

Sermon 14: Judges 16: The Death of Samson

OUTLINE

The proud Samson
The humbled Samson

INTRODUCTION

As we come to the closing chapter of Samson's life, two truths are borne out by his experience: Pride comes before a fall; and God gives grace to the humble. Samson we have said is a picture of Israel, a holy one set apart for God's purposes but who is unfaithful and as a result has to be disciplined and used despite themselves to fulfil God's will. Samson we have said is also a picture of our own sinfulness, he is a willful, lustful, conceited, self-assured, blinded, self-destructive fool. Samson we have said is an antitype of Christ who is a foil against which we see Christ as the faithful bridegroom and deliverer. Today as we come to the closing chapter of Samson's life we continue to see these things but finally we also get to see in his death something of a Christlike figure as well. In the first part of the chapter we continue looking at Samson the proud sinner, seeing the pride that comes before the fall. But then Samson is humbled, and the humbled Samson will be a greater instrument in God's hand than the proud Samson. These will be our two points.

The proud Samson

V1, 'Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her.' Our last chapter ended with Samson killing a thousand Philistines after a series of self-caused conflicts related to his philistine wife. And the chapter ended with the statement that Samson ruled for 20 years. Samson's greatest victory against the Philistines has yet to be told and the purpose of this chapter is to unfold the sinful self-serving activities of Samson which serve as the backdrop and the crooked stick that God uses to bring deliverance to Israel. We are left guessing what happened during those 20 years, our story rushes to the events near the end of Samson's life and reign and plunges us into Samson's life. And as we read the opening verse we are shocked and not shocked at the same time. Samson is on his own, not with an army; Samson is going walkabout; Samson is wandering in Philistine territory; Samson wanders straight into the capital of the Philistine territory; Samson is following his eyes again; Samson sees a prostitute and sleeps with her.

Samson is nearly 40, he has been a terror to the Philistines, it is clear from this chapter that he is public enemy number one, and yet we still see the same Samson though worse. Samson is still driven by what he sees. He is proof of Prov. 27:20, 'Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of man.' Unless we satisfy our hearts in God we will be captive to the lust of the eyes. Compare this to righteous Job, 31:1, "'I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?' Jesus warns us that lusting after another is a violation of the 7th commandment, Matt. 5:28, 'But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Sadly, this sin of the young man Samson is unmortified and is still the sin of the older man Samson. This sin left unmortified has been left to fester and led Samson into deeper sin. What was love at first

sight with a pretty philistine virgin has deteriorated into an opportunistic lust; what began with an intent to marry has collapsed into pure selfish gratification.

Sadly we see no fear in Samson, he is overconfident in his strength and brazenly going into the very capital of Philistia in a public fashion and rubs their noses in it. Samson has no fear of sin, no fear of consequences, this is a terrible position to be in. one of the ways in which God acts when he is judging sin is by not allowing the consequences of sin to instantly fall upon our heads, but allows us to get away with sin for a while. No fear, no retribution, no one to stop us, a terrifying place to be. The mother of King Lemuel in Prov. 31, the same chapter where she describes the 'Proverbs 31 woman', she speaks to the son of her vows, that he must not give his strength to a woman, v2-3. Samson who is the son of his mother's vows does give his strength to a woman. Is this your weakness, is this the thing that is going to pull you away from God? Many a young person has been taken captive by sex and fallen from their Christian confession.

V2-3, 'The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him."³ But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.' Samson's sins have put him in the thick of it again. But we see that Samson is used by God to undermine the military effectiveness of the Philistine's capital city by ripping the city gates out and taking them away. We are not told whether he had to fight his way free; we are not told whether a miraculous sleep came upon them to enable Samson to steal them stealthily. All we see is a man who has strength, conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the Spirit of God; who is taking a trophy for himself and positioning it in a position for all to see. You can't help but feel the jarring effect as you read this. Samson effectively cripples the capital city's ability to defend itself, but he sleeps with a prostitute. God is working to undermine Philistia but despite Samson. As we look at him we see all the dangerous signs of a man growing more and more reckless, a man dominated by his appetites, a man who has gifts but who is not relying upon God but who is self-confidently parading that strength as if it were his own. These are all part of the pride that comes before a fall.

V4, 'After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.' This brings us to the most famous and the most detailed story in Samson's life, the story of Samson and Delilah. The name Delilah could be a pun sounding like 'of the night' literally making her a lady of the night; or it could be based on an ancient Arabic word for 'to flirt.' She comes from the Valley of Sorek which is in N. Philistia, and we are told that Samson loved her. The decline intensifies. Samson's sin began with a love at first sight with a virgin Philistine; which developed into a lustful using of a prostitute; and now bottoms out with him loving a self-serving liar. That pattern of sin where he was weak towards women has led him into a deep pit which will be his destruction. Samson and Delilah are a picture of many relationships where you have two selfish people claiming to be in love.

V5, 'And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100

pieces of silver.” We have two selfish people who are destroying each other. Here we see come of Delilah’s weakness, she was connected to a strong and powerful man which raised her profile, but her heart was really after money. The Philistine rulers, 5 of them, came to her and offered her 5500 silver shekels for Samson’s secret. To put things in perspective David bought the threshing floor of Araunah where the temple ended up being built for 50 shekels. That would be like winning the lottery, she would be set for life. He was fixed on lust, she was materialistic; they were the modern couple. They did not truly love each other, but rather they loved what the other gave them. Like many modern men Samson didn’t need to marry Delilah because she was already putting out; and when a large financial offer came along, Delilah was only too ready to cash in her love for her true love. Too many modern relationships are built on the wrong foundation, and break down for the wrong reasons too. In order for a relationship to truly survive God has to be the treasure of our hearts. If our purpose is lust or security, when something else comes along offering these things we will abandon our love for our true loves. Having God in our lives fills that gap so that we stop looking to earthly things to give us ultimate satisfaction. We can actually find contentment and be joyful in the less than perfect situations we will all find ourselves in.

Delilah accepts the offer and begins to wear Samson down, v6, ‘So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you.” At first Samson does not take her seriously and he fools around with her. But it has been pointed out that Samson is showing all the signs of an addict. V7-9, ‘Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”’⁸ Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them.⁹ Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.’ Firstly, we see Samson who has compromised the law of God with Delilah compromising his Nazarite vow, a central defining aspect of his identity and calling. New bowstrings would be made from 7 tendons of freshly killed animals, they were still wet and not yet dried. Samson has often played fast and loose with his vow, and here he continues to take it lightly.

V10-12, ‘Then Delilah said to Samson, “Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound.”’¹¹ And he said to her, “If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”¹² So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And the men lying in ambush were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.’ Delilah is a deceitful hypocrite who Samson should have seen through, but she is still giving him what he wants, so he does not put her away. These lovers exchange lies seeking to use each other for what they want. You will notice that Samson is aware of Delilah and what she is doing, we are told that there were men lying in ambush. Did Samson kill them, did they flee when it was apparent their bindings did nothing, we are not told? The point is that Samson was so self-assured and flirting with danger, even though it was apparent that she was deceiving him. Maybe Samson liked the idea of getting some revenge upon the Philistines who had interfered with his wife once upon a time and is happy to have a confrontation.

V13-14, ‘Then Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound.” And he said to her, “If you weave the

seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”¹⁴ So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web. And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.’ Samson is getting closer to the truth now as he brings his hair into the lie.

V15-17, ‘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.”¹⁵ And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.¹⁶ 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.” Emotional manipulation and persistent nagging take their toll, to get a little peace and quiet he gives her what she wants, and he sells the last of Nazirite vows cheaply. He has given every other part of his holiness as an Israelite, and his consecration as a Nazirite away except this one part. And with this concession he sells the last part of his consecration to God. No doubt it is an external and ceremonial part, less important than his sexual purity, but he does it. His confession is telling. Samson reveals that he has known about his vow all along, it reveals that all of his sins have been high handed and not in ignorance. Maybe Samson did not really believe the vow was anything because he had violated it before and his strength was not taken; maybe he believed that there were no consequences for his sins; maybe he thought that his strength was in himself and not from God, we don’t know? A constant exposure to our sins will wear us down, we are supposed to put them away, cut them off, separate ourselves, run away not live with them allowing them constant access to our hearts. If we allow sin in our lives this way, it always wins.

V18-21, ‘When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up again, for he has told me all his heart.” Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands.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.’ We can feel our hearts drawn out to Samson in this section. The narrator pours on the detail, the man has made himself vulnerable to that one person in his life and she betrays him. the tragedy of this section is thick and full of pathos, it is amplified as we see that she knows he has told her all his heart, but then she takes it and crushes it for money. Worse than that after he is made weak she torments him. Her love turns to hate, and the treasure he had served betrays and torments him. The devil reveals herself, she is like sin in her lies and like satan in her hateful tormenting. The tragedy is doubled because not only has his woman turned on him, he still thinks that he has a chance, that he is still strong, but God has forsaken him. Some have suggested that the sleep might have been miraculous and a judgement from God so that he would not wake up and his hair would be cut off. The man who did what was right in his own eyes had his eyes gouged out; the man who roamed around Philistine territory freely and brazenly is bound with bronze chains; the man who destroyed Philistine crops is now forced to mill them for his enemies. Our sins blind us; our sins betray us; our

sins enslave us; our sins cause us to serve the enemy. Samson like every sinner thought he was strong, but he was overcome. The man who could rip city gates out could not keep his eyegate; the man who no man could beat was overcome by a woman. What is the sin you play with, that you think you are strong enough against, that you think you can brazenly court and keep around, whose lies you think you can see a mile off, that you have under control? Beware!

Now let me pull your mind away from the drama of this situation to the theological big picture. There is another perspective we should be thinking about. How can Samson who was born to deliver Israel deliver Israel if he is weak, God is against him, and he has been taken captive by the enemy? Does this sound familiar? The appointed deliverer of Israel betrayed for silver; weak and tormented, bound and handed over to the enemy? As you think about God's larger purposes you might feel a little bit like the disciples felt when Jesus was arrested or on Saturday after he had been killed on the cross.

The humbled Samson

V22, 'But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.' The narrator puts this in to remind us of God and the Nazarite vow. It is true that an ordinary Nazarite vow would come to an end with shaving one's head. Or if you were contaminated you could reset your vow by shaving your head. God had set apart Samson to be a Nazirite from the womb to the tomb, and God's purposes for him did not come to an end with a shave. This reconsecration, is a fitting symbol for the new Samson we have in this last part of his life.

V23-24, 'Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." ²⁴ And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." This portion transports us to a major religious holiday in the temple of Dagon when all the important rulers and many people are all gathered in one place. In ancient cultures many saw the strongest god giving victory in battle, and the Philistines worshipped Dagon, the grain god who was supposedly the father of Baal the weather god. This has just become a theological issue raising the question who is really the strongest YHWH or Dagon? The Philistines praise Dagon for their victory over Samson and see him as a trophy of Dagon's greatness. But God will not give His glory to another.

V25-27, 'And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. ²⁶ And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." ²⁷ Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained.' These Philistines are secure in their victory in the temple of their god as they carouse and gloat. And a tortured man, who has to be led by another is led into their midst. But Samson gets an idea.

V28-30, '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. ³⁰ And Samson said, "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.' Here is Samson listening to Dagon being praised, listening to God being dishonored, and he responds. Samson prays to Adonai YHWH, the Sovereign Lord of Israel. The only true God who is all powerful. We have seen many sins in Samson but this is the high point of his faith. Heb. 11:32-34 mentions the faith of Samson and in particular it says 'were made strong out of weakness.' We believe Samson did in the end die and go to heaven. But even here his prayer is not perfect, his prayer is full of 'me'. Remember me, strengthen me, avenge me. But Samson the man born to deliver Israel, the one set apart as a Nazarite who should have given his life in service of God now fully submits to that call and willingly gives himself in a self-sacrificing death for Israel. He had always put himself first, now he is not. And here in his most selfless act he was most effective. Philistia's leaders and most influential people are all killed with one blow. V31, 'Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.'

We said earlier that Samson who was antitype of Christ does in his death present a clearer picture of Christ to us. Here are some of the similarities others have pointed out. Betrayed by a friend for silver; handed over to the enemy; tortured and chained; publicly humiliated; helped to the place of his death; dying with arms outstretched; both gained their greatest victory in their death; both were solo saviors in a pattern of victorious defeat; both were strong, became weak; and become strong again; and both were buried by loved ones. Samson began to deliver; Jesus though finally delivers us from all our enemies.