

Samson Part 4: “Let Me Die With the Philistines”

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 16:1-31; PROV 6:20-26; COL 3:1-7

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Congregation of Christ: Those of us who were raised in Christian homes and churches remember a few things about Samson. And these are mostly the “good” things about him: his God-given strength, his victories over the Philistines, and his prayer to God at the end to kill the Philistines in their own pagan temple. The not-so-good thing is his affair with the Philistine woman Delilah.

Those of you who remember the music of the 60s may know Neil Sedaka's “Run, Samson, Run.” It went as high as No. 28 on the Billboard chart in 1961. It tells of Samson as “a fella who was strong as he could be, 'Til he met a cheatin' gal who brought him tragedy. Then, the song urges, “Run Samson run, Delilah's on her way, Run Samson run, you ain't got time to stay, Run Samson run, on your mark you better start, I'd sooner trust a hungry lion, Than a gal with a cheatin' heart.” Our Sunday school teachers never taught us this song, but I wonder if this song was a hit today, if it would be one of our hymns this morning!

But our text this morning again smells like a tragicomedy of Philistine proportions. It is often regarded by Christians as a tragedy ending in victory. Many Christians even regard Samson as a hero of the faith because he is mentioned in the “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11. Some also consider him as a type of Christ, because of a few similarities in his birth, life and death. But was he really a faithful judge? Was he really a type of Christ?

Today, we will meditate on the last days of Samson's life and on those two questions in our theme, “**Let Me Die With the Philistines**” under three headings: first, **He Died Because of Worldly Pleasures**; second, **He Died Because He Violated His Nazirite Vows**; and third, **His Death the Beginning of Israel's Salvation**.

He Died Because of Worldly Pleasures

Samson's adult life begins in Chapter 14 with him traveling to Timnah, where he spots a beautiful Philistine woman who was “right in his eyes.” Even to the dismay and opposition of his parents, there was no way he wouldn't have her. In Chapter 15, his marriage to the Timnite woman led to an escalating violence and retaliation between him and the Philistines. Here in Chapter 16, we read first that he now pursued his lust by hiring a prostitute at night in Gaza.

That night, the people of Gaza discovered that he was in the prostitute's house. So they surrounded the place and waited at the city gate for morning to kill him. This was a big mistake because Samson would smell their ambush and escape. How did he manage to escape? He removes the gate from its posts. To ridicule and humiliate the Philistines and his Judahite enemies, he carries their gate 40 miles away near a hill in the city of Hebron, the main city of Judah. The magnitude of this act is beyond imagination, because city gates during those ancient days were two stories with posts set deep into the ground! ¹

¹ Gates from this period, the Early Iron Age, were elaborate complexes, at least two stories high, with guardrooms flanking a narrow opening. The two posts were set deep in the ground to support the doors. (ESV Study Bible)

But this action too was self-serving. It was unnecessary; why carry the gate 40 miles, instead of merely destroying it and killing more Philistines to save Israel? But this was least in his mind.

Next, he sees another woman, named Delilah, whom he “loved.” Again, this is lust, not love. Delilah was the most important character in Samson's life, the only woman named in his story. As in Samson's first woman, the Philistine rulers seize this opportunity to exact vengeance upon Samson. They each offer to pay Delilah 1,100 pieces of silver if she could extract from Samson the source of his superhuman strength. We know from Judges 3:3 that there were five lords of the Philistines, so the offer is a total of 5,500 silver pieces. This is an incredibly huge amount. In those days, 5,500 pieces of silver was equivalent to 550 times the average annual wage. In today's terms, it will be about \$15 million!

Who can resist this offer? Delilah was confident that it was only a matter of time before she won the jackpot. Samson was not to be easily deceived by this woman. He played with her. First, it was seven fresh bowstrings. Snap! Fail. Next, it was brand new, unused ropes. Snap! Fail again. Next, weave seven locks of his hair into her loom. Snap! Fail again. By this time, Delilah must be starting to doubt she would ever win the lotto.

So, like Samson's wife before Delilah, it was time for a torrent of tears, and, “You don't love me anymore!” “If you love me, why don't you trust me?” So she “pressed” Samson, caressing him, cajoling him day after day, until like the first woman, she was able to extract his secret. He yielded his secret,

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.

And we know the rest of the story after this tragic confession.

He Died Because He Violated His Nazirite Vows

This is amazing! Samson did not have to go into so much details about his hair. Delilah must have been so anxious for Samson to just say it. What did she care about the Nazirite vow?

Nazirite vow? So Samson knew all along about the Nazirite vows that he should have kept! He knew he shouldn't go near a dead lion. He knew he shouldn't drink wine with his Philistine buddies. He knew his hair cannot be clipped. He violated all of these Nazirite requirements for his own pleasure, rather than to please God who gave him life and supernatural strength.

From the outset, he lived his life as if there was no God. He was a member of God's covenant people, but he always violated God's covenant laws. He knew that he should not disobey his parents and the traditional marriage arrangement. And he knew the covenant prohibition against having fun with foreign Philistine women.

Because of his interest in pleasuring himself alone, he was not able to deliver Israel from the Philistine oppression. With his extraordinary gift of strength from God, he would have easily defeated the Philistines for good. And men of God today are not exempt from this self-interest. We read and hear of this pastor, this missionary, this televangelist, this seminary professor, who give in to temptations, whether it is women, money, addiction or power. And this falling into sin almost always leads to the destruction of a church or some other ministry.

Men and women in the church are not exempt as well. How often have we seen the destruction of families and relationships when people fall into the sin of self-centered pleasures?

His Death the Beginning of Israel's Salvation

After Delilah found out Samson's secret, she made Samson sleep on her knees, and called a man to clip his hair. Then she woke him up as the Philistines surrounded him. Ever-confident of his super-strength, Samson was not concerned. But the last portion of verse 20 has an ominous statement, *"But he did not know that the LORD had left him."* This is the third and final "did not know" statement in Samson's story. Manoah did not know the identity of the messenger of the LORD (13:16). Manoah's parents "did not know" that the LORD was seeking an opportunity to strike against the Philistines through their son (14:4).

After some months, the lords of the Philistines gathered to worship their god Dagon, and to thank him for their victory over Samson. The 3,000 people gathered at the temple of Dagon, led by their worship team, sang their hymn of praise, *"Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us."* The Philistines now declare that their god Dagon has conquered Israel's God Yahweh! So after all the drinking and merrymaking of pagan worship, the people called for the main event: Samson. Just the sight of this great superhuman Samson, now helplessly blind and shackled, was entertainment for them.

Samson requested to be brought between the two middle pillars of the temple.² As the people made a spectacle of him, he called to the LORD for only the second time in his life, *"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."* Was this a faithful prayer? The first part seemed to be, asking God to remember him in his trouble, to give him back his strength. But the second part of his prayer betrays him again. Why was he now crying out to God? Like his first prayer, it was a self-centered prayer. Instead of praying, "O LORD, please let me deliver Israel," he prayed for strength so he might exact vengeance against the Philistines for blinding him. Instead of praying, "O LORD, please vindicate your name against the Philistines," he prayed, *"Let me die **with** the Philistines."* Even in his death, Samson identified with the Philistines.

It is striking that the Philistines also failed to notice that Samson's hair had grown long again. It should have been obvious from their vantage point that the source of his strength was his long hair. This is because they didn't know that the LORD himself is the source of his strength. Notice also that in previous displays of superhuman strength, the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him. But not at his death.

But we must not forget the beginning of Samson's life, when the Angel of the LORD appeared to his mother. The son in her womb *"shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."* With the destruction of the temple of Dagon with its 3,000 idolaters, the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines had begun. The Philistines will continue to fight against Israel up to King Hezekiah's reign. But after the Assyrians completely defeated them, the Philistines ceased to exist as a nation, while Israel continued until the coming of Christ.

² "A temple from the period of the judges has been unearthed at the Philistine site of Tell Qasile. It was built with two central pillars to support the roof of the entire structure, a design distinct from either Canaanite or Israelite temples." (ESV Study Bible)

Dear Friends, with all the sins and violence of Samson's life, the question before us now is: Why is he even mentioned in Hebrews 11, a chapter known as the "Hall of Faith," among the faithful such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, David, Samuel and the prophets. Granted, Samson fit the description of those *"who through faith conquered kingdoms... stopped the mouths of lions... became mighty in war..."* (Heb 11:32).

All of the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 have some measure of faith, some large, some small. They were not all equal in spiritual maturity and faith. Abraham and Moses had a large measure of faith, while Samson had but the smallest measure. Only on two occasions did he pray to the LORD, and on these two occasions, his prayers were self-centered. He never gave praise and thanksgiving to God for delivering him from the Philistines. He never prayed for the deliverance of Israel. The only measure of faith that he displayed was when he was dying of thirst, and when he trusted that God would give him back his strength to avenge himself.

Some even say that Samson was a type of Christ: born in similar circumstances, with a barren mother, and the Angel of the LORD announcing his birth. He began delivering Israel from the Philistines. But the similarities end here. Unlike Christ, Samson wasted his life and his God-given gift. He was one of the most self-centered, self-indulged, pleasure-seeking characters in the Bible. He did not care for the purpose given to him by the LORD, that is, to deliver Israel from the Philistines. He did not care about his Nazirite vows. He did not care about the Law of Moses.

Samson was not a type of Christ. On the contrary, he was an anti-Christ, as he was very much the opposite of Christ in every way. His only redeeming value is that he had a "deathbed conversion" like the thief on the cross. And that it didn't matter to God that he was a covenant-breaker, because God still used him. So *in spite of* Samson's vile character, the LORD was able to accomplish his purposes: to begin Israel's deliverance, and to vindicate his name against the Philistines.

Many people in the church are a mirror of Samson's life. Selfish ambition, power, money, sex are often our highest goals in life. We take pride in our accomplishments, forgetting that all that we have are from God, especially the benefits of our salvation from sin and death. Be mindful of the warning of Christ to the lukewarm church in Laodicea, *"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked"* (Rev 3:17). Pray that God's commendation of the church in Smyrna will be yours, *"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)"* (Rev 2:9). Remember also our Lord's warning against the sexual immorality in the churches in Thyatira and Pergamum. And Paul exhorts us to flee from sexual immorality, where Samson failed repeatedly and miserably.

Just as the Philistines did, the name of the LORD is often dishonored even in the churches. It is often mentioned in vain in our conversations and even in our prayers. When people call God names like "Bro" or "Man Upstairs" or "Buddy," or when we use teen sayings such as "God is Rad" or "Jesus Rocks," we dishonor God's name. The Jews regard the name of YHWH so holy that they can't even say it audibly. The angels in the temple sang to one another saying, *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"* (Isa 6:3) And when John was taken to see the worship of Christ in heaven, he heard the hosts of heaven sing, *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"* (Rev 5:12) May we honor God and Christ in the same manner.