

The Two Faces of Samson: Sinner and Saviour

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 0 0] We turn now to our reading from the Bible, and we're in Judges, the book of Judges, chapter 16 tonight, and you'll find that on page 215 in our hardback Bibles, if you have one, page 215.

The last chapter describing the life and works of Samson. So Judges, chapter 16. Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went into her.

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.

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.

After this, he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. 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.

[1 : 3 4] And we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver. So Delilah said to Samson, please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound that one could subdue you.

Samson said to her, if they bind me with seven fresh bow strings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.

Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bow strings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. 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 bow strings as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

Then Delilah said to Samson, behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound. 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.

[2 : 4 4] 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.

Then Delilah said to Samson, until now, you've 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.

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. And she said to him, how can you say I love you when your heart is not with me?

You've mocked me these three times and you've not told me where your great strength lies. And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.

[3 : 54] And he told her all his heart and said to her, a razor has never come upon my head, for I've been a Nazarite 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

[5 : 06] But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. 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.

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. 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.

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.

[6 : 15] 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.

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. Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshterol in the tomb of Manoah, his father.

He had judged Israel 20 years. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May it be a blessing to us. Well, let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer.

[7 : 19] God, our father, your words, the words of the Bible are the words that are life and they bring life.

They revive our hearts. They are perfect and wonderful. And we pray, therefore, that as we read from the book of Judges tonight, you will strengthen us and help us and prepare us for the days ahead that we may serve you.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn to Judges chapter 16 again, page 215. And as I said earlier, this is the last chapter of the four chapters that tell the story of Samson.

And in this chapter, we'll look at the two faces of Samson, sinner and savior. I imagine that this story of Samson and Delilah is the best known story in the whole of the book of Judges.

There are other colorful ones, of course, especially the ones that little boys might like to retell to their maiden aunts in order to shock them. Oh, Auntie Florence, did you hear the one about Ehud plunging his dagger into the belly of King Eglon?

[8 : 32] Oh, Auntie Florence, did you hear about Jael hammering the tent peg into the head of General Sisera? That sort of thing. But this story, this story of Samson and Delilah, includes exactly the kind of elements that you get in a typical modern blockbuster film.

You have sex outside its proper boundaries. You have heroic physical deeds. Think, for example, of James Bond, Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis. There are lies.

The conversation between Samson and Delilah is all lies until Samson finally tells her the secret of his strength. Then there's the added interest of money and greed.

1,100 pieces of silver times five was a lot of money in 1,100 BC. And then behind the actual details of the story and the excitement of what's going on on the ground, you have the sense of the unease of the nation of Israel, with the Philistines and the Israelites living next door to each other, but in a relationship that has neither trust nor love nor mutual support in it, but rather hostility and suspicion.

So we have a colorful story here. But as always with these Old Testament stories, we have to ask the two questions. First, what is God doing through these events?

[9 : 55] And then secondly, what does this story teach us about living in the world as believing Christians? And as we proceed tonight, I hope that at least some answers to those questions will begin to emerge.

Now, Samson is a very odd Bible hero. As I said a week or two ago, he is a paradox of a man, a paradox. On the one hand, there is little, if anything, to admire in his character.

He's a serial womanizer. He's incapable of fidelity in marriage. He's rude to his parents. He's insensitive and rough. He's supposed to be a Nazirite, devoted and consecrated to the Lord.

You may remember the angel who foretold his birth said that he would be a Nazirite from the womb until the day of his death. But he seems to be taking his Nazirite vows very lightly, not least when he suggests to Delilah that his head could finally be shaved.

So there is not much to admire in this man's character. He's a roughneck. He's a dunderhead. But on the other hand, and this is the other side of the paradox, he is a savior.

[11 : 08] The prophecy made about him before his birth was that he would begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. That comes back in chapter 13, verse 5. And that's exactly what he does do.

He subdues the Philistines. He cows them. He frightens them. He burns their crops. He kills many of them. He raises the power of Israel. And he lowers the power of the Philistines.

And on top of this, he is ranked in Hebrews chapter 11 alongside Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. Yet we're bound to ask, why didn't God at this stage in Israel's history bring to the fore a man of noble and unspotted character, someone like Daniel or Samuel?

Well, the answer must be that God was doing something for Israel and for us that could not be achieved through a man of shining integrity.

Just for the sake of the argument, imagine that God had raised up a man like Daniel at this point in Israel's history. What would the Israelites have made of a man like that?

[12 : 18] They would have found it very hard to identify with him at all. His lifestyle, his godly lifestyle and his values would have been on another planet to them. They had sunk so far down into ungodliness.

They were so much under the thumb of the Philistines, they'd so much given into the Philistines, that they'd lost their capacity to live for the Lord and to love him. But in a man like Samson, they had a leader who was very much like them.

We noticed this a couple of weeks ago, but let me just point it out again. Turn with me back to chapter 14, verse 3. 14, verse 3. Samson at this stage has just seen a pretty Philistine girl in Timnah and he wants to marry her.

And speaking very rudely to his father, he says to his father, get her for me for she is right in my eyes. Notice that phrase, right in my eyes. Then look on to verse 7 in the same chapter.

Then he went down and talked with the woman and she was right in Samson's eyes. She wasn't right in the Lord's eyes. Not at all. She was a Philistine.

[13 : 25] She didn't belong to the covenant community. The law of Moses was very clear that a Jew must only marry within the Israelite community. What Samson is doing then is making up the rules for himself.

He's despising the law of Moses. If something is right in his own eyes, it's right as far as he's concerned. What God thinks about it is irrelevant. Now just turn on to the last verse in the whole book of Judges, chapter 21, verse 25.

In those days, 21, 25. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It's put here at the very end of the book so as to make it very pointed.

It's a description and it's worded cuttingly of the wretched state to which Israel had sunk at this point in her history. It's a moral free for all. Out with theocracy, in with self-determination.

Just make up the rules for yourself. If you fancy marrying a Philistine, let the law of Moses take a running jump. If you want to do it, young man, you go ahead and do it. Nothing is more important than for you to fulfill your own particular idiosyncratic potential.

[14 : 46] Now it's no accident that the driving force in Samson, which is doing what is right in his own eyes, it's an exact reflection of the driving force operating throughout the whole people of Israel.

Everyone was doing simply what was right in his own eyes. It's a pretty good description, by the way, isn't it, of our own society today. Morality largely has become privatized.

A national consensus of opinion on what is right and what is wrong has to a great degree drained out of our nation. Thankfully, a moral consensus on certain things hasn't disappeared entirely, but it's an endangered species.

And only a return to the Lord and to the Bible will reinstate it. Anyway, to return to Samson. Being a leader like this, a kind of moral loose cannon, meant that he and the people that he was leading had a great deal in common.

A Daniel would have been way beyond their experience and their understanding, but a Samson was a man after their own hearts. And therefore, Samson, in all his moral indiscipline, is held up as a mirror to his people.

[16:02] And the first readers of the book of Judges should have picked up some sharp lessons from Samson's life, which they would never have picked up from a leader of outstanding godliness like a Daniel.

So we'll look at the two faces of Samson as sinner and savior. And I've got two headings for our thinking. First, he lives the life of a moral ruin.

But second, he dies the death of a triumphant savior. First then, he lives the life of a moral ruin. In the final verse of chapter 15, you'll see that Samson judged Israel in the days of the Philistines for 20 years.

I think we can take it then that in chapters 14 and 15, and the incidents that we looked at last week and the week before, he was a young man. Let's say he was 20-odd.

When he married the girl from Timna, when he killed the lion, when he caught the 300 foxes, and then killed the 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. Then there seemed to have been 20 years of responsible leadership.

[17:12] His feats of strength have made him a national hero. And people acknowledge him as a national leader. And they bring their lawsuits to him. And he sorts out their squabbles, just in the way that Deborah and others had done before him.

So if he was 20-odd in chapters 14 and 15, he's 40-odd when we get to chapter 16. He's exercised leadership for 20 years.

And yet he doesn't seem to have grown wiser. The moral fabric of his life, if anything, seems to be disintegrating. And I'm not just talking about his sexual indiscipline.

That's part of the mix, certainly. But the problem seems to be deeper. There's a spirit of recklessness in him, as though he feels that he's now invincible. Now, I suppose you can understand this in a way.

If you have killed a lion with your bare hands, followed by killing 1,000 men using the jawbone of a donkey, it's not surprising if, when you take your shirt off and look in the mirror, you think you're looking at something rather special.

[18:18] Let's trace this sense of reckless invincibility in chapter 16, verse 1. He goes to Gaza. Gaza.

Why go there? The Philistine territory had five main cities. Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza.

And Gaza seems to have been the capital city. It was the center of Philistine power. Gaza was then just where it is today, in the southwestern corner of Palestine, not far from the border with Egypt.

So Samson, verse 1 tells us, goes to Gaza. He sees a prostitute, and he goes into her house. If you just look back to chapter 14, verses 1 and 2, you can see how little he has changed.

In chapter 14, verse 1, he sees one of the daughters of the Philistines, goes straight back to his parents and says to them, I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah.

[19:16] Now get her for me as my wife. One look, and all wisdom and self-restraint fly out of the window. He's like a rabbit falling into a trap. He can't stop himself.

So, chapter 16, he goes to this prostitute's house. But, of course, he's noticed by the people there, because he is so well known.

He's famous. Well, he's infamous. He's the bugbear of the Philistines. He's the man the Philistines all love to hate. And, of course, he would have looked very distinctive with his hair down to his waist and a beard as big as a hawthorn bush.

So he's noticed, and the bush telegraph begins to buzz. Verse 2, the Gazites are told, Samson has come here. The dreaded, hated, feared Samson is spending the night at Floribunda's house, number 15, red light crescent.

So the Philistines of Gaza immediately see their opportunity. They say, we'll get him and we'll kill him. So they surround the house where he's staying, and they set another group of men in ambush at the city gate.

[20 : 24] Now, the town then would have had a very high wall, and there would have been simply one way in and out of the town through the big city gate. But although the ambush was set, the men lying in wait for Samson must have fallen asleep.

Because they say in verse 2, let's wait till the light of morning, and then we'll kill him. It doesn't seem to have occurred to them that he might not himself wait till the light of morning comes.

So he gets up at midnight, creeps down through the city, and then filled with his titanic strength, he pulls up the whole apparatus of the city gate, the doors, the posts, and the crossbar, and he carries them on his shoulders from Gaza to Hebron.

And if you look at your Bible atlas, you will discover that Hebron is 40 miles from Gaza. We now come to the last act in the drama and to the last woman in Samson's life whose name is Delilah.

The 17th century English poet John Milton, author of the famous *Paradise Lost*, also wrote a long poem called *Samson Agonistes*, which means Samson in his agony and struggle.

[21 : 40] It's a long poem. It runs to about 1,800 lines, and it's presented like a short play with speeches being allocated to a number of different actors, just like any other play is presented.

And Delilah is one of the players in this drama. But when Milton sets out his list of players at the beginning, the *dramatis personae*, he describes Delilah as Samson's wife.

Now, I don't know where he got that idea from, because our verse 4 here simply says that Samson loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

There's no mention of her being his wife. And the story doesn't read like a story of conjugal happiness, does it? Now, Milton was a Christian man. He was a devout Puritan.

And I'm not sure about this, but my guess is that he just couldn't bring himself to describe Delilah in the *dramatis personae* as Samson's live-in girlfriend. As a considerable public figure and a well-known poet in 17th century England, Milton was perhaps conscious of his responsibility to model Christian behavior.

[22 : 46] So he used poetic license and described Delilah as Samson's wife. He was sanitizing things. But of course, she wasn't his wife. Verse 4 tells us that Samson loved her, but I think we know Samson well enough by now to know what that meant.

Let me put it like this. If you were to give birth to a daughter, would you call her Delilah? I think maybe that proves my point. This was not wedlock.

Well, let's trace out the conclusion of this happy little relationship. The Philistine leaders clearly have an ongoing campaign to catch Samson and kill him.

He is public enemy number one as far as they're concerned. It's rather like the campaign to catch and kill Osama bin Laden, which went on for nearly 10 years until the Americans finally caught up with him in Pakistan in 2011.

The Philistines thought that they'd had him back at Lehi in chapter 15, verse 14, but then he picked up the jawbone of a donkey and killed 1,000. Then they thought they had him in Gaza in chapter 16, verse 2, but he broke out.

[23 : 58] But they're still on his trail, and when they learn that he is living with Delilah in the valley of Sorek, they devise another plan, and this time it's a more subtle one.

They've realized that trying to take him by force always backfires against them. So now they plot to catch him through his addiction to womanizing.

So who comes quietly up to Delilah's bungalow one day in order to lay the trap? Verse 5, the lords of the Philistines.

Now, we learned back in Judges chapter 3 that there were five lords of the Philistines. Clearly, these would have been the head men or the city mayors of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza.

They are the leaders of the Philistine nation, men of the standing of Boris Johnson or Alex Salmond. It would have been flattering to this little lady to be approached by such important men.

[24 : 59] So they say to her, seduce him. Once he's been seduced, he's much more likely to be putty in her hands. Seduce him, they say, and, verse 5, see where his great strength lies and by what means we may overpower him that we may bind him and humble him.

Now, that's interesting. Not bind him and then kill him. Bind him to humble him. They say to themselves, if we end up with a corpse, there's nothing further we can do to humiliate him or hurt him.

But if we take him alive, we can humble him, we can jeer at him, we can lock him up in a cage if necessary, put him on short rations, deprive him of all pleasures, show him that Dagon is better than Yahweh, will humble the monster.

And, Madam Delilah, we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver. Now, 1,100 times 5 is 5,500 pieces of silver, a great deal of money.

Apparently, it was shekels. And 5,500 silver shekels in ancient Israel weighed about 140 pounds weight. That is a lot of silver, isn't it?

[26 : 12] The temptation proves to be too strong for Delilah. Really, it's a double temptation if you think about it. First of all, the money is an obvious temptation.

Her pension needs would be sorted out for 30 years, wouldn't they? But secondly, here's the other side of the temptation, she would become famous. She was dealing with the five most important men in the country.

She perhaps could picture the headline in the Gaza Times, Brave Sorek Woman Defeats the Hairy Enemy. She'd become a national heroine, a national treasure.

So what happens? She arranges to have a little group of crack Philistine soldiers hiding in the back bedroom. Then later in the evening, Samson comes to see her.

And after they've had their three-course dinner, et cetera, they're in each other's arms. And Delilah perhaps runs her fingers appreciatively across his mighty chest and his bulging biceps.

[27 : 13] And she says, tell me, sweetheart, I find you so fascinating. What is the secret of your great strength? Well, I mean, if anyone, for example, wanted to tie you up and subdue you, how could it be done?

Now, Samson must have smelt a rat when he heard those words, mustn't he? I mean, he must have thought, someone's been plowing with my heifer as they plowed with my other heifer 20 years ago.

Surely he knew that she wasn't being sincere with him. So he chuckled within himself and he said to himself, two can play at the game of let's tell some amusing fibs.

So he says to her in verse seven, if they bind me with seven fresh bow strings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.

So excited, she pops down the street to where the five city mayors are waiting for her. She quickly tells them what Samson has told her. They get hold of seven fresh bow strings and she runs straight back to her house and ties Samson up, trusses him up like a Christmas turkey.

[28 : 23] And then, knowing what he doesn't know, that there are Philistine soldiers lurking in the back bedroom, she says to him, Samson, the Philistines are upon you. Are they?

He chuckles and he snaps the bow strings off his body as easily as a thread disintegrates when it touches the flames. So Delilah's lip comes up in a pout.

She says, you've been mocking me and telling me lies. Please tell me how you can really be tied up. You're such a darling. I long to know, meaning I long to have five and a half thousand silver shekels.

Well, the lies go on being told. The second lie is, buy into me with new ropes that have not been used. Just notice, by the way, there's an appeal to pagan superstition here.

Used ropes would be no good, but there's magical power in ropes that have never been used or bow strings that have not been dried. So she gets the new ropes, but the result is the same.

[29 : 25] Then we have the third lie. Weave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin. So he falls asleep and she does just what he says, but the result is the same.

But it's at verse 15. But the story begins to gather pace and intensity. She really now begins to put the emotional pressure on him. She says, verse 15, how can you say I love you when your heart is not with me?

You've mocked me these three times and you've not told me where your great strength lies. And then, verse 16, she presses him hard day after day and urges him until his soul is vexed to death.

she finds his weak spot just as his wife at Timna had found the same spot all those years before. Tears and sobbing and pressure and you don't love me and that kind of thing.

So she breaks his resolve. He doesn't really love her, does he? Not in a grown-up way. He's really a boy in a man's body. But even if he doesn't love her, he does very much want what she can give him.

[30 : 34] So finally, he gives way. And as verse 17 puts it, he tells her all his heart. He finally tells her the real truth. Verse 17, a razor has never come upon my head for I've been a Nazarite 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 as soon as he tells her that, she knows that he's told her the truth.

She knows she's got him. Now, I guess quite a few days have passed by and the lords of the Philistines seem to have gone home. But she sends for them again and tells them, he's told me this time.

He's told me the secret. You can bring my money up now. It's a sad moment, isn't it? Although he is such a rough and violent individual, you can't help but admire him as a kind of champion prize fighter.

But here he is about to be brought low, about to be felled, like a great tree. The Philistines had said back in verse 5 that they wanted to humble him and now they are about to humble him.

[31 : 41] So he falls asleep. A barber is called in to shave his head and then, beastly woman, she begins to torment him and his strength evaporates.

She cries out again, the Philistines are upon you, Samson. Then a very odd thing happens. He wakes up and he says, I'll go out as at other times and shake myself free.

Isn't that odd? He's just told Delilah that the secret of his great strength lies in his hair, in his Nazarite vow. And he must have felt when he woke up that he'd been shaved and had his hair taken off.

You can't have all that hair taken off and not feel it, can you? And yet he seems to think that he is as strong as ever. But he's not. He's a weak man now, just like any other.

And look at that sad final sentence in verse 20. He did not know that the Lord had left him. He knew it all too plainly a few moments later when the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes.

[32 : 47] Why did the Lord leave him at this point? Surely because in allowing his head to be shaved, he was showing how utterly he despised his consecration as a Nazarite, which was his consecration to the Lord.

His moral ruin lies in the fact that he thought he was invincible. He thought of his strength as something which was his by right, as though it flowed from within himself.

He'd forgotten that it was only his because God gave it to him. He knew that his hair had been shaved off, but he'd become so self-reliant that he thought he was unstoppable.

He'd been sitting loose to his Nazarite vows for years, but when he irresponsibly allowed his head to be shaved, it was as though he crossed a line at that point.

And the Lord left him and allowed him to be subdued and in that word of verse 5, humbled. The great champion has his eyes gouged out, he's taken back to Gaza, he's bound with shackles of bronze and forced to grind corn in the prison for the Philistines.

[34 : 00] Once he had burned the Philistines' crops to ashes. Now he has to grind the grain so as to make their bread. How are the mighty fallen? John Milton's poem is a great imaginative exploration of the torment that must have been going on in Samson's mind when he was humiliated and blinded and at one point Milton puts these words into Samson's mouth.

Oh, dark, dark, dark amid the blaze of noon, irrecoverably dark, total eclipse without all hope of day. Well, Judges 16 doesn't tell us really anything about Samson's inner feelings, but it does tell us in verse 22 that in the prison his hair began to grow again.

Now we mustn't think that there was some magic power in his hair. The point is that with the regrowth of his hair and the humiliation of his blindness and imprisonment, Samson would have been reminded of his Nazirite status.

Normally, a Nazirite would be released from his vow after his head was shaved. In other words, he would only be a Nazirite temporarily. But the angel, way back in chapter 13, had made it very clear to Samson's mother before Samson was born that this child was to be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.

Chapter 13, verse 7. Now, Samson surely knew that. You can be sure that his mother would have dinned that fact into his brain from when he was a toddler onwards.

[35 : 36] Samson, my boy, you're a Nazirite, aren't you? For how long are you a Nazirite? All my life, mommy. That's my boy. Don't you forget it. He would have known it so deeply.

So the Lord left him in verse 20. But he was to return and strengthen him once more. Samson wasn't abandoned any more than you or I are abandoned when we've gone through times of pain and humiliation.

So although Samson lives the life of a moral ruin ending up eyeless in Gaza, secondly, he dies the death of a triumphant savior.

Behind the action and the intrigue of this exciting story, there is also being played out a much higher drama. One of the great themes of the Bible is the supremacy of the true God over all pretend gods.

And the pagan nations each had their own little god, god with a small g. The Canaanites had their baals, the Philistines had Dagon, the Moabites and others had Chemosh and Molech.

[36 : 45] And they believed that each of these so-called gods reigned in their own place geographically. And they thought of the God of Israel as being just the local national deity of the Hebrews.

But the Bible says there is only one God and all these other so-called gods are lifeless. They can't see or hear or touch or smell or speak.

Their only power is the power to make their followers as lifeless and pathetic as they are themselves. It's a challenging creed, isn't it, to hold this creed of the Bible that there is only one true God and that Jesus Christ is the only way to him.

If you and I hold that today without being ashamed of it, our eyebrows will get singed on a regular basis. Now the final section of Judges 16 is making the point forcibly that the God of Israel holds Dagon, the fish god of the Philistines, in derision.

So there is to be a great celebration. A few months have passed since Samson has been captured and blinded. And the lords of the Philistines now plan a national festival of rejoicing to honor their precious and wonderful Dagon.

[38 : 01] The theme of the gathering is going to be, in the words of verse 23, our God has given Samson, our enemy, into our hand. So the date is set.

Crowds of people flock to the temple of Dagon. The ground floor is packed out. The lords of the Philistines are there. Three thousand more have gone up into the roof, those who couldn't get tickets.

And they're looking down from a high position, like when you go to the theater and you have to be up at the very top there. Then verse 25, when their hearts were merry, I think that means when large quantities of red, white, and rosy have been consumed.

Everybody then says, let's now have the main item in the show. Call in Samson. We want Samson. Bring in that brigand. Samson, Samson, Samson. You can hear them shouting.

So he's led in eventually by a young man who holds him by the hand. He looks, pathetic, doesn't he? And then we're told he entertains them, which probably means that he's led around the arena and they're able to jeer at him and throw fruit and rolls at him.

[39 : 08] Eventually, they tire of the fun. And Samson says to the young man who's leading him about, he says, I'm very tired. Let me just feel the pillars on which the house rests.

I do need to lean on them. So the boy takes him to the two central supporting pillars. And in the darkness of his blind eyes, he feels them with his right hand and with his left.

Now, I think we know that Samson was not much of a man of prayer. He had prayed once before at the end of chapter 15 when he thought he was going to die of thirst after killing the thousand Philistines with the donkey's jawbone.

But here now, we have his second and last prayer in verse 28. A prayer to the Lord for one final strengthening.

And the Lord who had left him back in verse 20 returned to help him. He was indeed a Nazarite to the day of his death. Now, just think of him pushing those pillars apart, bowing his head and stretching his arms apart.

[40 : 23] Doesn't that remind you of an even stronger man who died in the same position more than a thousand years later? The moment of Samson's death was the moment of his greatest victory.

And so it was with Jesus. Samson, in the end, died as a triumphant savior. Both he and Jesus were warriors.

They were fighting for the salvation of the people of God by bringing destruction to the enemies of the people of God. The death of Samson blessed Israel and destroyed the Philistines.

And the death of Jesus brought salvation to a multitude without number. But at the same time, it brought destruction to every power in heaven and earth that opposes him.

So let's thank God for Samson. Not for his moral weakness, not for his self-reliance, not for his sense of invincibility.

[41 : 24] But we can thank the Lord that he did deploy his strength against the enemies of the people of God. He did fight for the preservation of God's people. And you and I are called to the same warfare.

And God is more gracious than we can readily understand. God is willing sometimes even to weave our sinful failings into the outworking of his purposes.

It's a remarkable thing, but the fact is that each of Samson's great victories was immediately preceded by an episode of sexual misbehavior.

That's not an example for us to follow by no means, but it's a demonstration of God's grace which is sometimes unfathomable. The verdict of the New Testament on Samson is there in Hebrews chapter 11 where Samson is listed as a man of persevering faith.

He is placed among those who, I quote now from Hebrews 11, those 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.

[42 : 44] Surely that was Samson, made strong out of weakness. He was morally weak, but he was made strong so as to be a savior for Israel. Let's thank God then for the moral perfections and the eternal salvation won for us by a better man and a stronger man than Samson.

Shall we pray together? Amen. Dear Father in heaven, we think of your beloved son, the Lord Jesus, stretching out his arms upon the cross for our sake because of a love for us which we simply cannot fathom.

But we thank you so much for him and for that love and for his willingness to suffer agonies beyond our understanding so that we might be rescued.

And we pray therefore, dear Father, that you will keep us in that love, that you will strengthen us and give us joy as we seek to serve you and to serve each other.

and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.