

By the end of chapter 15, Samson, the judge and appointed saviour of God's people, has escaped the Philistines' clutches and leads Israel for 20 years. And then "one day Samson went to Gaza" - not just a Philistine town, but one of their five principal cities - "where he saw a prostitute" (v.1). Samson has learned nothing! And, while his physical strength will once again rescue him from his own weakness for women, the next difficulty he gets into will be his last, resulting in his death.

1. The Tragedy of God's Servant

Verses 1-3 are a link both to the past (chapters 14 and 15) and also to the future (vv.4-31). They are typical of the pattern of Samson's life - being enticed into an extremely dangerous situation because of his weakness for women. For Israel's judge to spend the night with a Philistine prostitute, allowing himself to be surrounded, is not just disobedient, it is also foolish. It also shows how that pattern is deepening - his recklessness (in going to one of the capital cities), his sexual addiction (sleeping with a prostitute) and the strength of the trap (surrounded by guards in a walled city), are all greater than they were in the previous 2 chapters. Like any pattern of addiction or compulsion, the cycle is increasing in force and power. And the act of strength required to break out is the most impressive yet - it is a remarkable feat to lift a city gate, and carry it forty miles to a hill near Hebron, in the centre of Judah's territory, as Samson does in verse 3.

The more God blessed Samson, giving him strength to fight the Philistines, the more Samson grew confident of his own invulnerability - and the more he engaged in irresponsible behaviour. In other words, Samson's heart used God's blessings as a reason to forget God. "Some time later, he fell in love with.....Delilah" and it proved to be his downfall. The rulers of the Philistines (5 of them - see Judges 3:3) promised her a huge amount of money "if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength" (v.5). Samson seemed to embrace the challenge and the danger of playing Delilah's game called "the Philistines are upon you". He seemed to enjoy himself, snapping both 7 undried thongs and new ropes and then wrecking Delilah's loom.

Delilah pretended to tire of the game. She had a right to know the secret of Samson's strength and he was making a fool of her. Cool and calculating, she pressed the matter upon Samson over a period of time and kept nagging him until at last he cracked - "if my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man" (v.17). She informs the rulers of the Philistines, the sleeping Samson is shaved and "his strength left him" (v.19). What follows in v.20 is strange. Samson knows that he has told Delilah the truth, and must know as he "awoke from his sleep" that his hair has gone. Yet he thinks, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free", because "he did not know that the Lord had left him". He assumed his strength would still be there, even though his hair had gone. And why not? Samson had been slowly breaking his Nazirite vow over a period of time. It is truly strange that Samson did not leave after telling Delilah the truth (v.17). Instead, he went "to sleep on her lap". Why? Because he did not really believe that his hair or his Nazirite vow was the source of his strength. He had come to believe that his strength was simply his - that no matter what he did or how he lived (including breaking God's law) he would not lose it. Samson was unable to see how dependent he was on God's grace. He had come to see his strength as being his of right, not a gift of God's mercy.

Why tell Israel this story? Why did Israel need to hear this? Why did Israel need to remember both the humour, the entertainment of Samson and also the tragedy of Samson? Because Samson was intended to be a mirror for Israel. In Samson Israel was to see herself. Samson is a picture of Israel - raised up out of nothing, richly gifted, who plays around with other loves and yet seems to always expect to have the Lord on hand. So Israel has received grace on top of grace and yet persistently carries on her affairs with

Baal, utterly ignorant of her true condition, happily assuming that all is well and that the Lord God is always at her disposal. She is a people who does not know that God may depart from her. How tragic when God's professing people cannot see that they are "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked", like the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3 (vv. 14-22). Whether to ancient Israel or the church in the 1st century AD or the 21st century, Samson's tragedy still speaks: watch out, be careful not to abandon God's calling, leave your first love and forfeit the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

2. The Lord God versus Dagon

Having grabbed Samson, the Philistines gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza, where he was set to grinding grain (the work of slaves and women) in the prison. And as the days passed, "the hair on his head began to grow again" (v.22). Last week, I made the point that the theme of the episodes recorded in chapters 14-16 may be summarized as "the stupidity of the Philistines". This theme reaches a kind of crescendo in vv.22-30 of Judges 16 - Philistine stupidity seems to pile up in this section. How dumb were they? First, the Philistines were as blind as Samson in supposing that blindness alone would render Samson harmless and in failing to notice that his hair had begun to grow again. A second aspect of Philistine stupidity may be intended in vv.23-24, where the leadership prematurely praise Dagon, a lifeless non-god, who cannot prevent the site of his celebration becoming a graveyard for his devoted followers. Thirdly, they summon Samson into their very midst to provide entertainment never dreaming that they were providing him the opportunity to go out with a glorious victory. Finally, the temple of Dagon was packed with participants including all the Philistine rulers - their national leadership will be wiped out in one blow.

It is more than a little amusing to see the Philistines make fools of themselves, isn't it? Surely any red-blooded Israelite would have found this quite hilarious. However, as I said last week, Scripture usually tells us something funny in order to sober us up. Doesn't anger mix with your laughter when you hear the Philistine leaders say, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands" (v.23)? Don't you seethe when Philistine people sing Dagon's praise in v.24? After all, we know that it is theological rubbish. We know that it was the absence of God, not the power of Dagon, that accounts for Samson's shame. But Samson's shame has become Yahweh's shame, for praise that belongs to the Lord God alone is being heaped at the lifeless feet of a helpless statue of stone. Because God's servant has been humiliated the Lord God himself also suffers humiliation. It is crucial that such false praises be stifled. After all, the true contest is between the Lord God of Israel and Dagon, the false god of the Philistines. Who is stronger? Who should Israel serve? God rescues his people most of all from their idolatry, rather than merely from their local enemies. Are we really concerned with the glory, honour and praise of our great God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Do we bristle with holy anger when he doesn't receive proper praise? Are our prayers driven by a concern for the glory, honour and praise of our God?

Samson asks to be "put....where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them" (v.26). Under the roof held up by these pillars are great crowds, including the "rulers of the Philistines" and the statue of their god. On the roof itself are 3,000 more people. The scene is set and, for only the second recorded time, Samson prays. Previously he has assumed that he will be strong - although this assumption proved wrong when his hair was cut. Previously he has used his strength to save himself - although in doing so he has usually disposed of a number of Philistines. Now, blind and weak, he simply asks: "O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes" (v.28). For perhaps the first time, he is exercising faith. Some commentators have argued that the request of v.28 is simply a vengeful one - and it is true that there is no mention here of rescuing Israel, only of revenge for Samson's eyes. But against this, first, there is a new-found humility here. Samson recognizes that the God of Israel is "sovereign". Further, Samson knows not only that God is his God, but also that he is the

Lord, Yahweh, the saving, covenantal, relational God of his people, Israel. This is a very different Samson to the one who presumed on “his” strength, and who demanded that God give him water because he was thirsty without thanking him for his power (15:18).

And, second, Hebrews 11:32-34 says that Samson was a man of faith. Surely this is the only place in the story where it could be said that Samson exercised faith! Hebrews 11:34 makes the comment, “whose weakness was turned to strength”. This is a great insight. Samson had been greatly humbled and had seen his weakness. So this last request is a departure from his previous feats of strength. In Judges 16:28, Samson first asks: “Remember me”, which is a humble request for attention. He knows that he has failed the Lord, that he has been foolish and faithless and that God has every right to ignore him. Second, he asks, “Strengthen me just once more”. Here, finally, is an acknowledgment of his dependence on God’s grace. Samson’s real temptation had been to believe that we are blessed by God because of something good and deserving in us - complacently to see what God had given him by grace (his strength) as rightfully his, to use as he wished. That, rather than Delilah, was his real sin! It is hard in our competitive and success-oriented world to remember that we do what we do only because of God’s grace, and that God’s grace is given so that we might do what is pleasing to him and in the service of his people.

3. Samson and Jesus

Samson - and we - cannot know as he reaches for the two central pillars and braces himself between them whether God will hear his prayer. With one final prayer: “Let me die with the Philistines!” (v.30), Samson “pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived” (v.30).

The most important moment of Samson’s life is his death. The most faithful and triumphant episode of his life is his death, as he at last, and at the last, performs the role of truly beginning to rescue God’s people from the hand of the Philistines (13:5). Samson’s death is, in 2 crucial ways, very different from that of the Lord Jesus. First, Samson is in the temple of Dagon because of his sin - his failure to live under God’s rule and for his glory. The Lord Jesus always lived for his Father’s glory, and died because of others’ sin - yours and mine. Second, Samson’s death achieved the limited role God had raised him up for - to “begin the deliverance of Israel” (13:5). Jesus’ death achieved deliverance “once for all”, a final rescue (1Peter 3:18).

But in so many ways, Samson’s end is a picture, a shadow, of Jesus’ death. Tracing it allows us to grasp more deeply what the cross is about, and to worship the One who died for us. First, both Samson and Jesus were betrayed by someone who had acted as a friend - Delilah and Judas Iscariot. Both were handed over to Gentile oppressors. Both were tortured and chained, and put on public display to be mocked. Both died with arms outstretched. And both appeared completely struck down by their enemies, yet both in their death crushed their enemy - Samson, the Philistines and Dagon; Jesus, the ultimate enemy, Satan. As Samson brought the temple crashing down around Dagon and his followers, the spiritual power and apparent triumph of Dagon was reversed. Samson brought permanent alienation between the two cultures, so that Israel would become distinct, no longer under the Philistines’ power. On the cross, Jesus brought the power of Satan to nothing, disarming him (Colossians 2:15). How did the cross achieve this? It took away the penalty for idolatry - death - so that Satan could no longer successfully prosecute God’s people. And it took away the power of sin in our lives, enabling the Spirit to live in us to break the lure of idols in our hearts. Samson prefigures, pictures, Jesus’ triumph, at the cost of his own death, over Satan. As Samson killed many as he died, so it took the death of Jesus to defeat (“kill”) Satan - the unseen power of idolatry, and the power of death itself.

And both Samson and Jesus were saviours alone. Othniel and Ehud had rallied all of Israel to fight their oppressors; Deborah and Barak took 2 tribes - Zebulun and Naphtali; Gideon had only 300. By Samson's time, sin had so devastated the people of God that no one (including, for most of his life, Samson himself) was willing to give themselves to the fight to liberate Israel. But when the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson, the Lord showed that he had no need for even 300. He could deliver by one man! In short, we have in Samson, more than in any of the other judges, the pattern of "the victorious defeat". Rejected, beaten, chained, all alone, and finally dying under an avalanche of his enemies (3,000 men and women on the roof), Samson triumphed. God delivered his people through the victorious defeat of one saviour, Samson.

As one commentator says, "(The Samson narrative) begins with a strong man who is revealed to be weak, but it ends with a weak man who is stronger than ever he was before". It is the gospel! Jesus became weak to become strong. But there is, of course, one last, crucial difference between Samson and Christ. With Samson's burial, his rule was over - he was "buried between Zorah, and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah, his father" (v.31). His story was finished. But with Jesus' burial, in many ways the story had only just begun. He is risen and rules beyond his grave. The One who became weak to save (humbling himself by becoming a human being and dying on a cross) will rule in strength and power eternally.

Becoming and continuing as a Christian is about the same pattern - becoming weak to become strong. Only those who admit they are unrighteous receive the righteousness of Christ. Only those who know their life and strength are theirs purely because of grace are not living in the grip of fear, boredom and despondency. Only those who know their own weakness are able to know God-given inner strength: the strength which enables us to avoid the pitfalls of Samson's life - pride, lust, anger, vengefulness and complacency and to grow more and more like our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

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