

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Things at Hand: Samson, Aaron, & Mary

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

Children sometimes say the most profound things. Often what they say gives a good reflection on what they have taken notice of. I have four at home, three of whom are speaking now so you can imagine that there are numerous things that they come out with that are wonderful. There was one recently when we were talking about some maths work that my eldest had been learning about. I had asked her if she knew what take away meant. She gave me a good answer. But then one of my other children piped up that she was wrong! He knew what a takeaway was. A takeaway was actually when you had food delivered to the door! This was in the middle of another lockdown, so it was a clear reflection of some more common activities that he had taken notice of. It could be argued that it was a profound statement about something that has become a little too common in our house recently.

I was reminded of this occurrence when considering the subject before us today, which covers the second verse of a children's chorus. The whole chorus goes as follows:

Shamgar had an ox goad, Rahab had some string
Dorcas had a needle, David had a sling
Samson had a jawbone, Aaron had a rod
Mary had some ointment, And all were used for God.

I must confess that it is not one that I know, but like many other little children's choruses, it covers an awful lot of ground in a short space of time. Like my opening remarks, there is something profound in the simplicity of the statements. All of these well-known people from the Bible, complemented with a list of ordinary equipment, were used by God to perform great works.

We will look at the items for Samson, Aaron and Mary over the course of this talk. They don't really link in any easy way so I will simply take each one as they come, looking at what we can learn from each case before considering ways in which we can be encouraged today by the lessons we consider.

Samson – The Jawbone

So, we first turn to Samson and his jawbone, or rather a donkey's jawbone. This particular story is told in the 15th chapter of Judges. It is a most peculiar story, brought about mainly by the rash decisions of Samson himself. Samson determines to return to his wife but finds that her father has given her to another man. He retaliates by burning the corn and grain fields of the Philistines using foxes of all things. This leads to the rather unpleasant result that Samson's wife and father are burned, causing Samson to retaliate again before hiding away in the cleft of a rock. The Philistines then respond by attacking and raiding some areas of Judah. Samson is then given over, bound, to

the Philistines by the people of Israel who had been attacked. Verses 14 to 20 of chapter 15 tell the rest of the story.

“When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting against him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men with it. Then Samson said:

“With the jawbone of a donkey,
Heaps upon heaps,
With the jawbone of a donkey
I have slain a thousand men!”

And so it was, when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand, and called that place Ramath Lehi. Then he became very thirsty; so he cried out to the LORD and said, “You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?” So God split the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore, he called its name En Hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day. And he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.”

Now, Samson is not exactly the first person I would think of as a good example for Christians. There were lots of things that he did and had been involved with that were certainly not to be advised. Samson made many bad decisions and his strength made him somewhat arrogant. He seemed to love trying to trick people as well and to top it off he had a weakness when it came to women.

However, this story brings out two excellent qualities. Firstly, Samson clearly trusted in God. There is no sense here that he was worried or doubted that God would deliver him. The situation is desperately hopeless. I am sure you, like myself, would have had a feeling of hopelessness, but Samson does not seem to show this at all. I know he had great strength, but he still needed the intervention of God to be set loose from the bonds he was in, as described in verse 14 of the chapter. Samson, for all of his faults had great confidence in God, and his last act, which is so well known, was the culmination of that faith that he had.

The second quality is that Samson attributes his deliverance to God. Verse 18 gives us some insight to this as Samson clearly says, ‘You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant.’ There is an element where Samson misses this in his little speech, but when it came to it, he did recognise who it was who had actually provided the victory. A timely lesson for all of us in a western, commercial and material world to remember that even the breath we have is only because of the One who holds the world in His hand!

I have nearly finished on Samson, but I can hear the cries asking, ‘What about the jawbone?’ In a way my failure to mention it until now is significant in that it is an insignificant item. There is the question as to whether Samson should even have touched a bone given his Nazarite requirements, but I will leave that to one side. Let us look simply from a rational viewpoint; with over 1000 men on the point of attack, a donkey jawbone is not the thing you would hope to find. However, it is all Samson had to hand, and he took it up and we can assume that he had full confidence in God that it would help him win the victory. A lesson we can take here is that if we trust in God to win the battle, whatever it may be, it does not matter what tools we have. He is able to use things that we may not think are the best that could have been used. We see this on numerous important occasions in the New Testament. Nobody would have wished for five loaves

and two fish to feed over 5000 people. Nobody would have planned for a crucifixion to solve the problem of sin, and nobody would have started the church with uneducated fishermen. But God did and look at His success!

Aaron – A Rod

But let us now turn to the second character and the item mentioned in the second verse of our chorus: Aaron had his almond rod. To be fair I think rod is a bit of poetic licence as most of the time it is called a staff. I only make this distinction as a rod tends to conjure up thoughts of a weapon or tool which involves skilful use by the owner. A staff seems to me less so and can be considered a simple stick of wood. Indeed, we will see when we look through these things that Aaron is not really required to do very much with the staff.

Unlike Samson's donkey jawbone, the occurrences of Aaron's staff being used are more numerous. We see that the staff of Aaron first used as the demonstration of God's power when it turns into a serpent in the presence of Pharaoh in chapter 7 of Exodus, as we read in verses 8 to 10:

'Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.'" So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the LORD commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent.'

There are then a number of the plagues that are started following some movement or action of Aaron's staff. The third plague is one of these occurrences as we can see in verse 16 of Exodus chapter 8:

'So the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your rod, and strike the dust of the land, so that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.'"

The other significant occurrence for the staff of Aaron was following the rebellion of Korah detailed in Numbers chapters 16 and 17. Cutting a long story short, Korah leads a rebellion against Moses and Aaron as they feel that Moses and Aaron get too much of the glory of leading the Israelites. A strange complaint as I would not want to take on such a task! Anyway, God judges Korah and some of the other rebels, casting them alive into Sheol, as verse 30 of chapter 16 describes. The following day the people all continue to complain that Moses and Aaron have killed 'people of the LORD', God would have destroyed them all at that point, but for the intervention of Moses and Aaron. In chapter 17 of Numbers, God then performs a sign to show whom He has chosen to work through for the people of Israel. All of the staffs of the various chiefs of the people were gathered together and the various names of the chiefs were written on them, including Aaron's staff. They are all left in the tent of meeting until the next day. God had declared that He would cause the staff of the one He had chosen to sprout as if a living tree. Verse 8 of chapter 17 of Numbers gives the result:

'Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds.'

So here we have Aaron's staff being used for a number of incredible miracles, each one could be considered for the specific features of the power of God. But let us consider more the actual usage of the staff or rod that Aaron uses. They are such simple acts such as stretch out, cast down or strike. The last occurrence is simply to hand it over with his name on it. Following the action of

Aaron, God then works. Again, we have before us that great lesson of what God can accomplish when we are obedient to His instructions. Aaron simply had to do as he had been asked to do and then God did the hard work. The last mention doesn't even require Aaron to be present. Aaron could have expended much more energy and activity with the staff that he had, but that is not what God had required. Aaron was to do the simple part, putting trust in God to do that which is beyond our capabilities.

I have one last point before we move to the last of our three examples. And that is considering the miracle of how God made the staff sprout as a living tree. This is a bit beside the point, but this is a wonderful picture for us of the transforming power of God. The staff is a dead piece of wood. The next day, against all natural laws, the staff was a full almond staff. Not only had it sprouted but it had buds, blossoms and ripe almonds. These are all stages of a fruiting tree at once! Is it any wonder that Aaron's tasks were so simple? He could never hope to achieve anything like this. This also serves as a picture of the Gospel. Aaron hands over his staff with his name on. God then brings it to life, but not just normal life, a more full and fruitful life; not supported by natural processes, but by God Himself. We are like that when we come to God. We hand ourselves over to Him, but we are dead in trespasses and sins. He then performs His miracle of renewal and we are made alive again. But this is not life as we have it now on this earth; it is a new life which is so much more abundant and is able to look forward to a life in the presence of God Himself. A miracle only God can do, but it requires us to first do that simple task of obedience in giving ourselves to Him and accepting His work of salvation.

Mary – Ointment

We can now look at the last one in our chorus verse today – Mary and her ointment. There are only a few verses in the account from John chapter 12, verses 1 to 8. The story is also referenced in Matthew and Mark, but the account in John is the only one which states that it is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. I shall read the verses now.

'Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.'"

This is a somewhat different activity compared to all of the others in our chorus. The others are actions that result in some key outcome. Even Dorcas with her needle had a specific output. But here we see that the action and the equipment are all for the benefit of the Lord Jesus. Such was the nature of it that even at the time there was a feeling that this was a waste and could have been better used for some noble deed. But this event is written in three of the Gospels, never omitting the rebuke of the Lord. Do we not have a tendency to act in a similar way though? How often do we put great Christian endeavour on a higher plane than the worship of God? Missionaries going overseas or full-time workers can be revered for their output and placed as the ultimate examples to follow. Now I am not for one moment suggesting that these things are not good or should not be examples to us. But I will say that activity is no substitution for the real heart worship of God. 'The Father seeks worshippers in spirit and truth', is what we know the Lord Jesus taught the woman at the well in John chapter 4. No amount of grand outreach or missionary campaign can be of any use unless it flows from the worshipping hearts of those who are undertaking it. We receive that

lesson here. What value would the gift to the poor have been, had it been given by Judas Iscariot? He did not worship God and therefore it would have been a meaningless gesture and he would still have died in his sins.

Finally, on Mary's ointment there is this aspect of supporting the greatest work of God. When we move to the New Testament and consider worship, we see that we have moved from the immediate action supporting a miracle of God. We now have the response to the salvation of God provided through the work of Jesus Christ at the cross of Calvary. Jesus declared that Mary had done this thing for His burial. It was a support act, if you like, on His journey to the cross. That is the difference we have now. We offer our worship in response and support of his work at Calvary. There is no need for a great deliverance in the same way we saw in the Old Testament examples, as He has now completed the greatest work and miracle. All our offerings, worship and service is to simply acknowledge and appreciate what He has already done for us. There is also a sense here that we have moved to more achievable things. We can look at these great people of God who did incredible things that we are in awe of. But Mary simply worshipped Jesus. Are we not able to do the same? Indeed, we should!

What about us?

But what about us now? Is this another children's chorus that should leave us feeling that it is a nice sentiment for children but is not practical for adults in the real world? There is certainly a need to make sure that we do not take it too literally. There have been many attempts over the last 2000 years to collect artefacts in the hope that they will somehow do something amazing. Not only is this not in keeping with Christian teaching, but it somewhat misses the point. The idea here is to encourage us in that God can use anything, if freely taken up or offered.

How many things could we put in this category? We can put in "normal" things that we actively encourage. Handing out a tract or starting an outreach work with a small assembly of believers - they fall into this area of God using things that are not necessarily very impressive. If we were to evaluate this in the cold light of day, they would never be anything that could be expected to make any difference at all in this world. But if handed to God, they are all able to accomplish great things for Him. Some of the greatest things we can do would also be classed as inconsequential. Things like quoting Scripture, prayer and the worship and praise of God, the world around scoffs at our use of them. But no Bible teacher would ever suggest that we should not do them wholeheartedly. Why is this? Because it involves God directly and He has the power to use these small things for His purposes.

I suppose there is a challenge here when we consider our resources, or the things that we are able to do for God. Do we feel downcast that they are not very much, or seem small? Or do we trust in God to use the things that we offer Him in service or worship for great and wonderful things? Our three subjects today are the latter and they are ever present in the word of God as examples for us to follow.

Conclusion

I am rapidly running out of words but before I do, I would like to look at a final categorisation of the three people we have considered. If we take Samson first, I would say that here we see the example of action. Samson picked up the object and used it to the best of his ability, and God blessed it. The Bible talks about pressing on, walking, or moving towards something. It does not really tell us to stand still. I was recently in a Bible study where a brother said that we are either moving forward or going backwards in our walk. Samson is a reminder of the active Christian life and using whatever is at our disposal for the service of God.

When we turn to Aaron, we see obedience. He was asked to do specific things with the staff that he had been given. When he obeyed, God worked. What a reminder to us that obedience is an essential part of our work for God. Doing what we think needs to be done or taking our own initiative does not mean that God will then use us for great things.

Finally, Mary and her ointment speaks of worship. Activity without worship is of no value. We first need to acknowledge the supremacy and greatness of whom we are working for before He is able to use us in a great way.

Now I think it is worth swapping those words around to say worship, obedience and action. For me that order is the appropriate approach we should have as it allows us to be in the right mindset, doing the right things and being able to whole heartedly work for the Lord in our lives. May we all be encouraged in these three things as we seek to work for God. Indeed, our little children's chorus has not got many words in it, but it does point us to some great lessons as well as many things that can encourage us and help us in our walk for God.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Things at Hand – Based on a Children's Hymn – Samson, Aaron, Mary, all used for God, talk number T1200.

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