

March 19, 2017
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Judges 16:23-31.

1. Why did God use Samson as a deliverer when he was so unfaithful?
2. List some truths the Philistines who were gathered at the celebration did not see.
3. Are there any examples of Samson actually expressing faith in God?
4. What lessons has God taught you through the Samson story?

**GOD VINDICATED THROUGH HIS
WAYWARD SERVANT
Judges 16:23-31**

My heart is always grieved when I hear people speak disrespectfully about my God and my Savior. Jokes about God abound. You don't have to work around the most wicked people in life to hear such mockery. In fact, professing Christians have been known to repeat mockery about God. That is blasphemy which means to speak down about someone or to denigrate or deride someone. Blasphemy can be the simple matter of attributing wrong to someone falsely or denying the honor that someone deserves for their work or character.

Worst is the fact that many leading and important people in our world speak against God continually as they deny His work of

creation, deny His inspired Word, the Bible, and deny His work as our Savior. Generally speaking, nearly all world leaders in all of human history have lived lives wholly characterized by blasphemy.

To that end, James warned Christians in his day about playing favorites toward the very people who blaspheme our Savior. He chides us, *“But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?”* (James 2:6-7).

By the time the world is swept into the torrent we call the Great Tribulation, Antichrist and his forces and people will blaspheme God on an unimaginable level. *And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven* (Revelation 13:4-6).

We, the people of God, are appalled at such realities. How dare they mock, ridicule, and criticize our God. Yes, we should be irritated by people who do that. But, do we give God's enemies reason and opportunity to speak against God by the way we live? Hear Paul's accusation to the religious hypocrites. *You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you”* (Romans 2:23-24).

God's enemies do mock Him. That is to be expected. Sometimes our careless actions and words give the enemy reason to criticize God. But in the end, God wins. After Antichrist and his people have denied and mocked the true God for seven years, God is going to have the last word. By His word, His enemies will go up in smoke, literally. It will be His chosen display of His vengeance against His enemies.

In that sense, Samson's story is a microcosm of God's plan for the ages. God chose Samson to serve Him. He raised up Samson and gifted him with amazing strength to punish the Philistines who denied God, mocked God, and replaced Him with their imaginary gods. Samson was a horrible example of a God-chosen servant. He gave

God's enemies much opportunity to blaspheme. His sinful lifestyle finally caught up with him and God allowed him to suffer serious repercussions. But in the end, God answered Samson's prayer for vengeance, and God vindicated Himself against His enemy.

The Philistines were real people, just like the real people who will experience God's vengeance in the last days. We must learn that God does not take blasphemy against Himself lightly. He will pour out His vengeance against every person who does not receive His grace and mercy. The person who thinks that God is a pushover who will tolerate all manner of sin against Himself would do well to read Jeremiah's Lamentation, which he wrote as he gazed on the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem, and note how many times God and the pronouns referring to God are used. God is still God and He will not be mocked.

Samson Had Given Pagans Reason to Blaspheme God (vv.23-27).

Here we find a large gathering of Philistine leaders and people as they praised an imaginary god (vv.23-24). *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." 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"* (vv.23-24).

The Philistines gathered to praise Dagon and rejoice. Dagon was a principle deity in the Philistine cities. Obviously it was a man-made god, for a man-made religion. We do not have a lot of information about this god or the religion connected with it. We do know that the idol had some connection with agriculture, probably similar to the many different fertility gods and goddesses. By Samuel's time and David's time, Dagon was known and worshiped through the entire region from Babylon to the Mediterranean Sea. We remember the later story of when the Philistines defeated Israel and stole the ark of God during the priesthood of Eli, while Samuel was a young man. When the Philistines placed the ark in the local temples of their god Dagon, the idols fell down before God's Ark.

There is also evidence that there was a large temple of Dagon located in Bethshan. It seems likely that the Philistines attached the

bodies of Saul and Jonathan to the walls of that temple to prove again that their god was superior to Israel's Yahweh. So also in this event that occurred only a few years before Samuel, who was the Prophet of Israel and the last judge, the chief people in Philistia gathered to celebrate the superiority of their god.

They were saying, *"Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us"* (v.24). These words appear to be part of a song they wrote for this special occasion. So they would have been singing or chanting the words. It reminds me of a soccer game in Mexico or Europe where the people chant throughout the entire game. Yes, it is irritating to me.

However, in the story before us, the chanting was about the battle between the true God and the false god Dagon. It is a battle that has raged since the moment Satan the false god tempted Eve to disobey the true God. The same battle still rages today. Who is the mighty God and whose god will win in the end? Is it Allah or Buddha or one of the multitude of Hindu gods? Aren't these all different expressions of the one true God? Not on your life! Is it mighty God the one presented in the Bible, or is it the false gods of the Mormon religion, Jehovah's Witnesses, or any number of mainline protestant religions who deny the God of the Bible?

Or, as the battle seems to be focused today, is the true and great god "ME"? Throughout the world today, and especially in America, creature worship is the main and most popular religion. The individual determines what is truth. The individual demands satisfaction regardless of the cost. That the individual feels happy and fulfilled is all that really matters. The god "ME" is the modern Dagon. And millions of "believers" gather regularly to celebrate the achievements, the power of this man-made god.

The Philistines thought that God's servant was their enemy. Notice their conclusion: *"Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand"* (v.23). *"Our god has given our enemy into our hand"* (v.24). The pagans who worshiped the creature rather than the Creator didn't understand how the true God works. They didn't understand that God chooses and uses His servants for His own glory. Therefore, the pagans assumed that Samson, acting on his own, had caused them harm. They assumed that Samson's astonishing strength was the result of some secret potion or unseen power or (as they learned) it

was in his hair. They assumed that if they could just get rid of Samson, life would be satisfying and they could do what they wanted to do.

Those ancient Philistines were like so many modern and ancient cultures and individuals who believe if they could just get rid of God's servants, life would be so much more pleasant. They were like the Pharisees and religious leaders who believed that if they could get rid of Jesus, life would be better. Or if they could silence the apostles and the early Christians, they could keep people under their control. And then multiple Roman emperors really thought that it was Christians who made life in the empire miserable. The Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages were convinced they could control all the people if they could just get rid of the troublemakers like the Reformers. Hitler believed that Christians stood in the way of his utopian society. Communist leaders today believe that Christians are the enemies of the state and must be eradicated. Islamists are of the same mind. The left-wing extremists in America are sure that Christianity must be nullified in order for them to establish the utopian society where babies and old people alike are disposable, where there is no distinction between genders, where anyone can have sex with anyone and anything without consequences, where truth is whatever the individual says it is.

Modern pagans, like their 10th century BC counterparts the Philistines, don't understand that God's servants appear to be their enemies only because they themselves are actually the enemies of the true God.

The ancient Philistines gathered to celebrate the victory of their god and to mock God's servant (vv.25-27). The Philistines made sport of God's servant. *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. (v.25a).* The crowd shouted, "Call out Samson, that we can mock him." Samson had desired to be just like the pagans who spend themselves upon their lusts. In too many ways he wanted to fit in with the people who worshiped Dagon the non-god. Now see how those people treat the servant of God.

Samson had pagan desires, but God would not allow Samson to be one of the pagans. He was a Nazarite, dedicated to serving God, not a pagan. But he sure tried not to be a servant of God. So while

God's servant sat in that dark, damp prison, God reminded Samson who and what God had chosen him to be.

We rejoice to know that Samson had a change of heart. However, because Samson had played the fool, now he had to pay the consequences. He who refused to see God in all His glory was without eyes altogether. He who once enjoyed the power of God's Spirit was a powerless pawn. He who God intended to demonstrate His majesty was now the object of jeering and mockery. Worse was the fact that the godless throng now mocked the true God by singing songs about His defeat by their non-god. Now they called out the man who would be one of them instead of the servant of Yahweh to mock him like so many drunks at a party. What shame we bring on the name of God when we desire to act like the godless people around us.

But all the time that the pagans seemed to be having their way and doing what they thought was best, the Philistines were unaware that the true God was arranging their judgment. *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 (v.27).*

This was a huge party for the elite, the leaders of the five Philistine cities. All the lords of the Philistines were there. The term "lords" in this case refers to all the leaders of the nation. This was like all of Congress and maybe the President showing up for a big celebration. God was about to leave the nation leaderless. Three thousand men and women looked on from the roof of the place where the victory celebration was held. I think the 3,000 were only part of the crowd assembled. These were the important people who were given the chief seats at the venue. The number probably does not include the thousands of people who sat in the cheap seats, on the grass, and surrounded the stadium.

They were all gathered to watch Samson their enemy stumble around in blindness like a fool. How proud they were that they had finally learned the secret of his strength and stolen it from him. But wait! If they really believed that the secret of Samson's strength lay in his hair, didn't anyone notice that his hair had grown? You would think that at least someone on talk radio in that day would have said, "Hey, wake up people. Don't you see that Samson's hair has grown out?"

The greatest truth the people completely missed was that God, the real source of their judgment, was arranging their circumstances in order to get glory for Himself. While they mocked physically blind Samson, they were spiritually blind to their own pending destruction. While the foolish people rejoiced in their supposed victory over their supposed enemy, they were totally blind to the fact that their Eternal Judge was about to strike them.

What a picture of this world those people drew for us. Time and again throughout history, we can see how entire cultures reject God, mock His messengers, celebrate their own supposed accomplishments, completely unaware that the God of consequences was about to knock on their door. Think about Belshazzar celebrating with the important people of the kingdom, drinking wine from the vessels his forefather stole from God's temple, being totally ignorant of the reality that Cyrus was at that moment leading his army into the city. What about the thousands of citizens of Pompeii who mocked God and rejected His Word and continued in their sin even as God was shaking Mount Vesuvius? What do we say about multiple cities, nations, cultures that have rejected God and derided His servants only to be decimated by war and natural disaster when they least expected it? It is not wise to pretend that our idols are more powerful than God.

Samson made a simple request that went unnoticed by the celebrating fools. *They made him stand between the pillars. 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"* (vv.25b-26). Samson was not really asking to take a rest. He was planning to cry out to God for strength one last time in order to destroy God's enemies. This simple request is another one of those almost hidden examples of faith in Samson's life. God arranged all the circumstances in order to bring glory to Himself.

God Brought Glory to Himself Through Samson One Last Time (vv.28-31).

Samson's prayer was a prayer for vengeance. *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"* (v.28). It is good to read

that the servant remembered his Master. This is only the second time we read about Samson calling out to Yahweh. In the Samson story, we discover that his parents were keenly aware of Yahweh. That title for God appears fourteen times in connection with Samson's parents. They recognized the angel of Yahweh and understood the significance of His message. In relation to Samson, we read six times that the Spirit of Yahweh empowered Samson to do God's work against the Philistines.

But, it almost appears that Samson was unwilling to admit, or ignorant of the fact, that his feats of strength were the work of Yahweh. He was certainly unaware of the reality that the Spirit of Yahweh left him (16:20). How horribly sad it is when a child of God grieves and quenches the Holy Spirit so much that he or she is not even aware of the Spirit's presence. But how great to see the child of God so crushed that he or she willingly cries out to God again.

Here we read for the second time (at least recorded time) that Samson cried out to Yahweh his Lord and God. In this one sentence we are faced with the three most common titles for God in the Old Testament. First is the title *Yahweh* (LORD). This is the name for the covenant God who pledged Himself to care for His people. The name reveals that He is the ever-existing, self-sufficient God. Second is the title *Adonai* (Lord). This is a more general term for God that refers to His position as our master and owner. Third is the title *Eloheim* (God). This is the mighty one, for Israel and for us. It is the title used to speak of "the creator," found forty-nine times in the creation story (Gen. 1:1-3:24).

Samson called out to God because he believed that God would hear and respond to his request. While all around him were the shouts and cheers and jeers of those whose faith was in a lifeless idol of their own making, Samson called out to the one God who could make a difference. Do you truly have faith that the one true God will hear you and will respond? People who believe that are praying people. The better we come to know God, the more prone we are to spend time talking to Him. When we have deep faith in God, we do not spend so much time asking for stuff as we do just talking to Him. Our deep desire in prayer should be that God would glorify Himself through us.

That is what Samson prayed, though he still evidenced a bit of self-centeredness. The servant requested strength for vengeance.

Samson's request was that he might be able to gain vengeance against the people who blinded him. And we are tempted to respond, "Samson! When are you going to figure out that you are God's servant?" God chose you before you were born to be His servant. God used you to bring glory to Himself. You didn't do anything on your own except sin against your God and Master. Life isn't about you Samson! Nobody but you really cares if you are satisfied or feel fulfilled. God gave you life, gave you His spirit, raised you up, gave you amazing power for His glory alone. God's full intent for you was to use you as an instrument against HIS enemies! Talk about "Ye of little faith!" Yes, and all these things can be said about us also.

In the end, this was a matter of God's vengeance against His enemies (vv.29-31). God strengthened His servant again. *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. 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 (vv.29-30).*

At least at the end (if not at other times during his life), Samson understood that he was completely dependant on God who is the author of life and death. We are wise to learn this lesson before our end. Samson who would not control his lust, who took his Nazarite vow lightly and bartered away God's blessing. He was a sorry loser by anyone's assessment. Be that as it may, when he sincerely cried out to God for help, God heard him, turned to him, and answered his request. God who abandoned Samson for a time, heard His cry.

We easily wonder why God ever used Samson. It seems likely as we look back over the man's life that God used Samson in ways that illustrated the fickleness and sinfulness of His people Israel. His life was much like the sequences of God's people who sinned, suffered, cried out for help and were delivered. It seems obvious that God intended for Samson to serve as a picture, an illustration of themselves, of the nation, to all of Israel. Didn't Israel treat God just like Samson did even though He had called the nation to be dedicated to Him like so many Nazarites?

John Milton wrote a poem called *Samson Agonistes* in which he tells the story of Samson and adds quite a bit of material that isn't in the Bible account. Milton has several friends and relatives of Samson visit him in prison just before this festival to celebrate Dagon. In line 165 as his peers looked on at Samson in his disheveled condition they conclude:

O mirror of our fickle state,
Since man on earth unparallel'd!
The rarer thy example stands,
By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
Strongest of mortal men,
To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall'n.

Indeed Israel fell many times. And many times they cried out to God for help. And did He not turn to them in times of stress to answer their requests for help? And will He not hear you, oh sinner, in time of distress and you, dear saint, in times of need? Will He not turn His attention to His people who have no other helper, no place to turn, no hope in sight? Does He not allow us to wander into the hopeless places so that we will learn to depend on Him and Him alone?

The family of God's servant came to get his body and took it home to bury him. *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 (v.31).* What a sad, sad story as we watch Samson's family go to the rubble, where thousands of mourners mourned their dead loved ones, to retrieve the body of their son and brother. What chaos sin brings upon people! This is a sad story about the consequences of sin.

And yet we end the story with a reminder that God listed Samson in Hebrews chapter 11 among the people who had faith in God. *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 (Hebrews 11:32-34).*

God is good, God is great, God's sovereign control is astonishing. God will not share His glory with our man-made idols and especially not with us who think we are God. Great God of glory vindicates Himself in many ways and many times in human history. In the end, all things will bring about God's amazing glory. Let us be found faithful, always asking Him to bring glory to Himself through us.