

## UGLY HOLINESS

### A Devotional Meditation on Nasso (Elevate)

Numbers 4:21-7:89; Judges 13:2-25; Romans 9:14-23, 11:29, 12:14-21

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John Brown made people very uncomfortable during his lifetime. He was a violent man living in a violent era, caught up in the national debate over race-based slavery that split the United States in half. As an ardent opponent of slavery, Brown joined the influx of antislavery settlers who moved to Kansas in the 1850s to bring it into the Union as a free state. Since a similar influx of pro-slavery settlers poured into the territory for exactly the opposite reason, it didn't take long for conflict to escalate. John Brown helped that escalation by overseeing the kidnapping and brutal murder of five proslavery men.



*The Tragic Prelude: John Brown.* Mural by John Steuart Curry, 1938, [Kansas State Capitol, Topeka, KS.](#)

In October 1859, Brown orchestrated a raid on the military arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His plan was to arm slaves in the Southern states and create a free territory where escaping slaves might find refuge. A force of US Marines and soldiers under command of Colonel Robert E. Lee soon defeated Brown's raiding party, and Brown himself was put on trial for his life. The trial gave him a platform to speak boldly against the evils of slavery. When he was hanged for his crimes, he had become a martyr for the cause of abolition.

Good people in the North received John Brown's message, although they did not and could not endorse his methods. Good people in the South rejected the message because it was tainted by Brown's actions that threatened their very lives and livelihood. Because Northerners embraced Brown's message, Southerners painted them with the same brush of violent extremism. During the election year of 1860, attitudes hardened on both sides, and when Republican Free Soil candidate Abraham Lincoln won the presidency, Southerners reasoned there was no longer a place for them in the Union.

John Brown didn't cause the American Civil War, but he played an important role in making it happen when it did. It's awkward to talk about John Brown because he was a Christian who lived out a deep love for his Savior Jesus Christ, drawing on extensive knowledge of the scriptures he had studied since childhood. His faith informed his understanding of righteousness, and the difference between good and evil. Slavery was evil and unrighteous, and men of good conscience should do all they could to eradicate

it. Yet his violent methods were not compatible with the Christian ideal of living peacefully with all people (at least as far as it depends on us). So was John Brown a genuine man of God, or a vicious imposter?

This is another hard question we have to ask. We are still confronted with issues that divide the people of God and, if left unchecked, could (and do) have us shooting at each other as if we were all infidels. That's why Catholics and Protestants fought bloody wars over the centuries, why Christian nations have never hesitated to confront each other in battle, and why Christians and Jews have been at odds for nearly 2,000 years. It really comes down to the question of whether any of us can conceive of someone as holy if they don't fit our understanding of the word. Either they really are profane infidels, or our definition is incomplete. And if our definition of holy is somehow deficient, then we might want to correct it before we find ourselves inadvertently fighting against our God.

The stereotypical holy person speaks politely, doesn't drink or smoke (at least in public), and is scandalized by improper activities like gambling, going to parties with the "wrong crowd," and watching movies (at least the versions with the bad language and naughty scenes still included). So how do we account for someone like Samson, who was set apart from birth as a holy man? He not only drank alcohol, he hosted parties with the "wrong crowd," killed and robbed unsuspecting people, deceived his parents, caroused with women, vandalized public and private property, endangered his own people, and flaunted the God Who called and commissioned him. Then, at the weakest point of his life, he bargained with God to give him one last opportunity to strike at his enemies, and in his death took thousands of them with him.

How is that holy? Yet Samson was a Nazirite, which, according to the Torah, is, "Any man or woman who desires to vow a Nazirite vow to be separate for Adonai" (Numbers 6:2 TLV). Nazirites avoid all fermented drinks, anything from the grape vine, and any contact with dead bodies, and they are to let their hair grow long for the entire time of their consecration. All that marks them as holy, or set apart for God. That's exactly what Samson was, from the time he was in the womb, and yet he disregarded all the stipulations of his Nazirite status, which is why the Spirit of the Lord departed from him at last. Even so, he completed the work God called him to do, which was to, "begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5 TLV).

So was Samson a holy man of God, or a vicious imposter? A holy man, according to the scriptures. He may have been unfaithful in the details of his calling, but the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. We would like to think that he fell short of that calling and misused his gifts, but did he really? Did God call Samson to be a nice guy who would negotiate a treaty with the Philistines and allow Israel to live in peaceful decadence? Or was Samson God's answer to an apostate nation that had slipped so far into sin that it was no longer capable of delivering itself? Could it be that Israel in those days couldn't be preserved except through an instrument of God's judgment like Samson – an instrument of judgment whose violence reminds us of John Brown?

This is where it gets really uncomfortable, especially when we remember something Paul wrote:

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For to Moses He says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

So then it does not depend on the one who wills or the one who strives, but on God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up—to demonstrate My power in you, so My name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then He has mercy on whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But who in the world are you, O man, who talks back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does the potter have no right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honor and another for common use? Now what if God, willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath designed for destruction? And what if He did so to make known the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory?

Romans 9:14-23 TLV

We like the idea of God preparing vessels of wrath designed for destruction if they are pagans or apostates or obnoxious people. That's easier to accept than men and women of God who are designed to be wrecking balls to bring down the unholy structures we have built with our own hands, or allowed to spring up in our midst. It's not a question of whether such people have a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. That's the King's prerogative to answer. Our place is to fall on our knees when we encounter such people and ask whether our politely passive holiness is any more acceptable to our Creator than their ugly holiness.