

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

Samson and Delilah

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Judges 16:1-31

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 16. Thank you, John, for reading for us.

Our passage for this morning brings us to the final chapter – the resounding conclusion – to what is perhaps the most tragic and memorable stories in the entire Old Testament. There’s a lot for us to learn from Samson’s final episode, but then there’s also a great deal for us to learn from his story as a whole. For that reason, this morning we’re going to begin by zooming *in* on this chapter, but then we will zoom *out* to draw out some lessons from Samson’s legacy.

For now, let’s make our way through the three scenes in the passage before us. In the opening verses we find:

Scene One: Samson’s Defiance

It’s been over a month since we read chapter 15 but it’s important for us to remember that Samson has just finished slaughtering 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. That story JUST happened. The Philistines HATE Samson.

And yet, here in the very next scene we find him here in Gaza – the capital city of Philistine. Samson is not supposed to be here. Worse than that still is the REASON why Samson is in Gaza! Look again at verse 1:

Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her. (Judges 16:1 ESV)

Here's our hero. Sleeping with prostitutes in the capital city of Israel's enemy.

In one sense, we're shocked by this story. But – in another sense – isn't it all too familiar? Isn't church history littered with stories of wonderfully gifted men and women – people who were used by the Lord to do GREAT things – who we later learned had been living a lie?

I took a short break after I wrote this paragraph and logged onto Facebook. The very first thing that popped up into my news feed was a letter from a prolific, well-respected Christian author. I have some of his books on my shelf. In this letter, he confesses that he has been engaging in an affair for the past eight years. Eight YEARS! During that time span he wrote FIVE books for the church!

This opening verse, then, presents us with a real and necessary warning: It is possible for a person to operate in the *gifts* of the Spirit even when their life is no longer marked by the *fruit* of the Spirit¹. Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23 ESV)

We tend to give an awful lot of attention to *works*. We gawk at others and say, 'Look at how much he *does*.' And – don't hear me wrong – 'doing' is important. But DOING is not even REMOTELY as important as BEING. Jesus warned:

On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I

¹ Tim Keller says something very similar in Timothy Keller, *Judges For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 147.

declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’
(Matthew 7:22-23 ESV)

Jesus warns that we can have ‘success’ in ministry, even when our hearts are far from him. And, isn’t that what we see in this story? Just look at the ‘success’ that Samson enjoys here! When the Philistines catch wind that Samson has come to Gaza, they set a trap for him. The gates of the city are firmly closed for the evening, so they prepare to ambush him in the morning. But Samson – undoubtedly expecting this response – gets up from the prostitute’s bed at midnight, walks over to the city gate, and rips it off the hinges!

As if that weren’t enough, he then lifts the gates – which would have easily weighed 1,500 pounds – and carries them 40 miles to Hebron. This is a miraculous display of strength!

But, more than that, it is a powerful display of defiance. City gates were symbolic. They represented a city’s ability to defend itself. Samson, here, marches into the capital of Philistine territory, sleeps with one of their women, rips out their defences and then carries the gate to the centre of Judah to be displayed prominently for everyone to see.

His statement to the Philistines is clear: ‘I’m not afraid of you.’

At this point, Samson is looking unstoppable. But that brings us to:

Scene Two: Samson’s Weakness

Before we can understand this scene, we need to look back to two earlier episodes in the story of Samson. First, we need to remember chapter 13 where an angel declared to Samson’s mother:

behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. **No razor shall come upon his head**, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.” (Judges 13:5 ESV)

The significance of Samson’s hair is not that it is somehow *magical*. It is *symbolic*. Samson was to be a man set apart *by* God and *for* God and His long hair was the outward mark of that commitment.

Second, we also need to look back at a curious story from chapter 14. Samson had made a wager with some of the men in the town that they couldn't solve his riddle, so they enlisted Samson's Philistine wife to draw the answer out of him. The strategy worked:

She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, **and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard.** (Judges 14:17a ESV)

Notice that phrase, 'pressed him hard'. It introduces a pattern that will repeat in his story – a glaring weakness that will be Samson's undoing. He keeps falling in love with women who are not committed to the Lord and – when pressed – he compromises.

The pattern reaches its climax here in this scene with Delilah.

The Philistines offer Samson's new wife 140 pounds of silver if she can find out where Samson's strength comes from. And so, she begins to *press*. Three times she asks him for the secret of his strength with no success. Samson toys with her. 'Tie me up with bow strings. Tie me up with new ropes. Weave my hair into your loom. Then I will be weak like any other man.' But each time, Samson easily breaks free from his bonds.

People often ask, 'Why was Samson being so foolish? He **MUST** have recognized that she was trying to have him captured.' But that question underestimates the blinding power of lust. It makes us short sighted. It turns us into fools.

After her third attempt had failed, Delilah really begins to press. We read in verses 15-16:

And she said to him, "**How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies.**" ¹⁶ And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, **his soul was vexed to death.** (Judges 16:15-16 ESV)

Delilah demands, 'If you love me you will compromise for me!' Herein lies the danger of a divided love. Any idol that you attempt to enthrone next to God will make the same demand of you. When pressed, Samson caved:

And he told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.” (Judges 16:17 ESV)

This is not merely the surrender of a secret. It is the surrender of his allegiance. Samson chose to put Delilah before the Lord. And it wound up costing him everything. We read in verses 19-21:

¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him.²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” **But he did not know that the Lord had left him.**²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. (Judges 16:19-21 ESV)

Just like that, Samson’s legacy was forever changed. His sin had finally caught up with him and the unique empowerment that God had entrusted to him was withdrawn. What humiliation he must have felt as he was led back into Gaza – the city whose gate he had previously carried away on his shoulders – blind and enslaved.

That brings us to the third and final scene in the Samson story:

Scene Three: Samson’s Legacy

In verse 23, the camera shifts to a party in Dagon’s temple. The Philistines assumed that they had captured Samson because their god, Dagon, had given him into their hands. The temple was filled to the brim with worshippers. 3,000 men and women were on the roof, and we can safely assume that thousands more were inside.

They led the mighty Samson into the centre of the temple where they forced him to ‘entertain’ them. Israel’s champion was now their clown, and the crowd mocked him with delight.

But this clown had one last act. And it was sure to bring the house down. We read in verses 28-29:

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two

eyes.”²⁹ And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. (Judges 16:28-29 ESV)

Notice that Samson ‘called out’. This wasn’t a silent prayer in his head. This was a loud plea. I suspect the crowd LOVED it! ‘This new bit is better than the last! What an entertainer this one is! Look at him pushing on those pillars! This is a riot!’

But the loud cackling shifted to nervous laughter as cracks began to shoot through the first pillar. The nervous laughter then turned to shouts of alarm as the second pillar followed suit. The priests of Dagon and the rulers of the Philistines listened in terror as Samson cried out:

“Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life. (Judges 16:30 ESV)

There – in a mass of rubble and bloody remains, Samson, judge of Israel cemented his legacy. Thus ends the story of Samson. As the angel had promised:

the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and **he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.**” (Judges 13:5b ESV)

Samson began the deliverance. It ended a little more than 100 years later when a shepherd boy named David struck down the giant Philistine, Goliath, with a sling.

At this point in the book, the author has ended his description of the judges and he is going to turn now to a thematic summary of the book. We’ll be looking at that in the coming weeks. But, before we conclude, I want to stop and reflect on this Samson story that received FOUR whole chapters of a twenty-one-chapter book! What are we meant to see here?

Just try to put yourself in the position of the author of Judges. Remember, these are *his* people. This is *his* family history that he’s writing. He comes now to the final judge he will be describing – the champion Samson. Suddenly, he wonders, does he *need* to include every detail of the story? Surely, he will tell of how Samson publicly embarrassed the Philistines by ripping the gate of their capital city right out of the ground! But does he need to explain that Samson was only in that city

to sleep with a prostitute? Surely, he will tell of how Samson destroyed the temple of Dagon! But does he need to explain that Samson *was first blinded and humiliated?*

He could have rushed right past the embarrassing details and painted Israel's hero in a positive light. Instead, he chose to tell the *full* story – for FOUR chapters! He chose to include every ugly blemish. Why did the Holy Spirit lead him to do that?

What Are We Meant To See In The Tragic Story Of Samson?

First and foremost, we are meant to see that:

1. Samson is a mirror²

I imagine that many of us read this story and feel some semblance of smug self-assurance. 'Sinful Samson!' we say. 'Foolish Samson! How could he live like that? How could he do mighty works for the Lord at one minute and then indulge his pet sin the next? It's unbelievable!' The story almost seems to be told so as to *draw out* that response from us.

But *IS* Samon's hypocrisy unbelievable? Or is it all too familiar? Is Samson an oddity? Or is he a mirror?

If you read his story closely, you might begin to notice that everything that was wrong with Israel is exemplified in Samson. As one commentator explains:

When he is not *saving* Israel he is *being* Israel, and that is most of the time.³

The author saw this. And he wanted to make sure that his readers would see it too. 'Isn't this ugly? Isn't this foolish? THIS IS US?!'

² "Samson was intended as a mirror for Israel." Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 186.

³ Michael Wilcock, *The Message Of Judges* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 111.

Just like Israel – and just like us – Samson was chosen by God for no apparent reason. He didn't *earn* this status. It was given to him before he was born!

Just like Israel, Samson was called to live a life of holiness and consecration. Having been chosen – having received mercy – Samson was then called to *respond* to that calling by obeying the Lord. He was meant to be like a light – like a city on a hill – displaying the goodness of God.

Just like Israel, Samson was essentially UNBEATABLE when God was on his side!

But, just like Israel, Samson chose instead to do what was best in his own eyes. He decided that he knew better. So he did what was right in his own eyes.

And so, just like Israel, Samson lost his anointing and was given into the hands of his enemies. They made him into a slave. They robbed him of everything that he had once enjoyed. They put him to open shame.

Just like Israel. And just like us.

The author of Judges didn't omit the embarrassing details because he knew that his people needed to look into the mirror of Samson's story. So do we.

Because, in the same way that Samson lost his anointing, so too can churches lose theirs. Didn't Jesus say that when he spoke to the church in Ephesus? He said:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Revelation 2:4-5 ESV)

Church, as we head into a week of intentional prayer, this would be a great time to invite the Lord to show us if there are ways in which we have allowed our own hearts to become divided.

Have you surrendered yourself to a Delilah?

Is there an area of your life that you refuse to surrender to Jesus?

Is there a secret sin that you refuse to let go of?

I pray that God would bring about a great spirit of repentance in us. I pray that we would be courageous enough to confess sin and to receive God's mercy and grace!

There are consequences for sin – we see that clearly in the story of Samson. But we also see that in spite of our sin – when God's people cry out to Him in faith – we can still be used powerfully in his hands. And that brings us to the last lesson that I believe we're meant to see in this story:

2. **Samson is an encouragement**

It's uncomfortable looking into the mirror of Samson.

His lusts and passions drive him off the rails all the time. He throws fits and temper tantrums. He so quickly takes the glory for victories that were so clearly the work of God. And he simply presumes that God will continue to use him.

If I'm honest, there are days when that whole paragraph aptly describes the church. If I'm painfully honest, there are days when that whole paragraph describes *me*.

I imagine that there are more than a few people in this room who can see themselves very clearly in the mirror of Samson. Maybe you're painfully aware of your hypocrisy, and you're just waiting for the shame that lies ahead of you. Maybe you've already been exposed, and you feel like you will never be used by the Lord again.

If that's you, can I point you to an encouragement this morning? In Hebrews 11 – the great hall of faith – we find a familiar name:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, **Samson**, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made

strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Hebrews 11:32-34 ESV)

How can Samson's name possibly be on this list? He was an adulterer! He failed miserably! Are we meant to believe that God looks at Samson and sees faith?

Yes.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like Samson. He doesn't deserve it. He should be disqualified.

But God used Samson. He included this corrupted, selfish man in his redemptive mission.

He also used the adulterer, David. And Matthew the crook. And Peter the coward. And Paul the terrorist. In fact, as you read through the Bible, and survey church history, you come to realize that there is only one time that God ever used a perfect person.

His name is Jesus.

In fact – the only reason why God CAN use sinful people like us is because Jesus – the SINLESS one – has cleansed us with his blood and has made us fit for service. It is only because of the grace of God displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that flawed, sinful people – people like Samson, and like you, and like me – can be redeemed and restored.

So, to you who feel disqualified, if God saw fit to use SAMSON – then why would you allow yourself to believe that He has no plans for you? This sin doesn't need to define your story. There is a bright hope for sinners! And God has shown us how to lay hold of it.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 ESV)

To that end, let's pray together.