

## Week 18 - Samson's Sad (?) End - Judges 16:1-31

### Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:14-22

#### Introduction

This morning, as we come to the end of the Samson narrative, we have to admit that the portrait Scripture has painted of him thus far is not a pretty one

Samson was born a child of promise to a barren couple

God set him aside from the moment of his conception and destined him to do great things for Israel

Anyone reading of Samson's beginning would expect great things from him

But, as his story has continued, Samson has proven to be a disappointment - there really is nothing attractive about him

He has proven to be a sensual, self-centered jerk who is disrespectful to authority in his life, casual to the point of carelessness about his calling, and ruthless in getting revenge on those who cross him

And yet he is God's chosen instrument for this time in Israel's history

Remember, in 13:5 [**Judges 13:5**], God told Samson's mom, "*he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.*"

As we have often seen in the book of Judges, the tools available to God are often crude, often imperfect, often not as we would expect or, perhaps, prefer

We like our heroes to ride into town with white hats

But the Bible isn't a fairy tale, and God doesn't always operate as we expect him to

And we need to remember that God is the main actor in the Samson narrative - God is the hero, and God's agenda is behind all the events in this narrative

God has used Samson as he is, warts and all, and empowered him for service

I would like to be able to tell you that Samson changes his stripes in this final chapter - but he doesn't

In fact, all of his faults and vices come together in these final scenes

Samson will prove to be a lustful, sensual man who is apathetic about his calling, foolish in his dealings, selfish, and vengeful to the very end

And yet, God uses all of Samson's flaws to accomplish his own purposes - and, in that, Samson is something of a success

However, we need to recognize that God's employment of Samson doesn't mean that God endorses Samson's lifestyle or the choices Samson makes - most of the Samson's activities and attitudes are abhorrent to God

And Samson alone is responsible for those choices, and he bears the consequences of them

Given what we've seen of Samson so far and what we'll see today, we might well wonder if we are going to bump into him on the streets of heaven

And I believe we will based on the fact that Samson is included in the "hall of faith" record of Hebrews 11 [**Hebrews 11:32-34**] - let's look at what we find written there

*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—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 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*

Because he is listed in this record of faithful men and women, I believe Samson was an Old Testament saint when he died - but I also believe that it was only in his final moments that he came to saving faith - as we will see this morning

Judges 16 contains two separate stories that concern two different women and then Samson's final act on God's behalf

And verses 1-3 contain the account of Samson and an unnamed prostitute in the city of Gaza

## **I. Samson, the prostitute, and the portal**

Gaza was a city located near the Mediterranean Sea deep in far southern Philistia

In other words, Samson is getting in deeper both geographically and culturally

This visit required Samson to travel the length of Philistia - this was no slip-up or crime of passion; it was intentional

So, once again, we have to face the fact that Samson has a lack of regard for God's Law in general and his status as a Nazarite

The plot is relatively straightforward as we see Samson, once again, see a woman who strikes his fancy; he goes to her, the men of the city discover his presence, and they set a trap and lay in wait to capture him in the morning

This woman happens to be a prostitute, which is convenient because it strips the whole affair of the bother and fuss of another wedding

Samson can simply walk in and have what he wants without all the hoopla that marriage entails - so he does

We aren't told who it was who informed the men of Gaza that Samson was in town - only that they are told

And Samson's previous dealings with the Philistines - burning their crops and killing a whole bunch of them - have made him a wanted man - I suspect his face would have been prominently displayed in their post offices if they had them

So they planned to lay in hiding all night and ambush Samson in the morning when they expected him to leave the prostitute's home and pass through the city gate to leave the city

It was actually a pretty good plan, and given the nature of the city gate, it should have worked

Let me explain

We need to have an accurate picture of what a city gate would have looked like in this region at this point in history

This was no garden gate or even the kind of gate we might envision on a fort in a cowboy movie

A city gate was a defensive structure - an elaborate construction that stood two or three stories high and consisted of guard rooms that flanked the approach to the gate itself, forming a sort of tunnel on the inner side of the gate

The gate itself was a pair of massive swinging doors made of wood that were likely covered with metal to make them fireproof

Those doors were affixed to two massive posts that were sunk deep into the ground on either side of the opening

Once the doors were closed and bolted, there was no way in or out of the city until the guards reopened them in the morning

We aren't told why Samson awoke at midnight or why he decided to leave the city in the middle of the night

Did God awaken him and warn him to leave?

Nor are we told how he was able to get past the guard houses full of men that flanked the gate

It makes sense that those who were waiting to ambush Samson assumed he would stay until morning - that would have been the natural thing to do - and it could be that they were merely sleeping

But we have to wonder whether God put them into an extraordinarily deep sleep because they apparently slept through the racket Samson had to have made as he effected his exit

Samson wasn't a locksmith, but he didn't need to pick the lock anyway

He simply pulled the gateposts out of the ground and walked away with the gates on his shoulders, and he carried those massively heavy, unwieldy gates 40 miles to the east to the top of a hill near Hebron

It's noteworthy that our author doesn't include any mention of the Spirit of the Lord rushing upon Samson and empowering him to accomplish this feat - although it seems that what Samson did was beyond normal human strength. After all, he carried the gates 40 miles uphill from the coastal city of Gaza to the high country of Hebron and planted them deep in the heart of Israelite territory - it was a trip that had to have taken several days.

My thinking is that the feat had to have been the result of supernatural intervention.

So we are left to wonder, then, why there is no mention of God in this whole episode - it's related as if it were an utterly secular affair.

What I think is going on is that our author is showing us how things appeared to Samson and the people around him at the time.

We have been let in on the secret that God is working through Samson to rile things up between Israel and the Philistines and, up to now, we have been explicitly told of God's empowerment of Samson.

But we haven't had any indication that Samson was ever aware of what God has been doing.

For all we know, he thinks he is doing it all in his own strength - and it would be highly unlikely for the Philistines or even Samson's countrymen to understand God's involvement, given their spiritual distance from God during this time.

So, I believe we are seeing things as they appeared through the eyes of those who were on the ground - that Samson was "the man, the myth, the living legend" who performed miraculous feats of strength from time to time.

And Samson clearly demonstrates a sense of personal invulnerability in his affair with Delilah, which we will turn to next.

## **II. Samson plays with fire**

Finally, we are given the name of one of the females in Samson's life - but sadly, we only learn her name.

I think people typically think of Delilah as a Philistine woman, and it's pretty likely she was, but we can't say for sure that she wasn't an Israelite who was merely tempted by Philistine money.

Still, we see that Samson has the same problem that he has had since the beginning - he loves the wrong women.

Delilah is a woman who lives in the Valley of Sorek, which runs from the hill country of Judah down to the Mediterranean coast.

And we can't help but notice the juxtaposition of the Valley of Sorek with the hill of Hebron.

Just when it appears that Samson may turn his back on the Philistines and turn to his people and maybe settle down with a woman from the heights of Hebron, he turns back to the valley that runs to Philistia.

It's another step lower in the downward path of Samson that he has been on his whole life.

And when the five governors of Philistia discover Samson's involvement with Delilah, they come to her with a compelling offer.

They will each give her 1,100 shekels of silver if she can discover and reveal to them the source of Samson's strength.

That's 5,500 shekels all together and, while it's difficult to determine how much that would amount to in dollars today, it's a considerable amount when we compare it to other mentions of monetary transactions in the Old Testament.

For example, it was more than three times the weight of gold that Gideon retained after his victory over the kings of Midian, and Abraham is said to have purchased the burial plot for Sarah for 400 shekels of silver, and in Exodus 21:32, we read that a slave was valued at just 30 shekels.

The extravagant amount the leaders of Philistia were willing to pay Delilah speaks to how much they feared Samson.

Of course, it was enough to turn Delilah's head, and she quickly set her plan to extricate the information into motion.

I don't want to spend a whole lot of time going through the details of the game - it's a good story, but the first three rounds are repetitions of Samson teasing Delilah and toying with the Philistines by feeding her false information

It seems clear that Samson had to have been in on the first three rounds of the game as he first allowed Delilah to tie him up with fresh sinews and then new ropes - both of which he snapped easily (no doubt with God's help, although, once again, our author doesn't mention it) when she called for the Philistines to come and take him

And by the time we get to the third round, it would be difficult to explain how he couldn't have been involved with it

The only way to reasonably picture the scene is if Samson positioned himself in such a way that Delilah could weave his hair into the loom

The whole process undoubtedly took a while, and Samson fell asleep during the weaving and, to Delilah's dismay, when she startled him awake, he simply undid the pin on the loom and set himself free - it was all a game to Samson

And this game reinforces things we've learned about Samson

First, the whole idea of him allowing himself to be bound by fresh sinews rather than dried sinews serves to highlight his complete disregard concerning his status as a Nazarite as it concerns contact with death

Second, his willingness to play the game at all reveals that Samson believes he is invincible

After all, he had come out on top repeatedly when the odds appeared to be demonstrably stacked against him

He obviously doesn't fear the Philistines and feels free to toy with them

But Samson is tap-dancing in a minefield, and he's utterly unaware that he's about to take a wrong step

Samson has forgotten about his weakness when it comes to a woman's tears

And after Samson has repeatedly made sport of her and the Philistines who were paying her, Delilah resorts to the same blackmailing tactic successfully employed by Samson's Timnite wife in chapter 14

She begins to whine and cry and asserts that Samson can't possibly love her if he isn't fully committed to her

Look with me at verses 15 - 16 [**Judges 16:15-16**] -

*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." And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.*

Here we see the riddle that Samson's wedding companions had employed as an answer to his riddle come into focus

Samson is strong - like a lion - but he finds women to be sweeter than honey and a woman's tears can take him down

And, with his soul "vexed to death," he gives in in verse 17 [**Judges 16:17**], and he spills his guts to her

Based on how we've seen Samson respond in the past when his wife badgered him, we aren't exactly surprised that he bares his soul to Delilah

But what *is* surprising is that Samson is obviously aware of his high calling by God as he tells her he has been able to do all that he has done because he is a Nazarite

That reveals that Samson wasn't ignorant of his calling or even that he sought to violate the restrictions placed on him by God -

Samson simply didn't take the whole matter seriously

His calling, like his strength and even the people around him, was merely a toy to be played with and not a thing to be protected and fulfilled

Naturally, when Delilah realized that Samson had finally opened up and revealed the source of his strength, she went to tell the Philistine governors, who, believing her, paid her as they had promised

And in verses 19-20, we see Delilah convince Samson to go to sleep while she cradles his head in her lap, and when he is sound asleep, she calls in a barber who proceeds to shave Samson's head

Again, we might wonder, just as we did with the Philistines waiting to ambush Samson earlier, how he could sleep through such a thing, but it's likewise possible that it was a divinely induced slumber that Samson enjoyed

Nonetheless, when Delilah awakened him this time, he first thought nothing had changed, and verse 20 contains one of the saddest lines in the Bible [Judges 16:20] - *"But he did not know that the Lord had left him."*

All his life, Samson had gone and done as he pleased, and no one had been able to tell him what to do - until now

As we went through the earlier events in Samson's life, we saw the link between God and Samson's strength hinted at, but now the author makes it clear as he first declares in verse 19 that Samson's strength was gone and now the Lord is gone leaving us to understand that it was when the Lord left him that his strength went too

God has abandoned Samson, and that's the worst fate anyone can experience on this earth

Samson has taken his calling and God's presence and empowerment for granted and used them as a plaything, and now he's about to discover what that means because he has forfeited both

Samson was a man ruled by what he saw, and he did whatever was right in his own eyes

But now that his strength is gone, the Philistines seize him and scoop out his eyes

And, just like that, the man who followed his eyes and went where he pleased and did as he pleased is reduced to a life of blindness and bondage

The Philistines took him to Gaza, put him in shackles, and set him to work doing the menial labor of grinding grain

Samson has been on a downward trajectory all his life, and now he has reached his lowest point

We can't know how much time elapsed between verses 21 and 22, but over time, Samson's hair began to grow again

And with that pronouncement, our author lets in a sliver of light that makes all the difference

We have the dark image of Samson - God's designated instrument of deliverance - weakened, blinded, bound, humiliated, and, worst of all, abandoned by God

When suddenly, like a ray of sunshine breaking through clouds of despair, we are reminded that all is not lost as long as God is on his throne - Samson may yet have a part to play in God's agenda because hair that is shaved grows back

And, as the scene shifts in verse 23, we realize that Samson's story isn't over yet and God still has work for him to do

### **III. God defends his honor**

Delilah is out of the picture as the scene opens on a new day and a new venue as we are transported from the prison house to a Philistine arena where the governors and people are gathered for a celebration

The purpose of the gathering is primarily to offer praise and sacrifice to their false god, Dagon, but it becomes an opportunity to mock and humiliate Samson

Dagon was an agricultural divinity in the Philistine religion and the father of Baal, the weather god

That gives Samson's labor of grinding grain an enhanced emphasis as he was, in a sense, toiling in servitude to Dagon

Samson had once burned their grain and shamed Dagon, but now the governors and the people gathered to celebrate the fact that, in their minds, Dagon had triumphed over Samson in the end and delivered him into their hands

The governors led the celebration by chanting, "Our god has given Samson, our enemy, into our hand," and the people responded in kind, saying, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us."

It's an enthusiastic song of praise to Dagon that highlights the magnitude of their victory over their enemy, Samson

Then, at the height of their merriment, the people called for the trophy of their victory to be brought out to entertain them

Archeologists have unearthed a building in the territory of the Philistines that reveals what this particular building was like

In these discovered remains, the roof and upper story of a large temple were supported by two large cedar pillars set on round stone bases and positioned slightly less than ten feet apart

And in verse 26, we see all eyes are focused on the man in shackles who has been led hand in hand by a young boy to stand in the center of the building on display before the cheering, jeering crowd of roughly 3,000 men and women

But here's the thing

It wasn't only Samson who was being mocked and humiliated

After all, Samson was God's servant, so God was also being insulted right alongside him

The song of praise that the Philistine crowd was singing should have been on the lips of Israel as they praised God

We know that the presence and power of Dagon had nothing to do with Samson's imprisonment; it was the absence of God that resulted in Samson's present state

Samson's shame is God's shame, and God will not suffer such an offense for long - he is jealous of his glory

That's the lens through which we need to view the final act of Samson's drama so that we don't get caught up in the details of Samson's activity or the particulars of the architecture of the building, or the manner of death of those present

What we need to focus on is that God defends his honor by answering the prayer of his disgraced servant and shows Dagon to be the false god that he is

Let's look together at Samson's prayer as we find it in verse 28 [**Judges 16:28**] -

*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."*

Samson's prayer is certainly an impassioned plea for divine assistance - there's no doubt about that

And it's notable that, for the first time, Samson refers to God by the name *Yahweh* rather than the generic *Elohim*

First, Samson asks God to "remember" him - that is, to take note of him and act on his behalf

Second, he asks God to strengthen him one last time - showing that Samson indeed did recognize God had been empowering him all along

Samson has finally reached rock bottom, and the only way he can look is up toward God

Of course, the fact that Samson is finally acknowledging God's role in his life is a welcome thing, but there his prayer is still more than a little troubling

Once again, we see Samson completely absorbed with Samson as the requests he makes are all self-focused

Samson appears to be completely oblivious to the national emergency surrounding him and the agenda for which God had raised him

And, again, Samson is focused on just one more act of revenge against his captors - he gives no thought to whether or not God has a long-range plan for himself or his people

He still just wants to get even with them for taking his eyes

And as he turns the attention of his prayer to his missing eyes, Samson reverts to referring to God as *Elohim*, showing that his heart hasn't changed all that much after all

Samson demonstrates no corporate sense whatsoever as his prayer consists only of "I," "me," and "my"

And his final request to God is that he be allowed to die with the Philistines - and so Samson finally wholly identifies with Israel's enemy as the Nazarite, set apart for God's service, desires only to perish with the uncircumcised Philistines

Our author's silence on the matter leaves us with the question as to whether or not God answered Samson's prayer

However, the result would seem to indicate that he did

After all, Samson demonstrated more physical strength in dislodging the pillars from their bases and bringing down the temple with all the people than he did in any of the previous incidents

But the author chose to focus on the human actor once again as he described Samson pushing simultaneously against the two pillars, dislodging them, and causing the roof and upper level to collapse, thereby killing all the celebrants

Samson was God's instrument, and he began to deliver Israel from the Philistines by killing their leaders and many of their citizens

And the Samson narrative ends with his relatives coming to retrieve his body and placing it in the family tomb

## **Conclusion**

Samson wasn't a role model, and his story is a tragic one in many respects

And the epitaph that he killed more Philistines in death than he did in life is a terribly sad indictment of the man

But, as I said in my introduction, the Bible isn't a fairy tale; it tends to show people as they were without sugar-coating them or the things they did

And Samson proved to be a mirror of Israel's condition during his time

Like Samson, Israel was raised up out of nothing, richly gifted by God, and yet gave her affection freely to other loves while always expecting to have God at her disposal

Like Samson, Israel received grace upon grace during the period of the Judges and yet pursued her love affair with Baal while being totally ignorant of her true condition

She was a people who didn't recognize the fact that God might well depart from her and let her have her way

Samson and Israel are a cautionary tale for the church today because it's still possible for God's people to leave their first love and render themselves useless and cause God to spit them out of his mouth and depart from them

And many local churches and whole denominations are "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" and, like Samson, they are completely unaware that God has left them

So we must learn from Samson and take our calling seriously

We must avoid temptation and not toy with it so that we don't fall prey to it

We must acknowledge our dependence on God and honor him for his blessings to us

But we can also rejoice in what we see here about God

God left Samson but he didn't abandon him - he cast Samson down but he didn't throw him away

God answered Samson's final prayer, imperfect as it was and as undeserving as Samson was, God still used Samson to vindicate his honor

And God will always hear his people when they call - even when they call from the depths of their depravity

God is going to accomplish his sovereign will with or without us

So we must strive to remain instruments fit for God's use so that we can partner alongside God - not merely be used in spite of ourselves and become another cautionary tale for others to learn from

Let's pray

**Revelation 3:14-22 (page 1030)**

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

“‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”