even yet more significant that God had in mind for his life. We've seen from the text that God's plan was that he should be a deliverer.

Do you see that in the end of verse 5? He shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Most of you will know, as you read through the Bible, that this book called the Book of Judges is actually a section in the history of Israel between Joshua and Saul, who would become King Saul, and during that interim period, there were in fact a series of judges who would be responsible in many ways for the leadership of the nation. For this man, Samson, he was ordained to fit into that category.

We can read on further, and we can find that not only was this God's choosing for him, but God also equipped him. One of the features of that equipping for the call was this unique strength that he had. We're all well aware that if anyone's drawing cartoons of Samson, he's always a great big fellow with great big muscles.

There's nothing in Scripture to suggest such a thing. His strength was something that resulted from the Holy Spirit, from the power of God. God equipped him.

Those whom God calls, he equips, and this was certainly the case here for this man. He was supernaturally equipped for the assignment that God had in his mind for him. What is noteworthy, as we think about Samson, is that although he was called of God to this separated life, separated unto God, there's actually no record at all in the text that he ever took that vow.

It was his parents who were told that this is who was going to be born from their reunion together, and this was how God would view him and what God had in mind for him. But there's no record that he actually took the vow that other people would normally take if they were going to live in that particular way. We know that he didn't cut his hair, and he may have abstained from a strong drink.

We don't know that, but we assume that maybe that was true, and there's no record of him touching a human dead body. There is a record of him touching the dead body of a lion, you may remember as you read through the text. But if we're watching the text carefully, that's as far as his separation went.

In other words, that's where his Nazarite lifestyle ended. I'm crediting him with one or two of those things. We've got every reason to believe he kept his hair long, as I've indicated, but we don't know about the other areas.

But that's all we know. In other words, it becomes obvious that Samson conformed to the imposed commandments or directions for a Nazarite as far as suited him, as far as it was convenient for him. There's never a suggestion in the unfolding story through the major part of his life that he was in any way, shape or form, separated unto God.

Again, we've only got the text to go by, so we don't want to imagine things, and we don't want to credit him with what is not due. But the fact is, there's no reference in the Scripture that he lived in any way a life that was subjected to God. Quite the contrary, as we shall see.

He never seemed at all to manifest devotion to God. What we do know is his heart was full of himself, full of self. There's a reference in this story, and then again we can find it later on in the book of Judges, where the Lord has had it recorded that the nation of Israel lived in such a manner that they fulfilled everything that they deemed to be right in their own eyes.

And clearly, that is exactly how Samson was living his life. He was doing that which was right in his own eyes. And once again, the nation was doing the same thing.

If we look into chapter 14, let me read a couple of verses here from verse 1. Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. Now therefore, get her for me as a wife.

Then his father and his mother said to him, is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives or among our people that you go to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? But Samuel said to his father, get her for me, for she looks good to me. Do you see? He's doing that which is right in his own eyes. And he's operating.

This man, who ostensibly was to be separated unto God, is doing whatever he's choosing to do. He's letting his flesh control him. And he is following his own lust.

And he would like to intermarry with someone who was a pagan, which was forbidden by God. He was also going against the will and wishes of his parents, as we saw there. And at the same time, we can't help but note the sort of arrogance that he seems to manifest as he's speaking to his parents.

None of these features indicate a man who is separated unto God, who is living for God at all. Although he was this miracle child, although he was the result of the call and plan of God, he violated his calling. It's a very serious thing that we're looking at.

And he was strong. He was strong in his will as well as physically strong. And he certainly manifests a recklessness as we watch through the story.

We can see here's a man who's squandering his life in pleasure-seeking and indulging his lusts. And you can't help but also add to that that there's no sign along the unfolding story that he pauses to reflect upon his lifestyle or the way he's living. It's just a issue after issue, feature after issue of his own self-seeking life that we find here.

And yet somewhere overarching his selfish life, there is this record that God had chosen him for a purpose. I really don't know how any truth-seeking Christian believer can deny the fact there's a hugely troubling parallel that we find between Samson, as we've just been referring to him, and the lives of much of what today would be referred to as fundamental Christianity. It's hugely troubling.

It should be hugely troubling. In fact, just to back up, of course, Samson should have been deeply troubled in his own heart. And surely at some point he would pause long enough to think seriously about his birth and his life and his calling.

He was going throughout with motions, but clearly his heart was not in it at all. And I can find a parallel. In fact, I can't miss the parallel as I note these things.

Perhaps what I could do for a few minutes is just pull over into a lay-by, as it were, and just think about the word evangelical. In a very similar way to the word Christian, both of those words have become like generic tags identifying a brand, Christian, fundamentalist, and so on. The word evangelical represents to us, I suppose today, a person.

A person, we would say, is an evangelical, or a denomination is evangelical, or an organization is evangelical. Of course, in the world at large, especially at this point in time in the political arena, the word is used to specify or label a social category of people. But it's all very generic.

The word itself came into existence in the 16th century. This was the time of the Reformation. That Reformation that would change the Christian church, I believe, forever.

And I am confident in my own mind it holds far greater significance than any of us fully appreciate at any rate. But this label was given to followers of Martin Luther. Of course, he, along with other great reformers, were breaking away from Catholicism at that point in time.

They were the Protestants, the Protestants, and they were protesting the Roman Catholic position, and so on. And the word would be used in reference to those who were responding to what God was doing and saying through Martin Luther and the other spokespersons of that movement at that time. But it particularly emphasized those who recognized and subscribed to the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone, not by works, but by faith alone, and a redemption and relationship to God, which was by grace alone, his

grace alone, and would be found in Christ alone.

And those who identified with that great teaching and embraced it with all their hearts were labeled, as I've indicated. The word is derived from a Greek word, euangelion, and this is where we get this word evangelistic. It means literally, I hope I still have your attention, it literally means good tidings, good news, and it's translated in our New Testament 77 times.

I have to say in the King James Version because I've never tried to count in any other. 77 times in the New Testament, that word is translated gospel. So we're thinking about the gospel, we're thinking about people who subscribe to the biblical gospel, and they're distinguished in this particular way.

Having said all of that, we have to swallow some hard things. We have to be prepared to acknowledge that most modern or very many modern evangelicals or people who live under that title or embrace that kind of title are indistinguishable from those who are lost, for those who have not responded to the truth of the gospel and found its life and power within them. And moreover, rather in the same way as we thought of Samson a few moments ago, they are somehow blithely indifferent to the concepts of waiting on God, personally, drawing aside.

I'm talking about modern evangelicals who have a passion to get alone with God and spend time in his presence, and to engage in those contexts in personal worship of God, and whose hearts engage readily and wholeheartedly with the concept and teaching of heart purity and of godly living, and those with a resolute focus on the things of God. Now, I hope that I'm making myself clear and plain here. I'm talking about those who would consider themselves to be evangelical Christians today, believing the gospel, and yet in so many ways these core issues, some of which I've just listed, seem absent in the lives of so, so many.

I've referred back to the root of the word evangelical, but just to turn our attention back there for a moment, let me draw your attention to some of the original evangelicals. I'm thinking of John Wycliffe. Some of the names I'll mention, I think by many of the younger people in our evangelical churches today would know very little about these people, and maybe the names would be unknown to them.

But John Wycliffe, to whom we owe so much for the fact that we have this Bible in our hands today, he would say things like this, I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death. There's one of the original evangelicals. Or there are the Protestant reformers who would follow behind John Wycliffe, Martin Luther I've mentioned, who would make statements like here I stand, I can do no other.

There's a context for these statements I can't take time to tell you about. Or John Calvin, who said I am resolved never to deviate in the least from the authority of Christ. Or William Tyndale, who said I defy the Pope and all his laws.

And then he went on to say if God spares my life, I will, and there's a wonderful follow-up to that statement. Or what about those who were engulfed in the flames of a burning stake? I'm thinking of Hugh Latimer, who in the midst of the fire that was already beginning to consume their bodies, he spoke to his colleague who was similarly tied to the same stake. And Latimer said, play the man, Master Ridley.

We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out. Or more recently, what about the great evangelical, a young man, Jim Elliot, who said God deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things, and pour upon me the oil of the spirit that I may be aflame. These were

Christian men.

These were true evangelicals in the real sense of meaning of the word. They were men of uncompromising devotion to God. And they lived with unshakable convictions.

Do you see? They were people separated unto God. And these qualities that I'm drawing your attention to are in, I think, short supply today. And there will be those who will challenge my statement and deny that.

But to me, it seems so plain. In England, we'd say it's as plain as the pike staff. But so many of these great qualities that many of these men and women of God possessed are in very short supply at this present time.

So far as Samson was concerned, as the story unfolds, there would be the fourth time that Delilah would waken him. He was sleeping on her knees, we're told. As he awoke, nothing for him would continue and remain the same.

His life of lust and reckless waste would come to an end. But a new nightmare would begin for him. The scripture itself makes this statement, the Lord had departed from him at that point.

The Lord who had given him this unique strength for the purposes which God had ordained him for was gone. And you remember, as he awakes, he says, I'll awake as I've been doing these other three times. And he was just snapping the cords and bonds that he'd been tied with.

But I like the old King James. In the old King James language, it says this, he wished not that the Spirit of the Lord had departed from him. He didn't realize what had happened.

He was blind already. He was blind to that fact. And his enormous ego was deflated.

His natural strength was gone. The things were going to get worse in a big hurry, we know, because he was about to have his eyes gouged out, very graphic language in the text. And he would be put to work like an animal, doing the work that an animal would do.

You can read the story for yourself. And he was shackled with chains. This strong man, this man of miracle birth, this man of miracle calling, this man who was ostensibly to be separated unto God, a man through whom God would work, and here he is.

And to use a modern expression, he's a total train wreck. Everything has collapsed at this point. If we attempted to ask the question, why would an evangelical need to be evangelized? My answer to that question is, because in so many cases, we're all so like Samson.

My entire life, my entire life has been spent in evangelical circles. My mother and father were Christians, evangelical Christians. And so that's the way I was raised.

And I've been teaching the Bible for 50 years. I was a bit shocked when I did that little calculation. But during that time, I've had the privilege of talking to many people and having many people talk to me, evangelical Christians, people who would say, although their lives are different to Samson's, there were similarities.

Not a few of them would tell me that they had come from homes which were Christian, and they had Christian parents. And many of them would claim to have been saved and have assurance of heaven

when they die. And yet, here they are talking to me because, and sometimes in their own words, one way or another, the Christian life was just not working for them.

I've heard about lifelong struggles with sin in multiple forms. I've heard about addictions to pornography, to homosexuality, to marital unfaithfulness. These are professing Christians, evangelicals.

I've heard about being plagued with guilt. I've heard about being chained to credit card fraud. I've heard about being enslaved to gambling.

I've heard about being stalked by irrational fear, etc., etc. Professing believers. Yes, evangelicals who wield their issues, you know, like a grocery cart, through their life, taking their grocery cart of issues that were in their own hearts, in and out of their own homes, in and out of their workplaces, in and out of the churches, the places of worship, in and out of meetings.

And many of them were right at the point of giving up. If you look back into the text we've got here, look into chapter 16, and we can read, where shall I break into this? Let me read several verses. From verse 18, when Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, Come up once more, for he has told me all that is in his heart.

Then the lords of the Philistines came to her and brought the money in her hands. She made him sleep on her knees and called for the man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his hair. Then she began to afflict him, and his strength left him.

She said, The Philistines are upon you, Samson. And he awoke from his sleep and said, I will go out as at other times and shake myself free. But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.

Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. And here's my verse. However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it was shaved off.

I'd like to read more, but time will not let me do that. Amen. Do you remember that little two-word phrase, I know many of you do, in Ephesians chapter 2, but God.

But God. Did he waste most of his life? Yes, he did. But God.

His hair began to grow again. In other words, grace, the grace of God gave to that man a second opportunity. God gave him, he gave him a golden moment, a moment of destiny.

We're told that, perhaps I need to read it a little more to get this clear in your minds. Let me read, be ready for several verses. Verse 25, it happened when they, this is, I know I need to go back again.

Verse 24, when the people saw him, they praised their God. This is in a big gathering where they were sacrificing to their God, Dagon, as a matter of fact. And they said, our God has given Samson, our enemy, into our hands.

And when the people saw him, they praised their God, for they said, our God has given our enemy into our hands, even the destroyer of our country, who has slain many for us, of us, I beg your pardon. If so, it happened that when they were in high spirits, that they said, call for Samson, that he may amuse us. So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them, and they made him stand between the pillars.

Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, because of course he's blind at this point, let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them. Now the house was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there, about three thousand men and women were on the roof looking on while Samson was amusing them. Then Samson called to the Lord and said, 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.

And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested and braced himself against them, the one with his right hand, the other with his left. And Samson said, let me die with the Philistines. And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people that were in it, so the dead whom he killed in his death were more than those he'd killed in his life.

And then his brothers came and took his body away. Amen. God gave him this moment.

I mentioned earlier that we never saw any reference to Samson speaking to God. There are no evidences of his life being yielded to God at all, but this is exactly what we see here on this moment. I'm saying God gave him another opportunity, and while these evil men and women, I dare say even demons themselves, were mocking him and laughing that God's man had come to this, God obviously had made a terrible, terrible mistake in ever choosing him, so it would be thought and so on.

And then I love the words where he says to the boy, place my two hands on these posts, and so on. He cries out to God in his own personal brokenness. Again, it's the first time we hear him pray, but he had to come to this place before God could truly use him.

There's just one reference to Samson in the New Testament. It's in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. I won't read it there, but verse 32 makes reference to him.

And the wonderful thing is, this is in a whole list of the true great men and women of faith in the Old Testament, and the writer of the Hebrews is listing them in a category here to demonstrate the fact that there were these people who were truly God's people, men and women of faith in the Old Testament period, many of them being listed. And Samson's name is right there. And the very next statement after Samson's name comes there, and bearing in mind there's no reference of all of his lusting and all of his wasted life, there's no reference of that at all.

This is God's perspective on this man. It is as though it's erased completely, and it speaks of him as one of those who subdued kingdoms. And so it reads on.

You can read chapter 11 and see that for yourself. But the judge, the man who had been chosen by God, at this stage in his life now, having come through eventually to this place of brokenness and yieldedness to God, God re-equips him again. And he, as the judge, is able to unleash this divine judgment on these enemies of God.

And he died a great deliverer in Israel. Amen. One of the great ironies in evangelicalism, in my observation, is that so many will say amen to some presentation of Scripture, perhaps not unlike this that I'm reading and sharing with you.

They will sing their songs with true words. One that just leaps to my mind is, my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee. Here's the irony.

Although they would say they appreciate this teaching of the Bible, they sing these words as though they were their own testimony. And yet the fact is, they leave the meeting with the same old grocery cart, with the same old stuff, the accumulated issues of their lifetime that they push on and continue. And we say, how can this be? How can there exist such an irony, such a contradiction? There are many things that could be said in answer to that question, but I believe that tragically, all too often, in the actual presentation of this gospel, the message has been reduced, greatly reduced, reduced to a raising of a person's hand and receiving, they believe, a free ticket for heaven when they die.

And yes, I know and I believe with all my heart that salvation is by grace alone. It's not the result of any works which we can do. But at the same time, there's this issue of how a person responds to the message of the gospel that is so critical to us.

I fear in so many ways, it's reduced to something not unlike making a purchase on your computer with Amazon, where it just requires just your thumb print as the appropriate place on your computer and the deal is completed. In other words, we've reduced everything down to something that is so simplistic. When at the same time I hear Jesus teaching, and Jesus talks about a narrow gate that few find, and a narrow way that few choose to live.

He told many parables, but one great parable comes to my mind. It was basically, he was saying, this is how my kingdom works. And then he went on to say something very simple, seemingly very commonplace, and yet incredibly profound and challenging.

He said there was a merchant man who was going about seeking precious pearls, and he found a pearl of great price. And he immediately went home, said Jesus, and he sold everything that he had in order to realize the funds. And he went back and he purchased the pearl of great price.

That's how we're to respond to the word of God. When the word of God comes to us and we sense that it is God speaking, and think of Wesley's words as I'm saying this. He said, he speaks, he, he God, by the Holy Spirit.

He speaks, he speaks into our hearts. He speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive. There's something about the word of God.

There are people who will hear it and they'll walk away. But there are those others who will hear the word of God, and it arrests them deeply. They're challenged deeply in their innermost heart.

And somehow, mystically, faith is somehow communicated into that believing heart, and is then exercised in faith toward God that he may do this great work. And the issue is, as in the parable, it's the giving up, it's the selling off of everything that we are, the giving of our entire lives to God. And in return, he gives himself to you and to me.

Jesus said, and we will come. He's talking about his father and himself, and we will come and make our abode with him, with the one who responds in this radical and this complete way. Those evangelicals I mentioned earlier of yesteryear, they all did this.

They believed the word was being spoken to them by God in the depths of their hearts, and they embraced it with every fiber of their being. God transformed their lives, and he gave them a message and a purpose for their lives, as we know very, very well. The Bible also says in the book of Peter, he says, he gives to us all things that pertain to living a godly life.

He equips us with his Holy Spirit to live a different life. He is the one who breaks the bondages to everything in that grocery cart, and to the cart itself. He sets the prisoner free.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin, we sing, and sets the prisoner free. True freedom is only realized in this particular way. I'd like to suggest to you that if you're hearing something in your heart at this point in time that resonates with you, where you sense that very sadly, even tragically, your life is not so significantly different to the life that we've been thinking about from these passages of Scripture, and that some of those bondages, maybe even specific ones that I mentioned earlier, are somehow a big part of your life also.

If you sense that God is speaking to you, then I want to tell you with full assurance of faith in my own heart, that God only speaks to people when he intends to carry out his purpose. He is ready and able to do a new thing in your life, I believe, to awaken your heart to truth, to himself. Yes, to evangelize you afresh with his blood tithings.

Whatever you do, don't do what Samson did. He waited all the way to the very last moment of his life. Yes, he died a great hero in Israel, but that in no way takes away from the fact that he wasted his lifetime, even as the prodigal son in riotous living, as we read in Scripture.

Amen. Don't wait to become radical on the last stretch of your life. Receive his word to your heart.

Embrace it with every part of your life and give yourself to him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's pray shall we? Father, we thank you for the gospel. We thank you for the truth of the gospel. We thank you for the power of the gospel.

We thank you for the call of God that reaches into each one of our hearts, oh Lord, and stirs us in those deep, invisible but very real places in our inner man. Lord, thank you. We thank you for every moment, every time that you speak.

For Lord, you bring light, you illuminate darkness, you illuminate everything that is wrong. And at the same time, Lord, you bring hope and faith and promise. Lord, I pray, Father, for everyone listening to these words this morning, that you will find their hearts attentive to you, Lord.

I pray that no one will just simply get up and walk away and say, well, that was good or bad or whatever, Lord. I pray that no one will just simply press the end button on their computer and that's that. But Lord, I pray that you will continue to work in the lives that you have spoken to and fulfill every aspect of your word and purpose in their lives.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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