

God Uses Sinful People, but ...

When we look back through history, secular and spiritual, ancient and contemporary, it is clear that God uses sinful people to accomplish His purposes—not just weak people, but sinful people. But this does not mean that God always approves of those He uses. And it does not mean that there are not consequences to our sins. Sin is still deadly.

In the same way, God uses wounded people to accomplish His purposes, including wounded Christian leaders. But if those wounds are not properly healed, it is likely that those wounded leaders will themselves wound others.

In the Bible, there is probably no greater example of this than Samson, a man called to be a Nazarite (meaning, specially separated to the Lord) before he was conceived in the womb.

As the angel of the Lord said to his mother, “You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (Judg. 13:3-5, NIV; see also Num. 6).

Samson, for his part, is best known for two things: the supernatural strength God gave him, enabling him to accomplish powerful exploits against Israel’s enemies, the Philistines; and his lack of self-control, because of which he ended up having sex with Philistine women and even marrying a Philistine woman. Talk about sleeping with the enemy!

And so, even though God used him to kill many Philistines, his folly cost him his freedom, his eyes (literally), his reputation and ultimately, his life. His last words, spoken as

he pulled down a Philistine temple filled with thousands of people who had come to mock him, were: "Let me die with the Philistines!" (Judg. 16:30a).

Still Samson, despite his sins and weaknesses, is listed as a hero of faith in Hebrews 11, among those "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (-34).

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So God did use Samson, and the gifts the Lord gave him were his for life, despite his sin, unless he violated his Nazarite oath. That's why, in Judges 16, after sleeping with a Philistine prostitute, which was about as low as you could go as the national leader of Israel, he got up in the middle of the night and "took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron" (Judg. 16:3b).

This is as remarkable as it is terrifying. Just because a spiritual gift operates in someone doesn't mean they are right with God. Just because God uses a person doesn't mean He is pleased with them or sanctions them.

In the end, Samson's folly caught up with him, and he paid a severe price for his sins. This hurt the nation as well, since he was called to be its deliverer.

Yet the Lord still called Samson from his mother's womb, and the Lord still gifted him, even though He knew full well that Samson would fall repeatedly. The Lord also saw something positive in Samson's heart, recognizing him in Hebrews 11 as one of the heroes of faith.

In the same way, God used Martin Luther to spark the Protestant Reformation, which has literally affected the entire world. For Protestants, Luther is one of the giants, a fearless pioneer with a backbone of steel, a man who would not bow, a man with incredible spiritual insight.

For Catholic apologists, Luther is a madman, a clear proof that Protestants are in error.

To quote Luther's writings against the German peasants, "Like the mules who will not move unless you perpetually whip them with rods, so the civil powers must drive the common people, whip, choke, hang, burn, behead and torture them, that they may learn to fear the powers that be." And, "A peasant is a hog, for when a hog is slaughtered it is dead, and in the same way the peasant does not think about the next life, for otherwise he would behave very differently."

For Jews, Luther is the one who wrote that Jewish synagogues should be set on fire and their places of business broken down and destroyed, that rabbis should be forbidden to teach under penalty of death, that passport and travel privileges should be revoked, that Jews should be deprived of good jobs and herded together like gypsies. That's why the Nazis reprinted his writings with glee and why Hitler thought Luther was a genius.

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Yet God not only used Luther to bring about powerful and needed reformation in the church (many Catholics would also agree that there were some things that needed to change back then), but his writings have continued to change lives over the centuries. Both John and Charles Wesley were deeply impacted by Luther's commentaries on Romans and Galatians, which played a key role to their own spiritual transformation.

Luther was used by God, but his weaknesses and sins caused much pain for many.

What is the takeaway for us?

First, let's not be overly impressed with people. We can honor leaders for their service, but let's save our high praises for the Lord Himself.

Second, just because someone is gifted or anointed or used by the Lord doesn't mean they are saintly or holy. We should judge the tree by its fruit, which includes moral conduct.

Third, for all of us, especially those in leadership and ministry, let's be quick to repent, let's do our best to acknowledge our weaknesses and wounds and find healing and strength in the Lord, and let's walk in humility and the fear of the Lord.

In the long run, this will determine whether we do more harm than good or more good than harm.{eoa}

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