

God's Chosen Vessels

A few years ago, my wife and I went to an arts and crafts show in Cambridge.

While we were there, Eleanor bought a china cup with a hand-painted rose on the side, and it quickly became her favourite cup for drinking tea in.

Now, Eleanor isn't a possessive person, and I don't recall ever discussing it, but somehow I knew that the next time I had to fix the toaster or the weed whacker, or something like that, and I needed a container to put the nuts and bolts in, somehow I knew Eleanor's china cup with the hand-painted rose on the side wouldn't be a good choice.

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And we all have things like that, don't we?

I wouldn't be surprised if you ladies have an extra-large roasting pan that you use to cook the Thanksgiving or Christmas Turkey in.

The rest of the time it just sits in the cupboard taking up space.

But, husbands, if you're the kind of person who likes to service your own vehicle and you need something to catch the old oil in, don't even think about it!

That roasting pan has been *set aside* for a special purpose.

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And God has His sanctified vessels, too, doesn't He?

For instance, the descendants of Abraham have been set aside for a special purpose.

And one of those purposes was foreshadowed in God's words to Abraham---"**And in you**

**all the families of the earth shall be
blessed."**

Yes, Israel's Messiah would become the Lamb
of God Who would take away the sin of the
world.

And the Bride of Christ has been set aside
for a special purpose.

We find that in 1 Peter 2:9---"**But you are a
chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a
holy nation, His own special people, that
you may proclaim the praises of Him who
called you out of darkness into His
marvelous light."**

So, just like Israel, the Church's purpose
is completely bound up in the person of
Jesus Christ.

And not only that, but every believer has
been set aside for a *special purpose*.

You might call it our God-given commission.

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Well, I'm sure you have already guessed that the subject of today's lesson is *sanctification*.

And as far as a Christian is concerned, there are two kinds of sanctification.

There's *positional* sanctification, which is a direct result of God's sovereign will.

After all, we "**are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.**"

And there's what we would call *practical* sanctification, which is progressive, and under the influence of the Holy Spirit is directly related to the Christian's free will.

So, in my opinion, I don't think we can get a proper understanding of sanctification until we have at least some understanding of the sovereign will of God and the free will of man.

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First of all, let me say that these are subjects that I can only comment on rather than fully explain.

Certainly they are subjects that have divided Christians over the centuries. However, I believe they are subjects that God wants us, at least in our limited capacity, to understand.

The first thing we must recognize is that both the sovereign will of God and the free will of man are found in scripture. The problem, at least as far as man is concerned, is that they seem to contradict each other.

If God is completely in charge of His creation, which, of course, He is, then how can man have any choice at all?

John Calvin attempted to answer that question by asserting that man does *not* have a free will.

According to Calvin's way of thinking, man's earthly existence and his eternal destiny, be it heaven or hell, were preprogrammed by God before man's creation.

Of course, that makes man, who was created in the image of God, a mere puppet.

And even though there are verses that seem to support Calvin's theory, what would you do with a verse like 2 Peter 3:9 that tells us God **"is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."**

And how could Jesus' invitation---**"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden"**---have any meaning if man doesn't have the option to come?

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On the other hand, evangelicals believe in the free will of man, and rightly so, and especially as it concerns salvation.

We quote such verses as Romans 10:13 that say "**---whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved,**" and many other verses that we could quote from memory.

However, because we often have trouble putting these two concepts together, many evangelicals tend to neglect the verses that emphasize the sovereign will of God.

So what *is* the answer?

Well, I don't propose to have the answer to a problem that has puzzled so many, but for myself personally, I have found peace in the following explanation.

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It seems to me that the only way these two principles can co-exist is if the one has been created by the other---in this case,

if the sovereign will of God was responsible for the free will of man.

And the Genesis record seems to verify that fact.

For instance, sometime after God created mankind in His own image, we find Satan busily trying to deceive Eve.

If she had been created with no possibility of making a decision, then Satan would have been wasting his time.

And as our whole history demonstrates, he *wasn't* wasting his time.

So, apparently, and from the very beginning, one of the characteristics of being made in the image of God is a *free will*.

And it was an attribute that God considered so important that He included it in man's make-up, even though He knew His decision would eventually necessitate the death of His own dear Son.

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And so, with this brief outline, I think we are ready to consider the subject of *sanctification*, and we are going to draw our inspiration from a rather unusual source.

Turn with me then to Numbers 6:1-8 **"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, 'he shall separate himself from wine and *similar* drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from *similar* drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. 'All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed**

to skin. 'All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. *Then* he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. 'All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. 'He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God *is* on his head. 'All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD."

And since we are talking about a vow, we must of necessity be dealing with man's free will.

And yet, once entered into, there are some very stringent requirements.

The first one was a complete separation from wine or any product of the grape.

I'm sure we all realize that many of the social functions in Bible times, such as the wedding in Cana of Galilee, for instance, included wine as a beverage.

As a result, this first restriction would greatly reduce the Nazirite's involvement in social gatherings.

And as far as the man was concerned, his long hair would have the same effect.

That's quite evident from Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 11:14----**"Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?"**

And by the way, I very much doubt that the religious paintings we are used to are correct in portraying Jesus with long hair.

No doubt these artists, such as Holman Hunt, were influenced by the fact that long hair was popular for men in their day. You will also notice most of them portrayed Jesus with the facial features of an Englishman, and with brown hair, when everyone knows He was Jewish.

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Getting back to the restrictions placed on a Nazirite, it's not hard to see that the first two would protect him from the distractions of daily life.

The third one was designed to make him acceptable to the LORD.

You see, under Old Testament law, any contact with a dead body would make a person ceremonially unclean.

We see that in Numbers 19:16 **"Whoever in the open field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a**

man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days."

As a result, a Nazirite was not allowed to attend funerals, even of close relatives. However, in spite of these restrictions, we must not lose sight of the fact that it was a vow, and therefore voluntary.

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But this morning, we are going to draw our inspiration from three Nazirites in scripture who had *no* choice in the matter.

The first one that I will mention is Samuel. In his case, his mother made the vow on his behalf before he was born.

We pick up the account in 1 Samuel 1: 10-11

"And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish.

"Then she made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the

affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head."

No, Samuel wasn't a *volunteer*.

However, in spite of the fact he had no choice in the matter, he was always a willing participant in what he saw as God's plan for his life.

Yes, he **"---judged Israel all the days of his life."**

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However, scripture records two Nazirites who were set aside, not by their mothers, but by the sovereign will of God.

The first one we will consider is John the Baptist.

Like Samuel, he was a *miracle* baby, for both Zachariass and Elizabeth were too old to have children.

You will remember the angel's announcement to his father, found in Luke 1:13-16---

"Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God."

Yes, John's commission was quite clear.

He was to **"turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,"** and he

totally dedicated his life to its fulfillment.

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But who was the other Nazirite that God set aside for His own special purposes, and what would his reaction be like?

Well, his name was Samson, and his birth announcement is found in Judges 13:1-2

"Again the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. Now there was a certain man from Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had no children."

Yes, this would be another *miracle* baby.

V 3-5 **"And the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Indeed now, you are barren and have borne no**

children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. "Now therefore, please be careful not to drink wine or *similar* drink, and not to eat anything unclean. "For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the **Philistines.**"

Now, in view of our present-day ruling on abortion, it is interesting to note the restrictions placed on Manoah's wife.

In spite of the fact that she wasn't a Nazirite, she was to **"be careful not to drink wine or *similar* drink, and not to eat anything unclean."**

Why?

Because her body must provide the proper environment for a Nazirite.

As the angel said---"**the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb.**"

No, not *after* he emerged from the womb, but he would be a Nazirite *from* the womb.

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It's also interesting to note *Elizabeth's* response when Mary visited her.

As you will remember, when the Angel Gabriel announced Jesus' birth, he also told Mary that Elizabeth had been expecting for six months.

And no doubt it was shortly after that that Mary visited her.

Listen to Elizabeth's response upon Mary's arrival.

Luke1:44 "**For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.**"

Yes, Elizabeth called that which was within her, a "**babe**," even though *that babe* would have to wait for three more months to be born.

Elizabeth had it right.

Our society has it wrong.

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Getting back to Judges 13:5 and the announcement of Samson's birth, we read -- "**For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.**"

At this point, we will drop down to verses 24-25---"**So the woman bore a son and called his name Samson; and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him**

**at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and
Eshtaol."**

Apparently Samson's childhood and teenage years had gone well, and he was responding favourably to the Holy Spirit's influence.

But somewhere along the line, Samson lost sight of the fact that God had raised him up to *deliver* his people out of the hand of the Philistines.

In fact, it appears he was spending quite a bit of his time *with* the Philistines.

Judges 14:1 **"Now Samson went down to Timnah, and saw a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines."**

So what was he doing in Timnah?

And if a young man spends his time in the wrong place, it is almost certain that he will find the wrong *girl*.

That's just the nature of things.

Judges 14:2 "So he went up and told his father and mother, saying, "I have seen a woman in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife."

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At this point, we should take a brief look at Israel's history.

When they first entered the Promised Land, God laid down certain rules concerning their separation.

We find them in Deuteronomy 7:2-4 "and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you (that is the people of the land), you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. "Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. "For

they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly."

And time after time, that's exactly what happened.

They intermarried, adopted their neighbours' pagan ways, and were repeatedly led into captivity.

And as we have already noticed, they were presently under Philistine rule.

No wonder Samson's parents were upset.

Judges 14:3 **"Then his father and mother said to him, "*Is there* no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?"**

But it was like talking to a stone.

Samson's only response was---**"Get her for me, for she pleases me well."**

Of course she pleased him.

He was a young man, and she was a beautiful girl, but what about his commission?

How could he defend Israel against the Philistines if all his in-laws were Philistines?

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And like Israel, Christians have also been warned against such unholy alliances.

2 Corinthians 6:14-15---"**Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?"**

Of course this applies to various alliances, not just marriage, but it *does* apply to marriage.

And since we're thinking about Samson, this might be a good time to ask our young men the question, *How would you carry out your God-given responsibilities if you decided to marry an unbeliever?*

For instance, there's your obligation not to **"provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."**

How could you do that, if their mother didn't live by those values?

And the list goes on and on.

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Getting back to Judges 14, we might wonder if all of Israel's hopes for freedom were to be dashed by this willful young man.

Well, the answer is *no!*

In fact, Judges 14:4 is quite an eye-opener--**"But his father and mother did not know that it was of the LORD--that He was**

seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel."

No, God's sovereign will was *not* at the mercy of man's free will.

His plan to liberate His people would prevail, not because of any co-operation on Samson's part, and as far as that young man was concerned, at a terrible cost.

I think we all know the story.

During the wedding feast, Samson put forth a riddle that his 30 young guests, Philistines all, couldn't solve.

And to show you the kind of people Samson was associating with, they threatened to kill both his wife and her father if she couldn't discover the answer.

Not surprisingly, she wept on Samson's shoulder during the whole feast, and he finally yielded.

So, of course the young men won the bet, and of course Samson had to pay each of them **"thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing."**

But there was no doubt in his mind that he had been cheated.

And Judges 14:19 tells us **"---the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men, took their apparel, and gave the changes of clothing to those who had explained the riddle."**

And then he stomped off home.

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Well, Samson had really stirred up the pot, and it was about to boil over.

Thinking Sampson had forsaken his daughter;
the father-in-law gave her to another.
And not surprisingly, when Samson found out,
he was beside himself with rage!

Catching 300 foxes, he tied firebrands
between their tails, and destroyed all of
the Philistines' grain harvest, including
their vineyards and their olive groves.
And when the Philistines found out what had
set him off, they killed his father-in-
law and his wife.

And in retaliation for their actions,
Samson attacked the Philistines single-
handedly, and killed a great many.

And then, in retaliation for *his*
retaliation, the Philistines drew up
their army against Israel.

In fact, Israel only narrowly escaped
disaster by promising to deliver Samson
into their hands.

Judges 15:11-15 "Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What *is* this you have done to us?" And he said to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." But they said to him, "We have come down to arrest you, that we may deliver you into the hand of the Philistines." Then Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not kill me yourselves." So they spoke to him, saying, "No, but we will tie you securely and deliver you into their hand; but we will surely not kill you." And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. 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."

And that did it!

Realizing they had met their match, the Philistines left Israel in peace.

In fact, Judges 15:20 tells us, Samson **"judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines."**

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Certainly Samson's great strength was an effective deterrent, and certainly God gave him credit for protecting His people, even placing him among the heroes of faith found in Hebrews Chapter 11.

However, during those 20 years, there is nothing said about Samson's personal life.

There's nothing to indicate he ever remarried, and I rather think he didn't. Oh, he continued to wear his hair long, and even braided it in seven locks, seven being the number of God.

But at the end of those 20 years, we get a picture of a man in a very backslidden condition.

Judges 16:1 **"Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her."**

Yes, Samson was living a *double* life.

By day, he was Israel's deliverer, but he was back in enemy territory at night.

V 2 **"When the Gazites were told, "Samson has come here!" they surrounded *the place* and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city."**

But at midnight, he escaped, taking the gate and its posts with him.

An amazing feat of strength, but for the first time we don't hear the words---"**the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily.**"

And there's no indication that this narrow escape made any impression on him.

Judges 16:4 "**Afterward it happened that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.**"

And we know the story, don't we?

He was seeking love, but he found treachery. Oh, he was able to outsmart the enemy for a while.

When Delilah questioned him about his source of strength, he satisfied her with lies. First, he said seven fresh bowstrings would hold him, and then it was *new ropes* that would do the trick.

If they had any sense of history, the Philistines wouldn't have believed that one.

20 years ago, they lost 1,000 men because they had trusted in *new ropes*.

But, finally, after 20 years of victory, what the armies of the Philistines couldn't do, the words of a seductive woman did.

Yes, he finally told her the truth.

Judges 16:17 **"No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man."**

She would have *never* guessed it!

And like some Christians, it would've been better if he had never told her about his relationship to the LORD.

V 20-21 "And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" So he awoke from his sleep, and said, "I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!" But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison."

No, there was no magic in his long hair.

He had been a *special* vessel with a *special* commission, but when the Holy Spirit left him, he was powerless.

What a sad picture this is of Israel's deliverer.

And what a sad picture this is of a sleeping Christian.

Comforted by the world, he sleeps on unaware of his perilous condition until it is too late.

Finally, with his spiritual eyesight gone, and shackled by **"the sin which so easily ensnares us,"** he is condemned to spend his days *grinding* for the world.

And not only grinding, but mocked by the world.

Judges 16:25 **"So it happened, when their hearts were merry, that they said, "Call for Samson, that he may perform for us." So they called for Samson from the prison, and he performed for them. And they stationed him between the pillars."**

What a picture of defeat we have before us.

But wait---there's still hope!

If we turn back to V 22, we will discover that the hair of his head had begun to grow while he was in prison.

And what happened on the *outside* was
happening on the *inside*.

V 28-30 "Then Samson called to the LORD,
saying, "O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray!
Strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O
God, that I may with one *blow* take
vengeance on the Philistines for my two
eyes!" And Samson took hold of the two
middle pillars which supported the
temple, and he braced himself against
them, one on his right and the other on
his left. Then Samson said, "Let me die
with the Philistines!" And he pushed with
all his might, and the temple fell on the
lords and all the people who were in it.
So the dead that he killed at his death
were more than he had killed in his
life."

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This morning we have been talking about

God's special vessels, haven't we?

However, as has been demonstrated in the

lives of John and Samson, not all vessels
can be used in the same way.

As 2 Timothy 2:20 tells us "---in a great

**house there are not only vessels of gold
and silver, but also of wood and clay,
some for honor and some for dishonor."**

And with these different possibilities

before us, Paul makes this application:

V 21 **"Therefore if anyone cleanses himself**

from the latter, (that is, the iniquity
spoken of in V 19) "---- **if anyone**

**cleanses himself from the latter, he will
be a vessel for honor, sanctified and
useful for the Master, prepared for every
good work."**

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*Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord, by
the power of grace divine;*

*Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
and my will be lost in Thine.*

*Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord, to the
cross where Thou has died;*

*Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer, blessed
Lord, to Thyself now glorified.*