

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

The Weakness of a Strong Man – (Judges Chapter 16) Last week we began the first of a two-part series on the life of the twelfth and final judge: Samson. We witnessed his call from the womb and his perpetual flirtation with sin and whatever was forbidden to one living under the Nazarite vow. We saw how God used Samson to awaken his people from a cultural slumber that was governed by idolatry, in spite of the fact that every opportunity of deliverance occurred within the context of violating the vow of a Nazarite. We began exploring how Samson in his life and death embodied both the way Israel related to God (unfaithfully) as well as the way in which God related to Israel (mercifully). Samson began the task that would not be completed until the reign of king David. He serves in many respects as a foreshadow of the true Judge who will come many centuries later and set things right again; this true Judge will reverse the curse and restore fellowship between God and his people.

Part One: A Burden of Iron & Wood – Chapter sixteen opens with an unsurprising but disappointing episode in the life of this final judge of Israel. Samson has journeyed to Gaza; the reason we do not know. The distance between Zorah and Gaza is approximately thirty-eight miles, no small distance for an ancient traveler. Scripture does not indulge our curiosity by offering an explanation of why he was there, it simply informs us of what he did there. He went in to a prostitute. It is noteworthy that he never married. His nearly executed marriage with the young Philistine woman in Timnah was not actually consummated, so he was not officially married to her though apparently fully intending to do so. It would seem shocking that he could not find a young lady within Israel to marry, particularly because of his heroic reputation. One of his severest weaknesses proved to be Philistine women.

After sporting with a prostitute in Gaza, Samson received word that the men of Gaza were lying in wait to kill him as soon as morning came. He deliberately arose at midnight, apparently finding the gates unguarded, and took, “...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” (16:3). In order to understand what was happening here, we must bear in mind that the gift of God in the life of Samson was supernatural strength. We can only speculate as to God’s purposes for granting one man such physical strength, but it stands to reason that such would have been the prerequisite given the amicable relationship that existed between the house of Israel and their ruling neighbors, the Philistines. Recall that the men of Israel lived at peace with the Philistines to the extent that intermarriage was common, and an outright military attack launched by them was unthinkable (note the response of the men of Judah in 15:10). When the Philistines came with an army of approximately 1,000 men to make a raid against Judah, the armies of Judah (being 3,000) strong refused to come to the aid of Samson or seize the opportunity to attack their overlords, but instead chose to maintain the status quo and deliver Samson into the hands of the enemy. If the vengeful attacks initiated by Samson were essential for an awakening among the people of God to the point that they would see the

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Philistines as enemies, and if such vengeful attacks would not be supported by the armies of Israel because of an unwillingness to provoke their Canaanite neighbors, then bestowing super human strength on one man enabling him to perform the feats of an entire army, seems completely rational. However, the Almighty is not obligated to function within the spheres of our limited reason, and chooses not to reveal to us the reason for equipping Samson with supernatural physical strength. It can be said with certainty that his spiritual strength and willingness to show self-restraint remained weak and unbecoming of a man with his divine call. As we have seen before in Judges, God does not use Samson because of his moral or spiritual superiority, but because of his gracious faithfulness to the covenant.

Part Two: Forbidden Love – The story continues with the introductory comments, *“After this, he (Samson) loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah”*. Although Delilah is not described as a Philistine, it is clear from the story where her allegiance lies. Her relationship with the lords of the Philistines also seems to confirm her identity as a Philistine herself (or more closely affiliated with them than any ordinary Israelite). Thus begins the saga that many children could recite with a good degree of familiarity. The Lords of the Philistines convinced Delilah to seduce Samson and find out the source of his super-human strength. In return, they would give her 1,100 pieces of silver. Delilah sells the life of her lover wielding her influence in a manner far from subtle, that only a man blinded by love or infatuation could overlook. She implores him, *“Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you”* (16:6). If was not enough simply to request the source of his strength, she went on to offer an explanation for why she wanted to know the source: *“...how you (Samson) might be bound, that one should subdue you.”* Could it have been more clear to anyone, her devious intentions?

First, Samson toys with her a bit and offers three false answers before revealing the truth. He tells her that he must be bound with seven fresh “bowstrings” that have not been dried. The actual Hebrew translated in the ESV as “bowstring” has the literal meaning of a string or cord that is left over or hanging down (picture a knitted rug and the residue from the strings that will be cut before finishing, the fringes). The idea is that these strings would be green or fresh and would be compacted by their number (seven) making it impossible for Samson to break free. Delilah attempted this, whether when Samson was asleep or awake, the text does not say. However, Samson snapped the strings, *“...as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire...”* Thus, the source of his strength was hidden for the time being.

Secondly, Delilah begins making the quest for the source of his strength more personal. She tells him, *“Behold you have mocked me and told me lies, please tell me how you might be bound”* (16:10). What was initially displayed as a passing curiosity (albeit, one that sought to subdue the man), is now presented as unfaithfulness to their loving relationship. She tells him he has mocked her, and indeed he had. How things might have been different if he had simply informed her from the beginning, that the source of his strength is a secret that he will never disclose. Then, she at least would have known that he could not be manipulated to reveal it. Better yet, Samson could have seen her inquiry as being the doorway to his downfall and fled when he had the chance. But none are so blind as those smitten by desire. So, he chooses to toy with her and pretends on three different occasions to reveal the source of his strength, until she finally calls his bluff and hits him where he is the most vulnerable. The second time, Samson informs her that he must be bound with new ropes that have not been used. She attempts this, and it results in the same fallacious outcome as the first. So, she presses him again to reveal to her

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the source of his strength. The third time, he tells 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”* (16:13b). Apparently, Samson had his hair braided in seven different braids since the text says she weaved the seven locks of his hair. The Hebrew word for “lock” is מַחְלָפָה meaning, *braid*. It is these seven braids that Delilah tangles into the weaver’s web. However, just as before Samson arises with his strength unabated.

Finally, Delilah has had enough. She informs Samson, *“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”* (16:15). Apparently, she conversed with him in this manner daily so much so that his soul, *“...was vexed to death...”* This led to Samson revealing to her all his heart. He reveals to her that he had been a Nazarite from his mother’s womb, and the one aspect of the vow that he has not broken is the cutting of his hair. If his hair is cut, his vow will be broken and he will lose his strength. When Delilah sees that Samson has revealed the truth to her, she sends for the Philistine lords and convinces Samson to sleep on her knees. Then appears the famous declaration of John Milton to describe the possible muse of the imprisoned Samson reflecting on this very instance, *“Whom have I to complain of but myself? Who this high gift of strength committed to me, in what part lodged, how easily bereft me, Under the Seal of silence could not keep, but weakly to a woman must reveal it, O’recome with importunity and tears. O impotence of mind, in body strong! But what is strength without a double share of wisdom, vast, unwieldy, burdensome”*¹ In the revealing of this life-long secret, he has sold his sold to the enemy and will soon be offered on the sacrificial altar of Israel’s indifference and his own ignorance. She shaves the seven locks of his hair and the Holy Spirit departs from him as each hair fell. When he awakens he does not realize that nothing has changed and attempts to fight away the Philistines. However, they successfully capture him, put out his two eyes and send him to grind grain.

Before we move on to the death of Samson, it is important to note the value of a Nazarite’s hair as a token of his vow. According to Numbers 6:18, *“And the Nazarite shall shave his consecrated head, at the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace offering.”* It has already been seen that one of the requirements of a Nazarite was that he should not shave his head for the entire duration of the vow. When his vow is completed, he is to take the hair of his head, the only physical emblem of his consecration, and cut it at the door of the tabernacle and place it upon the altar of God and offer it along with the peace offering to God. For Samson, his vow had no end. He is explicitly called to be a Nazarite until the day of his death as recorded in Judges 13:7. Therefore, there are two gross, sacrilegious actions that are depicted in this part of the story: 1) that he should prematurely violate the duration of the vow as symbolized through shaving his hair. 2) That he should take that which was consecrated to God (the hair of his head) and allow it to fall upon the altar of a strange, idolatrous woman. For the reader in ancient Israel, they would have sensed the tragedy of this moment and gasped. We too, should be filled with the same disgust as the token of the consecration of this savior of God’s people is shorn at the hands of an unbeliever and discarded as if it were some common, ordinary thing.

Part Three: The Death of Samson – The end for Samson is tragic to say the least. He is blinded, bound in shackles and made to grind in the prison mill. His strength, which is a gift of God given for the sake of bringing deliverance to his people, is here wasted in grinding the grain that will feed and sustain the

¹ Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes*.

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enemies of God. The tragedy of the scenario can only be comprehended by the fact that he is then called to the worship of the Philistine grain god, Dagon, for the sake of being made a spectacle to be laughed at by the enemy. Dagon, was a Philistine deity that will reappear in the book of Judges when the ark of God is taken from the tabernacle (1 Samuel 5). He was their god of grain and was worshipped in a fertility cult. No doubt the joke was not lost on the Philistine lords who had assembled to behold this *savior* from Israel whose God purportedly endowed him with supernatural strength, now debased to grinding the corn supplied to them by Dagon into the grain they would no doubt consume at their celebratory feast. It is here in the context of this final jubilation that the Lord would use Samson to accomplish his greatest work and would finally disrupt the tranquility between the people of God and the enemy of God so that the battle lines could be hard drawn for future generations.

When Samson was brought into the party, he asked the young lad who led him to situate him between the two weight bearing pillars of the house. The Philistines apparently no longer perceived him as a threat given that he was shackled, even though it could be noted that his hair had once more began to grow. Standing between the two pillars, Samson does something in earnest that he had only partially done on the knees of Delilah. He reveals to all the Philistine nobility the true source of his strength. His strength did not lie in his uncut hair nor in his vow to which he had repeatedly proven unfaithful. His strength lay in the Lord his God. Judges 16:28 reveals, *“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, then grabs hold of the two pillars and literally brings the house down upon his enemies. There is a pivotal verse found in 16:30b, *“So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.”* This verse will be explored in greater detail below. Thus died the strong man, Samson.

Part Five: The Meaning & Value of the Judge, Samson – The life and ministry of Samson may appear to be a confusing and disappointing failure to the casual observer. Yes, he was used of God to attack the enemies of God, enemies that were not perceived as such from the vantage point of God’s people. Every occasion (with exception of the last) in which these attacks occurred utilized situations that were in direct and conscious violations of his Nazarite vow. Yes, it is true that this strong man, arguably the strongest man who has ever lived, was weak in self-restraint, but he made two significant contributions to God’s story of redemption these contributions will be explored below.

First, when the angel heralded Samson’s birth the message delivered to his mother was that he would, *“... begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”* When one understands the degree of cultural syncretism prevalent within ancient Israel during this period of time, we know that the Philistines did not oppress the Israelites in the same manner as previous oppressors. Rather, they intermarried with them and cohabitated with them to such a degree that Israelite culture was highly influenced by the Philistines and their idolatry. This equilibrium of forbidden peace and spiritual lethargy exemplified a new low, a bedrock low for the ancient people of God. They could not fight one whom they refused to consider the enemy. Samson’s ministry served to awaken Israel spiritually and morally to the realization that the Philistines were not their friends; friendship with the Philistines meant enmity with God. Thus, Samson was called from the womb not to save Israel from the philistines (this would not be fully rendered until the end of the reign of King David), but to begin the process of salvation. As the old adage goes, one must admit they are lost before they see their need for a savior. Samson came to show the people of God they were lost. In a twist of irony, his antagonistic identification with the enemy was used of God as a sobering catalyst to awaken Israel to a knowledge of their rebellion against the God of the

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covenant. After Samson will come Samuel, another “Nazarite” who would be used of God to continue this antagonism against the Philistines. He would also be the one who would anoint both King Saul as well as King David, the first two monarchs whose reigns would be characterized with continued conflict with the Philistines. So, to understand the contribution of Samson to redemptive history we must place him in the context of his own generation and witness the outcome of his exploits.

Secondly, Samson serves as a Christ figure in this extremely dark period of Israelite history. Samson’s final purpose in the grand scheme of God seems to have been to be the savior of his people (who rejected him), and to suffer and die in order to show to ancient Israel the costliness of their salvation. The verse mentioned above, *“So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life”* (16:30b) reveals to us that Samson’s final triumph was in death. Did it have to be this way for the people of God? Were not David (and Saul for that matter) capable of uniting the people of God in successful military campaigns against the Philistines, though not possessing the supernatural strength of a Samson? How different things could have been had his own received him, as the savior of God’s people when he came to them instead of loving the false sense of security that was gained by fraternizing with the enemy. In this respect, Samson points the way to another Savior who will be born many centuries hence and will also suffer and die, and rise again so that his people may live victoriously through him. Samson’s life and death serve to reveal to us (as does the life, death and resurrection of Christ the true Judge), the far reaching extent of the mercy and grace of a covenant-keeping God.

Conclusion: As we prepare for the final lesson in the book of Judges, we should bear in mind the redemptive work of God in history. God has elected one man: Abraham, and covenanted with this man to bring the promised “seed” or redeemer through his descendants. He redeemed the descendants of this man (collectively known as the children of Israel) from Egyptian bondage and cut a new covenant whereby he revealed himself to them as YHWH and disclosed to them his law. His law is divine instruction on how God’s people are to live. Part of God’s promise to Abraham was the bestowal of the land of Canaan, a promise he fulfilled albeit not entirely due to the spiritual lethargy and indifference of the children of Israel. The story of the Judges reveals the consequence for allowing the residue of the Canaanites to live in the land. The Canaanites did indeed become a snare in the side of God’s people causing them to be led astray. When God disciplined his people, they were filled with circumstantial remorse and half-heartedly repented. Each time they sinned they sank lower and lower in their apostasy. God faithfully sent saviors to provide momentary reprieve from the just judgement their sins brought upon them, but instead of sincere repentance, they attempted to relegate God to a pantheon of other idols. Consequently, things fell apart. Next week we will explore the extent of the conditions in Israel when, every man doing what was right in his own eyes leads to its logical conclusion.