

Judges 16:23-31

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Date: 25 August 2013

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[0 : 00] If you're into art, I'm not really, but if you are, you may have had the experience of coming across a painting that you've never seen before, but just instantly by looking at it, you've known who the artist was.

Perhaps you're so familiar with that artist's style and his or her way of working that you can tell their work the moment you see it. The same can be true of other works of art, can't it? You can hear a piece of music by a composer or by a singer or by a band and you think, well, I know exactly who that is.

I know their style. I know their way of working. I know how they sound. I know how they do things. Perhaps you think about it, the same thing can be true in day-to-day life, can't it? Perhaps you see that someone has done something but they've not made it clear who it was.

Perhaps someone has done you a favour secretly. And you think, well, I kind of know who did that. It's them. That's just their style. That's just what they do. That's just how they do things.

I think one of the big problems I've found, as I've read and studied the story of Samson up to this point, is that as you read it, it kind of feels like the Lord has been working in a way which just doesn't seem to be his style of doing things, if I can put it like that.

[1 : 21] We've been looking at these four chapters of Samson kind of on and off as I've been preaching it in July and August. And it began, didn't it, chapter 13, when the angel of the Lord came to Samson's parents and promised that Samson was going to be born.

And that he would be a Nazarite, set apart in holiness as a kind of model for Israel of what all of Israel should be in devotion to the Lord. And there was that promise, wasn't there, that he was going to begin to save Israel from the Philistines.

That hostile group who also lived in the land, who worshipped other gods, who wanted to destroy Israel. And you think, well, that's fine. So far, so wonderfully typical of gods.

That's what you actually think as you come to the end of chapter 13. Then the issue is, is the way that Samson's life unfolds, I think, in chapter 14 and 15, is things seem to get a little bit less typical. Now it is true that Samson, we've seen, has achieved some great victories over the Philistines. But as we've seen through them, they're not without their problems, are they?

[2 : 30] Samson himself isn't the kind of great example of godliness he was set apart to be. He just seems to completely disregard the word of the Lord and the ways of the Lord.

And then the way the Lord wins victories through Samson just seems to be unusual. You look at it and think, that's kind of, it's odd, it's just not the Lord's style.

Last week after the sermon, someone said to me, they pictured Samson a bit like the Incredible Hulk. And there's some truth in that as you read through those chapters. You wouldn't like Samson when he's angry.

It was at that point in the story that the Spirit of God seems to rush on to Samson and give him the strength to fight and win just because he's angry.

And you think, this is strange. This feels unusual. An odd way of the Lord to work. And actually he seems to be using someone who shows very little awareness that the Lord is the source of his strength.

[3 : 31] Samson doesn't really seem to acknowledge the Lord very much. Except at points of real personal need. Like when he's particularly thirsty. Now if you were here last Sunday evening, you'll remember it all seemed to come crashing down for Samson.

His pride and his sin catches up with him. Deep down Samson seems to believe that actually the strength comes from inside him. That I think is the only explanation for why Samson I think tells Delilah about his hair and about his Nazarite vow.

When he knew from past experience, every time he told Delilah something, the Philistines came rushing in. I think deep down he just believed that his strength had nothing to do with those things. It was just down to him. But he was proved very wrong, wasn't he? The hair came off. The spirit has left him. And he's caught by the Philistines.

But the story isn't over yet. In fact, as we noticed last Sunday evening, it may be that the story of Samson and God's purpose in Samson to begin to rescue Israel from the Philistines has only just begun.

[4 : 45] So you remember how the passage ended that we looked at last week? Look down at verse 22. But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. Now as we thought about that last week, we saw that that was more than just a bit of an obvious detail.

You go to the hairdressers, you have your hair cut off, your hair begins to grow again. Well, at least you hope that's going to be the case. But it's more than that. It is a theological statement.

Back in number 6, we are told that if a Nazarite breaks his vow, as actually Samson has broken, breaking Nazarite vows all over the shop in Judges 14 and 15, the Nazarite can start again.

He can start again by having his head shaved off, his hair shaved off. And that kind of resets, if you like, the Nazarite vow. So to begin all over again.

Verse 22 is more than a hint of a new start for Samson. And a new start for his God's given purpose of beginning to rescue Israel from the Philistines.

[5 : 52] And you see, that's actually what we see in these last nine verses. These are not the epilogue to Samson's story. This is the great climax.

This is where it has all been heading. Where everything is going to be, is going to come to a great climax. This is what the Lord has been planning to do through Samson.

And actually I think you can sum up this instance by that sentence at the end of verse 30, which when you first look at it seems particularly grim, but it is showing the triumph of what is going on here.

So look at the end of verse 30. What are we told? So the dead whom Samson killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.

The writer is saying, no, this is the important thing about Samson's life. This is the important point where Samson won a great victory over the Philistines. And that perhaps helps us as we think about the Lord's style, if you like, of rescuing.

[7 : 00] What is the Lord's style of rescuing that we see through the life and death of Samson? How does that fit in with the Lord's style of rescuing and bringing glory to himself throughout the Bible?

Well, how does the Lord begin to save Israel from their enemies in the life of Samson? It is through weakness and death. The Lord begins to save Israel from their enemies through weakness and through death.

And if you learn more about God as we read his word, we see that is his style. That is how he works. God is not working against type in the life of Samson. In fact, you can say that all of those instances up to this point have been there to draw a contrast between what God is going to do at the end of Samson's life compared with what Samson, in a sense, has been trying to do in his own strength up to this point.

Let's draw this out a little bit. Just very briefly, I want to notice four things in this instance. Firstly, we see that as the Lord works here, he is working through the pathetic humiliation of Israel's saviour. I think it's impossible not to be struck by the enormous reversal of fortune for Samson at this point. What a picture of weakness, what a picture of failure we've got in these verses.

[8 : 34] Verse 21, as we saw when we looked at it, is a grim verse and shows just how the Philistines don't just want to capture Samson. They want to utterly humiliate him.

They bind him. They force him to do menial work. They take his eyes. It was a way of shouting to Israel, look at Samson. Is this your saviour?

Is this your judge, your deliverer? They're kind of doing the kind of thing that we saw, didn't we, a few years ago at the end of all the Iraq wars. And those photos kind of leaked out of Saddam Hussein as he was captured.

And then he was put on trial. And those pictures came out of the newspaper. It was like saying, look at Saddam Hussein now. He seemed so great at one point. So now look at what a tragic figure he is.

That is what the Philistines are doing with Samson. And they're rubbing it in the face of Israel. They are saying, Samson, judge for 20 years? But look at him now. He cannot even save himself.

[9 : 34] And then you get into the verses that I read. There's a great sacrifice, a great party going on in the temple of Dagon. I don't think too much like a kind of typical church.

I think there's more than a hint that there was alcohol involved. It's a wild party in celebration of Dagon. And now at this point, even the Philistines recognise the greatness of Samson in the past. They call him the ravager of their country who killed many of them. But why is Samson brought in to this great celebration to their gods? Well, he's brought out to entertain them, isn't he?

Verse 25. He's brought out for a laugh. Look at Samson. Let's make him play, do tricks for us. Let's laugh at this blind guy who used to kill us, that we used to be scared of.

Let's give him pride of place and a banquet. It's the first 26 of the sound verse, isn't it? You think of the greatness of Samson as we've seen in the previous chapters.

[10 : 42] What happens now? Samson has to be taken in by the hand of a young man. And kind of unceremonially parked against the pillar in a temple so he can stand upright.

It is a pathetic humiliation, isn't it? That's what we see. But just notice, just think about it, what we've seen in the story so far. Notice that the Philistines are actually falling into the same trap that Samson fell into.

The Philistines don't really understand what had been the source of Samson's strength. They thought it was just some kind of, presumably some kind of pagan magic to do with his hair.

They've not stopped and thought, they've not believed that if it was to do with his Nazarite vow to the Lord, then the source of Samson's strength was the Lord. And perhaps the Lord can give Samson back his strength at any moment.

The Philistines are playing around with Samson. Weak, pathetic Samson. But really they don't know who they're messing with, do they? The whole scene looks a little bit like a scene in a circus.

[11 : 51] I've never been to a circus, but you can go to circuses, can't you, in some parts of the world where they use animals. And there are people who try and tame lions, aren't they? It seems to me like a very stupid occupation, really.

And there are kind of occasional news reports, aren't there, of apparently tamed lions who suddenly turn on their tamers. And at that point you think, well, what did you think was going to happen when you took up that role?

Can you ever really tame a lion, something with such great force and power? And that's what the Philistines think they've done with Samson. This once great figure, with great power, tamed under their control.

Yet actually the source of his power, well, still on the loose as we will see. We've seen the pathetic humiliation of Israel's saviour. But next also we see that the Lord is working even though there is the apparent victory of the Philistines' gods.

The apparent victory of the Philistines' gods. See, the heartbreaking thing about the first few verses of this scene is that it is not just personal humiliation that Samson faces, is it?

[13 : 01] As the story moves on, we see Samson being taken right into the heart of Philistine religion. This is going on at a great religious celebration, the sacrifice in Dagon's temple.

Listen to what the Philistines say in verses 23 and 24. They have a theological interpretation of the events, don't they? Our God, they say, has given Samson our enemy into our hands.

And when the people saw him, they placed their gods. For they said, our God has given our enemy into our hands. The ravager of our country who kills many of us.

You hear how they talk about themselves constantly there. You can't miss the theological point they are making in their worship service in the temple. They were down.

They were oppressed. But Dagon has come to the rescue. Dagon has defeated the Lord. Dagon has defeated Israel's saviour.

[14 : 06] They say, our God reigns. Dagon reigns. Dagon, Dagon. The shout comes out from the temple. That's what the people would have been shouting. Dagon is king.

Dagon's ways are best. Dagon is Lord. And you see, at this point, we can't, we shouldn't miss the power of this. At this point, at this moment, so the moment of verse 26, 27, this way of looking at the world seemed so convincing.

It was convincing for them. After all, why else would Samson be in their midst? And presumably it would have been convincing for the Israelites, away from the land of the Philistines.

They were without their judge. The Philistines did seem to be winning. Do you remember that in earlier chapters, actually, all the Israelites were quite happy serving the Philistines. They thought that's just the way the world was. When Samson said, I want to go out and fight them, the Israelites were saying, well, what on earth are you doing? We just served the Philistines. That's just the way of the world.

[15:13] I'm sure they were tempted to think Dagon is a greater God than the Lord. It seemed to make sense of what they could see and hear. And Samson himself, well, it probably presumably made sense to Samson's world.

Remember, at this point, Samson couldn't even see. All he could hear was the noise of 3,000 people worshipping Dagon. 3,000 people from all walks of life were told, men, women, lords. All of Samson's world was worshipping Dagon. So surely Dagon is in control. I wanted to just pause there and think about the power of that.

Because I think this is the kind of moment that many Christians have to live in. Today, there are times when God appears to be kind of invisible.

And perhaps even inaudible in the world in which Christians live. There are times when God appears silent. There are times when everywhere that Christians look there, all there are is there are people ridiculing the Lord and praising other ways of life and other gods.

[16:22] It's true in other countries around the world, isn't it? It's true even to a certain extent in the culture, society in which we live. But remember what we said about God's style.

And we'll see as we move on. God specialises in bringing glory to himself even in this kind of situation. Which brings us to the third point. Things turn around, don't they?

And the third important thing to notice is the unusual faith of Samson's prayer. What would you expect Samson to do in this situation given all that we've known about him up to this point?

Well, I think what he does next seems to be so out of character. Yet it is a wonderful turning point. So look at verse 28. What does Samson do? Remember, all that Samson can hear is people crying out to Dagon.

And all that Samson knows is that he is being ridiculed and humiliated and his strength has gone. Well, verse 28 is wonderful. Samson calls to the Lord and said, O Lord God, please remember me, please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.

[17:37] Samson prays. Now, remember how radical this is for Samson. For the first time, he recognises that the source of his strength isn't in himself, but it's in the Lord.

He cries out for help. And then verse 29 and 30, he has the faith to believe that even despite what he can hear with his ears, and if he had eyes, he could see with his eyes, he has the faith to believe that he's been heard.

He grasps the pillars, cries out, let me die, and tears the place apart. Now, there are things that you can criticise about Samson's prayer here.

It seems a bit selfish. It seems very late, doesn't it? Yet it is wonderfully believing prayer, isn't it? Remember me. He knows who God is.

He knows God's, the Lord's commitment to Samson as one of his people. He acts on that knowledge. It's like, isn't it, the cry of the thief on the cross, that moment of ultimate weakness for that thief, and he just cries out to Jesus, remember me.

[18:46] And the Lord hears and answers, not just for Samson, but for all Israel, for the sake of his glory. Now, I think this little bit, I think it explains a question we might have about Samson.

It's strange, isn't it? It's time that Samson is mentioned in the New Testament. It's Hebrews 11, isn't it? Samson's name crops up there as one of the great heroes of faith, who looked at what was promised and trusted the Lord.

And perhaps as we've been going through these chapters, you think, well, Samson appears like anything but a great hero of faith. We might wonder why the writer of the Hebrews includes Samson in Hebrews 11.

But surely it is because of this great prayer at the end of his life. This great moment where he casts himself on the Lord. Where he cries out, remember me.

Where he recognises the source of his strength is not in himself, but in the Lord. And then, he acts on it. And that is what the Lord uses to bring this great victory, this great success for Israel.

[20 : 03] As the Philistines think they are victorious, but the house is brought down, quite literally, on them. And there is a greater victory brought than ever Samson brought when he was living.

So when we put together all these things, the pathetic humiliation of Israel's saviour, the apparent victory of Philistines' gods, the unusual faith of Samson's prayer, what do we get?

Well, I think we see, as we see this passage as a whole, we see the glorious triumph of the Lord's ways. I think in this story, we do see the Lord's style of saving, don't we?

I've used this illustration before, so forgive me if you've heard it, but I think what we've got here is the predictable unpredictability of the Lord's style. In a way, you could say this is a twist ending, this is a surprising ending, but actually, as you read through the Bible, it is incredibly unsurprising.

You'll know something of that kind of feeling if you've ever watched TV dramas like 24, or those kind of fast-paced dramas that kind of twist and turn. Good guys turn into bad guys, bad guys turn into good guys, Jack Bauer's dead, and then he turns out to be alive, and all those kind of things.

[21 : 17] Nothing is as it seems. And after you've been watching for a while, actually those twists and turns stop surprising you. You meet a new character, and you start thinking, I don't care what they say, they're simply not what they see.

There becomes a kind of predictable unpredictability and those kind of dramas. And actually, that is how the Lord so often works. It is his style not to do what we would naturally expect.

We expect, don't we, as human beings, victory through power, and through strength, and through charisma, and increasingly in our culture through celebrity. And how does the Lord constantly work?

He constantly works, doesn't he, through weakness, through suffering, through death. This isn't just a one-off in Samson's life.

We see it through the whole of biblical history. I think you can almost name a character, and you can see it in a life. Joseph, obviously, particularly. David, others.

[22 : 21] And in the story of Samson, actually, it is so important that we see this in the story of Samson, because in Samson, we see, I think, a model for the real saviour, the true saviour, the final saviour, who is to come in the Bible.

Remember the promise that the angel of the Lord brought to Samson's parents. Samson is only going to begin to rescue God's people from their enemies. Who, if you like, completed the job?

Who, who, who, who saves us from our enemies totally? Well, it is the Lord Jesus Christ. I had a friend who, who, when he was growing up, was really into building model aeroplanes.

So he spent his free time sticking together, lots of bits of planes on a table in his bedroom, and built up quite a collection. And then one day, he was taken by his parents to an air show, and, and the first moment, he saw those planes up close.

He'd never seen, um, uh, the kind of planes that he saw at this air show before. I think he said, one of the first planes he saw was a spitfire. He, he said, I knew exactly what they were.

[23 : 27] I, I, I, I knew exactly what those planes were. No one had to, to point out to me that is a spitfire, or that is a, uh, another type of plane. I knew what they were. Because he'd been working with those models for years.

He'd been working with the models so he could tell instantly the real thing. And I think, as you, as you read through the Old Testament, and you begin to get a feel for the way that the Lord works and brings victory, we can, should be able to instantly recognise the real thing.

As we open the page of the New Testament, and, and onto, onto our world walks our great saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. So think about the way the Lord Jesus Christ has brought great victory for us.

There, there is, there are so many parallels, aren't there? Although it's obviously in a slightly different context. there is pathetic humiliation, isn't there? I think we can say that. You can see that on so many levels.

God becomes a man, taking the form of a servant, emptying himself, humbling himself with tolls. Then you've got those moments, those painful moments, just before his great moment of victory, when he's alone, when he's being mocked, wheeled out for entertainment, wearing a crown of thorns, people crying out, how can you be a saviour if you can't even save yourself?

[24 : 52] And there's the apparent victory of other gods. Surely the, you might want to say that the cross is the moment where God proves he doesn't exist. There's a God, why is there suffering? Why is there evil?

Why is there sin? They're all present at the cross, aren't there? Why do bad things happen to good people? We all agree Jesus is a good man. The Pharisees view of God, the Roman view of God, the crowds view of God, they all think a win at that moment.

Heaven appears to be silent. But then at that moment you've also got a saviour who has wonderful faith until the end.

Just think about all those cries that come from the cross, all expressing faith and obedience to his father as well. Even that desperate cry, my God, my God.

There's still the emphasis on the my God. And that wonderful cry is finished. All revealing the glorious triumph of the Lord's ways. That apparent failure was the moment of victory when death was defeated.

[26 : 01] Sin paid for, Satan destroyed, that moment when the powers of darkness thought they had the saviour of the universe in their grasp and under their control. They showed they just didn't really know who they were dealing with.

That victory showed as Jesus rises again and ascends to the right hand of the Father. In the Old Testament we have these instances preparing for that. The Lord works with his people showing his style, showing us the way he works so we can recognise the cross, so that we can glory in his handiwork, so that we can trust him.

So this morning can I ask you a question? How do you believe God works? What would you say his style was? What would you say his way of working was?

Unless you recognise that God works through suffering and weakness you will never come to him.

That will always be a stumbling point for you coming to trust in the true saviour.

If you say you won't believe unless he impresses you with power and miracles then you will miss the great power he's revealed through the weakness of the cross, through the miracle of the cross.

[27 : 17] If you don't believe that Jesus is God simply because he's not the kind of God you expect him to be, I want to ask you this morning, perhaps your view of God is wrong.

Perhaps you're looking for the wrong thing. And as Christians and as the church say this is something we need to keep remembering, God works through weakness.

Remember that in your life. We live in a culture that tries to run as far as possible from any kind of weakness or sickness or death particularly. We try not to talk about it, we put lots of money and effort trying to get it under our control, yet deep down we know we are weak.

Sometimes you face the reality of weakness in all sorts of ways, in a very obvious way in your day to day life. But it is precisely God's style to bring triumph and glory through weakness.

To bring victory where anyone else would say there was defeat. So look to him, trust him, pray to him, believe his word here. And today we're the true church trusting in God as he's revealed himself seems so weak and so marginalised in our culture and our world.

[28 : 30] Don't let's ever think that God is somehow weak and marginalised. He specialises in bringing glory to himself through hard situations. This victory doesn't necessarily mean power, political power or getting our own way, but it means bringing hope and salvation and rescue to people.

We need to hold on to the fact that things can happen in our world that can be bad for society in the short term but actually be good for the church.

So we shouldn't give in to pessimism or fear or anger but trust the Lord who brings life from death and victory from apparent weakness.

Just to be close, do you see the hope this incident brought Israel? No one went home that day from the temple saying what a great God Dagon is. No one who heard about this incident thought that Dagon could rescue the Philistines and defeat Israel.

No, the Lord was seen to be great and glorious. He was shown to love and care his people. And incidentally, if you're concerned about this, this was a good thing for the Philistines too because Dagon could not save the Philistines.

[29 : 42] What they needed was Israel to show them the greatness and the holiness of their Lord. The only hope for the Philistines was in the Lord. The only hope for Philistines was for Israel to continue and for a saviour to come from Israel who was to be the saviour of the world which yes, includes even Philistines.

So it might appear that God is silent sometimes. It may appear that there are times when other gods in inverted commas are victorious. But appearance is a deceiver. That's what we want us to

go away thinking.

That is God's style. What is our response? I think for the first time in these chapters we can say, as the writer of the Hebrews implies, learn from Samson.

He might hate his faith and know that the Lord saves. Let's pray.