The biblical story of Samson presents mysteries that men have for centuries tried to understand and unravel. The story presents the picture of a God-called leader who squandered perhaps one of the greatest opportunities ever afforded a man by God to be a true leader, hero, and deliverer of his own people. Yet, Samson wasted and squandered his potential by living out narcissistic characteristics in the majority of his life decisions. Samson’s failure is epic in the annals of history. One finds in the story of Samson a clear presentation of the crippling effect of narcissism in the life of one who is called to serve God by serving others. The same crippling effects are still evident in the lives of Christian leaders who succumb to narcissistic behavior today.

Throughout history, God has called men and women to places of leadership in the accomplishment of His sovereign plans and purposes. A cursory survey of scripture reveals many examples one might consider. Noah was called by God in his generation to lead in the preservation of humanity by the building of an ark. Noah served as God’s man through preaching, building the ark, and leading his family to enter into God’s salvation (Gen. 6-8).¹ The reader’s attention might then be drawn to a man named Abraham (Gen. 12.1). Abraham was called by God to be the father of the Jewish nation, the people through whom the Savior, Jesus Christ, would be born into the world. After Abraham came men and women like Joseph, Samuel, David, Solomon, Daniel,

¹ The King James version of the Bible is used throughout.
Deborah, Samson, and many others. Many, if not all, of these leaders are considered successful for the cause of God and admired for their service and example.

It is here one might pause and reflect on what scripture has to say concerning these biblical leaders. The reader is reminded fairly quickly how these leaders, with the possible exception of Daniel, all had some recorded failure in their service as leaders. For example, Noah became drunk after the flood. Abraham lied about Sarah, his wife, on two separate occasions, almost causing his wife to be defiled by another man. David’s sin with Bathsheba is renowned as is Solomon’s propensity with the women, some 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). As one reads the Bible, it seems failure in the lives of biblical leaders was a fairly common occurrence.

This naturally leads one to ask the question, is this pattern of failure among Godly leaders any different in the church today? Do God-called leaders still fail? There are many examples in history and contemporary news reports of leaders who purport high levels of religious, moral, and ethical standards who have failed or are failing. The worst failures seem to be against those who are most vulnerable. In recent history, the scandals of religious leaders involved in illicit sexual activity have been most prominent. These types of moral failures among those who are considered Godly leaders reveal there is a danger for those who are called of God to lead. The danger for God-called leaders could easily be categorized as the negative effect of narcissistic departure from the moral and ethical standards of God.

This paper examines the danger of narcissistic behavior in the lives of God’s leaders with an in-depth socio-historical examination of the life of Samson. The lessons gleaned from this examination of Samson’s life and leadership history will serve to instruct and warn Christian leaders today concerning the danger and harm of narcissistic tendencies in leadership. Just how crippling and dangerous is narcissistic leadership behavior? Samson’s story sheds light on that very question.

Narcissism

Before examining the historical account of Samson, it is profitable to define the term narcissism. Narcissism can be defined by specific characteristics exhibited in the life of an individual. The first narcissistic characteristic is defined as an exaggerated sense of self importance, thinking more highly of self than is proper. Secondly, a narcissist has an inflated or fantasy expectation of great success and power. These characteristics are followed by an elevated view of one’s social and mental status, limiting the narcissist’s interaction to people of perceived like stature. Fourthly, the narcissist looks for and expects the admiration of others. Along with these

is a sense of entitlement, an expectation of deserving the best. A sixth characteristic of the narcissist is the use of others to achieve personal expectations or goals. This use of others is accompanied by a complete lack of empathy. The final two characteristics of a narcissist are envy and an arrogant or patronizing attitude toward others. In the spiritual realm, narcissistic behavior has been compared to the effects of original sin.¹ The love of self has alienated man from his source, spiritual narcissism has alienated man from God the creator.

For the biblical leader, any one of these narcissistic characteristics and certainly any combination thereof are detrimental to principles of biblical leadership. Not only is narcissism detrimental to biblical leadership, it is detrimental in the business world as well. Studies have examined narcissistic behavior in business and group settings and found copious negative effects.² The same research revealed a narcissist will garner positive support early in a group or business relationship based on the apparent success of the individual. However, short term success often gives way to long term problems which often cause others to reverse their initial positive opinions. It has been shown that narcissists lack good listening skills, are quick to point out the faults of others, have trouble focusing on problems, possess no true empathy for others, and seldom have positive contributions to the end goal of a group or work environment.³ A preoccupation with self, personal goals, personal desires, and an inflated ego often cause great tension in the group environment. These findings and observations are certainly categorized as negative or problematic for one in a leadership role and or serving as part of a team or group effort. With this general understanding of basic narcissistic behavior, this work now turns to a historical intertexture examination of Judges 13-16 along with the application to Samson’s leadership example.

I. HISTORICAL INTERTEXTURE OF JUDGES 13-16

Vernon Robbins identified historical intertexture analysis as a tool whereby one might answer historical and theological questions concerning biblical characters and then make application concerning Christianity and the church today.⁴ This synthesis of historical information is drawn from real life characters and events as recorded in the Bible. Samson is just such a character. Born in the time of the judges, Samson was a pivotal character in the deliverance of Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. In a time when Israel vacillated between obedience and disobedience to God’s law, Samson had great opportunity to lead the nation for good.

---

⁶ Craydon McDonald, "Clarifying Several Nuances of Narcissism and their Implications for Pastoral Care." Journal of Pastoral Care, 45, no. 2 (1991): 150.
⁸ Ibid., 169.
A Good Beginning

The historical account of Samson is set in a time when Israel was led by judges. The recorded pattern of conduct in Israel included rebellion against God, judgment from God, a cry for deliverance from the people, and God’s response by sending a judge or hero to deliver them. The story of Samson is actually a break from the pattern or norm. In the account of Samson’s call to leadership there is no record of the people calling out for deliverance. God simply took the initiative to send a deliverer. Furthermore, the deliverer, Samson, did not ask to be a deliverer, he was chosen by God before his birth. It is with the birth announcement of Samson that the story begins.

The birth announcement of Samson is recorded in Judges 13 as being delivered by an angel who took on human form and appeared to Samson’s mother. Samson’s mother had previously been barren therefore enhancing the power and excitement of the angelic announcement. Furthermore, along with the birth announcement, it was revealed that the child would be a Nazarite from birth. The Nazarite vow required total abstinence from wine or any strong drink as well as from anything considered unclean. A key element of the vow with relation to the narrative regards Samson’s hair. Samson was to refrain from cutting his hair, no razor was to touch his head. The unique nature of this vow is seen in that God pronounced the vow before the child was born. A Nazarite vow was usually entered into voluntarily and for a specific period of time. The historical case under consideration reveals God’s sovereign design in designating the child as a Nazarite from birth, thus making the vow permanent and lifelong. Furthermore, the vow was binding on the mother during pregnancy as well. Samson’s mother was to refrain from anything in her life that would defile the child she was carrying.

The first appearance of an angel with the birth announcement was presented to Samson’s mother when she was alone. It is customary in hero stories, particularly where the woman has been barren, to make the mother appear to be the stronger parent or partner in the marriage. The husband in this story was a man named Manoah. Manoah is presented here as passive while his wife appears to be receiving direct revelation from God while interpreting it as well. One might commend Manoah’s wife in this instance for she went immediately to her husband and reported all to him. Perhaps Menoah’s wife was not as dominate as has been presumed. The narrative reveals the wife finding and revealing all to her husband. Furthermore, one sees where Menoah began to pray for God to reveal the same information to him. God answered Menoah’s prayer, the angel returned a second time, and Menoah was privileged to receive God’s message first hand.

14 Ibid.
The birth account ends with the physical birth of Samson. The Bible records, “And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol” (Judges 13.25). The value of this verse is seen in the confirmation of God’s call on Samson’s life. The intervening months between the announcement, the actual birth, and the growing of the young lad would no doubt have caused anxious anticipation as to what God had planned for their son. The stirring of the Spirit in Samson’s life clearly identifies God’s hand in moving Samson toward his destiny of serving as the deliverer of Israel. There is a notable absence of any details concerning the early years of Samson’s life, even the details of how the Spirit moved in his life are missing. One is left to wonder at the degree of the Spirit’s moving and the kinds of events that began to manifest themselves in Samson’s life as he grew to be God’s deliverer. One might make the connection here that those whom God sovereignly calls to serve are in all ways prepared and equipped by Him to serve. God’s call on Samson’s life was not without its special equiping as a cursory reading of the narrative reveals. All that remained for success was Samson’s willingness to live and lead in accord with God’s will for his life. This kind of willing surrender to God was succinctly stated by Schafer, “A yieldedness to the will of God is not demonstrated by some one particular issue: it is rather a matter of having taken the will of God as the rule of one’s life.” Samson could have and should have taken God’s will for his life as the rule of his life.

**Knowing Right, Doing Wrong**

The historical account of Samson’s life takes on greater detail in chapter 14 of Judges with the record of Samson’s desire for a wife. Rabbinical law required Samson to choose a wife from among the young maidens of Israel, he was directed by the law to marry only a Jewish woman. Yet, the story unfolds with Samson travelling to the Philistine city of Timnah where he took particular notice of a Philistine maiden he wished to marry. Samson told his father and mother of the Philistine maiden and asked them to make the necessary arrangements to pay the dowry and secure her as his wife. Menoah and his wife resisted Samson’s proposal to marry the Philistine maiden, noting it was against God’s law. Samson responded with a classic narcissistic answer, “Get her for me for she pleaseth me well” (Judges 14.3b). Samson was literally saying that she was right in his eyes regardless of whether God or anyone else agreed.

Samson’s determination to marry outside of God’s will for his life is a classic example of the narcissist’s closed loop system, caring only for what is important for self-satisfaction or advancement.

The marriage request and terms set forth by Samson give the reader a first glimpse into the conflict between the will of God for Samson and the will of Samson for Samson. As a Nazarite, Samson was called by God to a level of holiness that would serve to mark him as set apart for special service. The paradox is found in that

19 McDonald, “Clarifying Several Nuances of Narcissism and their Implications for Pastoral Care.” 153.
Samson’s disobedience would be used by God to precipitate conflict with the Philistines which would ultimately result in the accomplishment of God’s purpose to deliver Israel,\(^\text{20}\) The lesson one may glean here is that God can and will accomplish His sovereign plan regardless of how cooperative the called man or woman may or may not be. Samson’s choice of wife in this passage is a classic example of a God-called leader making decisions based on personal preference with no empathy for the concerns or cares of others, most importantly a lack of concern for God’s instruction concerning the matter.

The account of Samson’s selfish choices did not end with the selection of a wife. On one of Samson’s journeys to Timnah he was attacked by a young lion ( Judges 14.5). The Spirit of God came upon Samson and he killed the lion with his bare hands. Sometime later, Samson passed by the same way again and turned aside to see the carcass of the lion he had slain. Honey bees had taken up residence in the carcass of the slain lion and created a honey comb. Samson took up some of the honey from the carcass of the lion and ate it as he continued his journey. Not only did Samson eat of the honey, he gave some to his parents and did not tell them where it came from.

**Downward Spiral**

The remainder of Judges 14 and 15 describe a progressively worsening condition of Samson’s disobedience before God. The irony seems to be that the Spirit came upon Samson with great effectiveness, and yet Samson retained the ability to make volitional choices of disobedience.\(^\text{21}\) The narrative describes a riddle given by Samson to a group of Philistine young men with a wager attached. The young men threatened Samson’s prospective bride to gain the answer to the riddle. When Samson discovered the answer to his riddle was coerced from the prospective bride, Samson’s temper took control and his unbridled rage led to his murder of thirty men and the burning of entire fields of Philistine crops. The conflict escalated with the execution of Samson’s prospective bride and her entire family by the vengeful Philistines. By the time the reader reaches Judges 15, Samson had been arrested, had broken free of his bonds, and, in the power of the Spirit, slew some 3,000 Philistines single handedly with the jaw bone of a donkey that happened to be nearby. After slaying the Philistines, Samson seemed to enter a state of depression, perfectly in line with narcissistic behavior.\(^\text{22}\) The Bible records that Samson was thirsty, thought he might die from exhaustion, and actually prayed for God’s help. Perhaps in a moment of need, Samson was given an opportunity by God to pause and consider his life’s circumstances? Perhaps there was some degree of remorse in Samson’s heart?\(^\text{23}\)

**Ultimate Cost of Sin**

The ultimate cost of Samson’s narcissistic behavior and open indulgence in sin becomes clear in chapter 16. The story of Delilah is given in typical economic style for

---

22 McDonald, “Clarifying Several Nuances of Narcissism and their Implications for Pastoral Care.” 155.
23 Ibid., 155.
literature of this type and period. Samson was again involved in a sinful relationship with a woman of hostile moral and ethical standards. Samson’s complete lack of respect for the spiritual danger of sin would eventually lead to his demise. Delilah pressed Samson over and over to divulge the source of his great power. What Samson did not know was that this woman, with whom he was smitten, was aligned with his enemy. Delilah was both a spiritual enemy as well as a physical enemy. The intrigue of the narrative is heavy with deception and counter deception as each party negotiated for personal gain. Samson was driven by his narcissistic lust and the desires of his flesh. Samson’s self-will and self-centeredness is glaringly evident throughout the entire narrative. The reader discovers Delilah was motivated by her own self-preservation and advancement as well.

By the end of the story, Samson had been persuaded by the persistent Delilah to divulge the source of his power. Samson told Delilah he was a Nazarite and that no razor was allowed to touch his head. With the secret out, Delilah betrayed Samson and cut his hair, resulting in his arrest, humiliation, and permanent incarceration. Two important questions might be asked at this point of the narrative. First, did Samson really understand the significance of his Nazarite vow? The obvious answer is no. Secondly, did Samson truly believe his power came from having long hair? Regardless of what Samson believed concerning the connection between his hair and his power, Judges 16.20 reveals his power came from the Lord.

The Final Act

The final act of Samson was bittersweet. The Philistines had put out Samson’s eyes; he was blind. The ultimate act of humiliation took place when some 3,000 Philistine lords brought Samson from the dungeon to the temple of Dagon to celebrate and make sport of him. The reader finds Samson being reconciled to God as he made his final request. Samson asked God for supernatural strength one last time which would enable him to push out the pillars that held up the building they were in. In this final event of his life, Samson realized where his strength had come from all along. Samson pushed out the main pillars of the temple causing the building to collapse and kill everyone inside, including himself. The Bible records, “So the dead whom he slew at his death were more than they whom he slew in his life” (Judges 16.30b).

II. SAMSON AND NARCISSISM

As previously noted, narcissism has been identified by a number of specific personality and character traits. One can glean from the narrative that Samson demonstrated many of these characteristics in the choices he made as a leader.

24 Niditch, “Samson as Culture Hero, Tricksters, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak.”
25 Ibid.
26 Martin, “Power to Save!? The Role of the Spirit of the Lord in the Book of Judges.” 44.
28 Ibid., 39.
29 Ibid., 39.
Narcissism is often characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance.\textsuperscript{30} Samson’s choices as a leader revealed his selfish motives and the priority of personal desires over the call of God upon his life. Furthermore, Samson’s inflated self-importance took precedence over what was best for others, including his own parents and kinsmen who were under bondage to the Philistines. Samson demonstrated he cared more for satisfying his base sexual appetite than being the man God called him to be as a judge and deliverer of the nation. Samson was more determined to marry a woman outside the covenant of Israel than he was to deliver the covenant people of God. Displaying the full range of narcissistic behavior, Samson was determined to live life on his terms rather than bring himself under the leadership of God’s Word for the sake of Israel and the name of the God who called him.

Of all the narcissistic characteristics, perhaps the manipulation of others for personal advancement is the most heinous. Samson’s most despicable leadership characteristic was his willingness to manipulate people and situations for his own benefit or the advancement of his own personal agenda.\textsuperscript{31} Samson made a wager with the young men of Temnath so he might be enriched at their expense. Samson willingly took advantage of the marriage gathering to increase his personal wealth with a wager he was sure he would win. Samson’s manipulation of others reached a crescendo when he murdered thirty men in another town to pay his debt after losing the wager.

Finally, Samson demonstrated a level of arrogance that is completely in line with how a narcissistic leader would interact with others.\textsuperscript{32} Samson took revenge on the Philistines by burning their crops, thus destroying a vital food supply that affected the entire Philistine civilization. Through Samson’s retaliation over personal injury, many innocent people were injured and caused to suffer. One might consider the effect of his actions upon women, children, and even the elderly. Samson’s pride drove him to have the last word or to make sure he had the last blow in the contest.

With regard to Samson’s narcissism as a leader, it has been observed that God’s special call on his life may have caused a degree of alienation from others which Samson struggled to deal with.\textsuperscript{33} Samson may have felt a degree of loneliness or even the inability to fit in with the rest of his kinsmen. After all, Samson was under a Nazarite vow from birth which, by its very design, was meant to set him apart unto God’s service. Perhaps Samson’s propensity for intimate relationships with many women was an unconscious expression of his desire to have an emotional connection with others? Gerson has well said, “The mantle of specialness, regardless of how bestowed, is an inheritance never easily worn.”\textsuperscript{34}

It has been said that Samson’s view of his own vulnerability, or lack thereof, led more to his downfall than any other element of his personality.\textsuperscript{35} Samson never thought of himself as a vulnerable person either emotionally or physically. Samson solaced himself with women, never considering the vulnerability of such liaisons. Whenever

\textsuperscript{30} Pincus, and others, “Initial construction and validation of the Pathological Narcissism Inventory,” 365.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 365.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 365.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 94.
Samson’s life was in peril, the Bible records how he simply “shook” himself as he was accustom to do and vanquished any and all danger. The narcissistic view of invulnerability was ultimately Samson’s undoing.

III. CHRISTIAN LEADERS AND NARCISSISM

Most Christian leaders will most likely never be as overtly narcissistic as Samson. However, there are some personal values that, when constantly reflected upon, tend to create a personal atmosphere conducive to narcissistic thinking.36 A constant personal requirement to be original, unique, and self-fulfilling can lead a person to self-centeredness which, in turn, can produce narcissistic behavior. Christian leaders, particularly those in vocational ministry, are often driven or motivated by the desire to be original in their teaching, unique in their personal style, and or self-fulfilled in doing God’s work. The Christian leader must ever be mindful that the ministry is about obedience to God, not personal exaltation, advancement, or recognition for being unique or original. The emphasis in the contemporary church to be cutting edge all the time falls into the danger zone warned of here.

Another danger Christian leaders face is making the mistake of replacing God’s Word or God’s plan with one’s own word and agenda.37 The worship of self is a very real danger when a leader begins to taste what appears to be success, either genuine or perceived. The Christian leader must be ever mindful that narcissism, no matter how slight, is the direct antithesis to the Christian virtue of humility.38 A Christian leader who lives, ministers, or operates from personal motives, no matter how small, has allowed pride to enter and cloud their judgment. There are two important things the Christian leader is admonished to remember concerning pride; (1) God hates pride (Proverbs 6.17), and (2) Pride is that thing which comes before a fall (Proverbs 16.18). Healthy humility comes when a person recognizes two things, “first, that he or she is loveable; second, that he or she is loved by God. Anything else is intellectual and emotional greed, and stands between the individual and a true understanding of self.”39 Humility before God is the key.

Finally, leaders who espouse strong Christian beliefs and ethics are more negatively affected by narcissism than those with less profound Christian beliefs.40 In other words, the negative effect of narcissism has been shown in a quantitative study to overcome and negatively influence even the most devout believer if allowed to go unchecked. Here again one sees the importance of the Apostle Paul’s admonition to be conformed to the image of Christ by a continual renewing of the mind in God’s Word (Roman 12.1-2).

38 Ibid., 22.
39 Ibid., 29.
IV. CONCLUSION

Samson’s life serves as a biblical example of one who had tremendous potential, by the grace of God, to bring much glory to God. Christian leadership is leadership under a unique umbrella. The man or woman called to serve God is called to serve on God’s terms for His glory and His alone. There are various aspects of Christian leadership that serve to make it unique.41 No Christian leader can justifiably claim a position of superiority, a natural feeling for one who is narcissistic, because there is only one superior person in the Christian faith, that person being Jesus Christ. Christian leaders realize Jesus is in control and willingly submit to His leadership in their lives. In the same way Samson was called of God to serve his generation, Christian leaders of every generation are called to serve those whom God places under their care. Serving Jesus rather than self takes precedence in the Christian leader’s life which ultimately brings great honor and glory to the Lord.

Christian leadership is also distinctive in its character.42 Christian character is clearly expressed in 1 Timothy 3:2 where the apostle Paul told Timothy an elder or leader in the church is to be a man who is above reproach. The idea is one of blameless character, a man upon whom there is no handle of accusation.43 This kind of character comes from the lordship of Jesus over a man’s life. Character is always realized by a consistency between what is said, what is intended, and what is actually done in life.44 The leader who allows narcissistic tendencies to enter life decisions and actions will fail in the area of character. The manipulation of others for personal gain by nature creates a dichotomy between intention, what is said, and ultimately what is done.

Finally, Christian leadership is distinctive in its power source.45 According to Romans 12:1-8, spiritual gifts come from God. The call to Christian leadership as well as the power, authority, and ability to carry out Christian leadership finds its source in God. The Christian leader operates as a steward over the abilities and resources God has placed in one’s care. The very people a Christian leader exercises leadership over belong to God and are to be cared for with the utmost love and concern. The lack of empathy present in a narcissistic leader is completely contrary to the model of biblical leadership. Proper stewardship, proper care, and proper concern for God’s people is erased or consumed by the narcissist’s preoccupation with self.

God was involved in every part of Samson’s life.46 The one thing God continually worked around, if it can be stated in those terms, was Samson’s unwillingness to obey and do things the easy way. Samson’s unwillingness was due to his narcissistic nature which demanded that he experience life on his own terms. The answer for the Christian leader is found in the statement of the Apostle Paul where he said, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live

42 Ibid., 318.
in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2.20). May this ever be the prayer and attitude of those who lead for Jesus.