

You Really Need a King:

Samson: A Victorious Defeat (Judges 16:1-31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 6, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ **The doctrine of grace is always on the line.** By that I don't just mean it's always being attacked, always being challenged, and always at the risk of being lost. Those are all true. But when I say grace is always on the line, **I mean believing in grace requires us to always stay on the line.**

- ❖ Picture a tightrope. Believing in the doctrine of grace requires a careful treading of the line where we're always aware of the dangers in falling towards either side. On one side of the line, if we fall we fall into the error of *legalism*. **Legalism is where you get God on your side by means of your own effort.** If I'm keeping his rules, if I'm doing my duty, then I can procure God's blessing or power in my life. Doing good and being good secures this for me.
 - ▶ On the other side of the line is the error of *license*. **Moral license is where you assume God is always on your side regardless of your effort.** Regardless of how you're living your life. Doing good and being good is good advice but it's not required. This error emboldens you to sin without remorse and to simply do whatever is right in your eyes. Samson is a good example of someone who's fallen off the line into the error of moral license.

- ❖ So a right view of grace requires us to tread that line carefully. **When you're walking the line of grace, you don't assume your efforts make all the difference, but neither do you assume they make no difference at all.** There's a danger on either side of the line.
 - ▶ **Now the reason I raise this is because we get a good illustration of both errors in Samson and his Philistine opponents.** We just said how Samson falls off the line in the direction of moral license. He's been described as someone who does whatever is right in his eyes. He takes God and his God-given gifts for granted. He just assumes God is on his side no matter what he does or doesn't do.

- ❖ On the other hand, you've got the Philistines who have fallen off the line in the direction of legalism. Of course they wouldn't use that term. They would probably call it magic. **They've fallen towards superstition, which is really just an ancient form of legalism.** It's all about saying the right incantations or using the right magical charms to move the hand or sway the will of the gods. Getting God on your side is about what you do or don't do.
 - ▶ What they're all missing is the concept of grace. They're missing the God of grace. **That's actually what the story of Samson and Delilah is ultimately pointing to – God's grace.** Did you think it was just about toxic relationships and how love (or lust) can blind you from the obvious? Sure, there are elements of that in this story, but there's far more.
 - Like last week I want to show you three portraits. We're going to see 1) A man carelessly toying with his gifts and calling, 2) A people superstitiously trying to solve their problems, 3) A God graciously using defeat to defeat the enemy.

A Man Carelessly Toying with His Gifts and Calling

- ❖ We begin with a focus on Samson, whom I'm describing as **a man carelessly toying with his God-given gifts and calling**. That's the impression we've already been given in chapters 14-15, and it continues in the first three verses of chapter 16. Here we see Samson go down to Gaza, a major Philistine city, in order to visit a prostitute. Word gets around that Samson is here and the men of the city plan an ambush at the gate of the city. They're going to wait till the dawn, and when he tries to leave through the city gates, they'll pounce on him.
 - ▶ But instead Samson gets up at midnight, catching them all off guard. Now the gates are shut but that makes no difference. Samson pulls the posts right out of the ground, puts the entire gate on his shoulders, and walks out of the city carrying the gate "*to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.*" That, by the way, is a 40 mile hike!

- ❖ **This brief section just reinforces this ongoing portrait of Samson as a supernaturally gifted man with superhuman strength.** We were told he tore apart a lion with his bare hands (14:6), and with a jawbone of a donkey he struck down a thousand Philistines (15:14). Now he's carrying a city gate 40 miles and uphill? Clearly he's been given a remarkable gift.
 - ▶ **And yet these three verses to start chapter 16 continue to reinforce this portrait of a reprehensible, disgraceful, deplorable man.** He's so gifted and set apart from birth as a Nazirite – under a special vow of consecration and service to the LORD – but Samson is clearly not driven by his calling and duty to the LORD but by his fleshly lusts and bondage to sin.
 - The angel of the LORD told his parents before he was even conceived that he would grow up to begin to save Israel from the Philistines (13:5). He was *set apart* for the task (that's what Nazirite means). He's supposed to deliver his people, to drive the Philistines *away*. **But in tragic irony, it appears Samson is actually drawn towards Philistine life and Philistine women**

- ❖ He's given this mighty calling and supplied with mighty gifts, but he doesn't take them seriously. He toys with them. **He uses his superhuman strength to accomplish what – hauling the gates of Gaza to the city of Hebron? For what purpose?**
 - ▶ At that time, Hebron was the chief city of the tribe of Judah. Remember, back in chapter 15 the men of Judah tried to arrest Samson and hand him to the Philistines. I wouldn't be surprised if he lugged that gate 40 miles uphill and planted it on top of the hill in front of Hebron, so that the men who betrayed him would step out of their city in the morning and see the gates of Gaza. He's rubbing it in their faces. Samson is using his mighty gifts just to send a petty message.

- ❖ And then in v4 we're introduced to a woman named **Delilah**. In v5 the lords of the Philistines come to Delilah and make a proposition. They seek her help to discover the secret of his strength. They want to overpower him, bind him, and humble him (lit. to subdue or torment him). And they'll make it worth her while. They offer her a hefty bribe.

- ❖ So just like Samson's wife from Timnah, back in chapter 14, Delilah dials up the tears and begs Samson to reveal the secret to his great strength. Look at v6, "*So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you."*"
 - ▶ Look at that. **No sugarcoating. No equivocation. She says, "Tell me how you can be bound and subdued (tormented)." And Samson plays along.** I know you're thinking, "Seriously? Unlike some women, Delilah is telling you exactly what she wants to do to you. She wants to bring you down. And you play along? Why?"

- ❖ Some have theorized that it's because he's so infatuated. He's lovesick. He's blinded by love. But I don't think so. **I think Samson is well aware of what she's trying to do. I just think he doesn't care. He's not threatened by her.** After all the things he's accomplished, he feels invisible. What's a little woman like her going to do? How's she going to bind him?
 - ▶ So he plays with her. It's all joke to Samson. The bowstrings are an absurd suggestion. He's messing around. He's just toying with his enemies. After tying him up, Delilah calls for the Philistines hiding in ambush. But Samson snaps the bowstrings like they were thread and escapes capture.

- ❖ **This same scenario plays out two more times with the same results.** Next, Samson suggests using new ropes, which sound more reasonable than bowstrings. And then in v13, he suggests for Delilah to weave the seven locks of his hair together with fabric using a loom and to fastened it all together with a pin. It's getting quite ridiculous. We're to imagine him falling asleep next to a loom as she tries to weave his hair together. Are you serious?
 - ▶ Samson certainly is not. He's not serious. **He's playing around. And he's playing with fire.** In his third suggestion, he draws attention to his hair. He doesn't give it away yet, but he's clearly playing with fire. And he doesn't care.

- ❖ In v15, Delilah amps up the whining. She accuses him of not truly loving her. In v16 it says, "*she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.*" He finally had enough. She wins. He caves and tells her "*all his heart*". He bares his soul. Look at v17, "*A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.*"

- ❖ So Samson clearly knows where his superhuman strength comes from. It's from God. It's because he's been a Nazirite *to God* from birth. One of the stipulations of the Nazirite vow is to not cut your hair while under the vow. But at this point, Samson is willing to reveal this secret because he no longer cares about the vow. He doesn't take his gifts seriously.
 - ▶ **Being a Nazirite is no longer a calling meant for serving God and others. Being a Nazirite is a joke meant for toying with others and playing around.** He says losing his hair will mean losing his strength, but I don't think he really believes that to be true. Even after his hair is cut, he thinks he can simply shake himself free (v20).

- ❖ **He assumes his strength will just be there, even after breaking his vow.** He's violated other aspects of his vow in the past (cf. 14:9; 15:15), and he still kept his strength. So he figured the same would be true this time. **In other words, he took God's grace for granted.** All his life, no one ever stopped him from doing what he wanted. No one could bind him or restrain him. So he figured things would work out the same.
 - ▶ But it was not just his strength that left him at the end of v19. **It was the LORD who left him at the end of v20.** The LORD was the source of his strength, not the hair. So without God, Samson is easily subdued. In v21 his eyes are gouged out, and he's brought to Gaza to work at the prison mill.

- ❖ What tragic irony! Samson lived his life doing whatever was right in his eyes, but now his eyes are gouged out and he's doing the will of others. He lived his life as a free spirit, but now he's shackled in prison.
 - ▶ He lived his life as if it were all a game, making a mockery of his gifts, but now he's being mocked and humiliated. He was given the highest calling to be Israel's mighty deliverer, but now he's just a lowly Philistine mill worker in prison.

- ❖ Last week we noted that his story is a microcosm of Israel's. **Samson is a mirror for Israel to see themselves in his life.** Israel was set apart, gifted, and called. And yet time and time again, they failed to fulfill their calling. They just did whatever was right in their eyes. Like Samson, Israel wasted their gifts and mocked their unique calling.
 - ▶ **Like Samson, they fell off the line of grace towards moral license. They took Yahweh for granted and assumed he'd be on their side no matter how they were living.** They treated God's blessing and power as an inalienable right. They never imagined he might actually take it away and leave them. But like Samson, one day God did take away his glory (cf. Ezek. 10). And like Samson, Israel was eventually seized, humiliated, exiled, and imprisoned. His story is a mirror image of theirs.

- ❖ Church, we need to take this warning seriously as well. **Many of us are on the verge of falling towards moral license or we've already jumped.** We're being just like Samson when we assume that God's gifts, his blessing, his power is simply ours by right. That it should just be there at our disposal whenever we need it – regardless of what our relationship with God is currently like.
 - ▶ Christian, be careful not to take God's grace for granted. Don't use it as a license to sin. **Being saved by grace doesn't give you a license to just do whatever looks right in your eyes.** Doing good and being good, trusting God and obeying God still matter and still make a difference.
 - Sure, looking at Samson we can conclude that God can still use a reprehensible, vow-breaker to accomplish his will. **In the Bible God used lots of people and lots of things to do his will.** He used a greedy, backstabbing prophet like Balam and the man's donkey. The Bible says God can raise up worshippers out of rocks – the stones will cry out (Lk. 19:40).

- ❖ So ask yourself: **Do you want to be used by God like a rock or a donkey? Or do you want to willingly serve God, joyfully joining him in accomplishing his kingdom purposes?** God is going to accomplish his will. There's no question about that. The only question is if you're going to be a willing participant.

A People Superstitiously Trying to Solve Their Problems

- ❖ So Samson is portrayed as a man who carelessly toys with his God-given gifts and calling. Next, we see the Philistines portrayed as a superstitious people trying to solve their problems by appealing to magic (or in modern terms, legalism).
 - ▶ **These Philistines were convinced that the source of Samson's great strength was something magical.** What's his secret? He must be doing something to keep himself so strong. **If they can figure out the riddle, they can break the spell that was making him so strong.**
 - This, by the way, would suggest that Samson didn't look like a giant, super-buff, bodybuilder. If that were true, then there would be no secret to his strength. So he must've looked like an ordinary man of ordinary strength.
- ❖ That's why the Philistines thought magic must be behind this. That's why they readily believed something as silly as fresh bowstrings or a loom would do the trick. Maybe these items would work like a charm (literally) and magically cancel out his super strength.
 - ▶ **That's how magic works. You have to learn the secrets of how to apply the right incantations or the right charms or amulets.** Say these magic words. Mix this potion. Whatever it is – you have to do something to make it work. **Samson must be doing something to keep himself so strong.**
- ❖ So when they hear that the secret is his hair, it makes perfect sense. That's why he's so strong. He has magical hair like Rapunzel. Cut off his hair and all the magic is gone. He goes back to being just an ordinary guy.
 - ▶ **But their mistake is thinking the hair is what makes him so strong, and sadly many readers draw the same conclusion.** We think it's all about the hair. And why not since v22 makes it sound like that. "*But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.*"
 - But don't be mistaken like the Philistines. There's nothing magical about the hair. **His growing hair is just a sign – signaling that God's not through with him.** That his superhuman strength may yet return, if God so wills. It's not magic. It's God's choice.
- ❖ Now you might be wondering why the Philistines let it grow back. If they were that superstitious, why didn't they give him a clean shave every week? **I think they let it grow back because they don't know the God of grace.** They can't comprehend a God who would still use a broken failure who broke his vow. They assume God must be through with Samson. They're thinking no way God is using him again. He really screwed up.

- ❖ That's how ancient magicians and modern legalists think. That's how they relate to God. And let's be careful that we don't fall into the same line of thinking. We can be guilty of making similar assumptions about God. **We assume we have to do something to get God's blessing and power in our lives and to keep it.** We treat prayer like a magical incantation that moves the hand of God to make things happen. If you follow these steps, if you keep these rules, if you do good and be good – then you'll have the Almighty God on your side.
 - ▶ **But if you're unfaithful, if you break your vows to God, if you do wrong and are wrong – then God might be done with you.** There's definitely no way he's going to use you again to do anything significant for him and his kingdom. That's what we start to think when we fall off the line towards legalism. **We assume we have to do something to keep ourselves in God's good grace.**

- ❖ Do you see the contrast between Samson and the Philistines? **They saw his strength as something magical, something he's doing to keep himself strong.** And they're trying to do something themselves to cancel it out. **But Samson, on the other hand, saw his strength as an inalienable right.** Something he'll always have regardless of what he does or doesn't do.

- ❖ What they both don't understand is grace. **They don't understand that God is free to work in and through our lives even when we fail him.** Even when we're not trusting and obeying, when we're not doing good and being good. That God's grace can work in spite of us flies in the face of legalism.
 - ▶ And at the same time, grace confronts the error of moral license. **If we ignore him and only seek to serve ourselves, then there's no reasonable expectation to assume God will still use us.** Grace means God doesn't owe us anything. He's not obligated. If he gives us strength, if he blesses us with power, it's his prerogative.

A God Graciously Using Defeat to Defeat the Enemy

- ❖ This is what the God of grace does. He challenges both the one who thinks God is on your side no matter what you do AND the one who thinks having God on your side all matters based on what you do.
 - ▶ In our third and final section, we confronted by this God – a God who graciously uses defeat to defeat the enemy. A God who defies human wisdom, who reverses human expectations, who is victorious through defeat. And in so doing, he magnifies the sovereign freedom of his grace.

- ❖ Think about how he does this. **We see the LORD demonstrate his grace in the way he mercifully returns to Samson one more time to use him to accomplish one more victory.** It starts in v23. The Philistines throw a feast in honor of Dagon their patron deity. The leading men and women of Philistia want Samson to entertain them. He's no longer the feared ravager of their country. He's the laughing stock. He's the evening entertainment.

- ▶ So he's led out by the hand, and he asks to be propped up next to the pillars on which the entire building rested. And in v28, we finally hear the cry that was missing earlier in this cycle of the book. The people of Israel should've been crying out to God since the beginning of chapter 13.
- ❖ Here in v28, Samson lets out a last cry for help. For the first time, he addresses God by his covenantal name, Yahweh, and asks to be remembered and strengthened one last time. **Now I'm not suggesting that Samson is some godly martyr laying down his life for his faith.** He's no saint. He's still self-centered with his motives. He just wants revenge for his eyes.
 - ▶ **But at least, in this prayer, he finally acknowledges his weakness.** Perhaps for the first time in his life, he doesn't presume he has the strength. He doesn't presume upon God to be at his side, to do his bidding, regardless of how he's living.
- ❖ **It appears Samson is finally learning that God's gift of strength is a gift of grace.** You have to ask for it with faith. And that's what he does. And the LORD listens. Samson is given that strength, and so we read in v30, *"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."*
- ❖ Samson sacrifices himself and ends up killing more people in his death than in his life. **This is a victorious defeat.** Think about it. God could've been done with Samson. He should've left him to rot in a Philistine prison. **But by his grace, he gave Samson one more chance to have one more victory.** God used Samson's defeat as the means to defeat Israel's enemy.
 - ▶ That's a work of grace. **Which I believe points us forward to another sacrifice, to another victorious death, to another defeat that defeated our enemy.** I'm talking about the sacrifice and death of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ **There are clear contrasts (big differences) between Samson and Christ, which is why I wouldn't call Samson a Christ-figure.** He's not a type of Christ. For instance, Samson died because of his consistent disobedience; while Christ died because of his consistent obedience. Samson sacrifices himself and kills his enemies along with himself; while Christ sacrifices himself and delivers his enemies instead of himself. And Samson's death only began the salvation of God's people; while Christ's death fully accomplished that salvation.
- ❖ **But having said that, there are enough similarities to warrant a comparison.** Think about it. Both Samson and Jesus are betrayed by someone close. Both are betrayed into the hands of Gentiles. Both end up delivering God's people by himself all alone. And as we've mentioned, in defeat, both end up defeating their enemy.
 - ▶ **The sovereign free grace of God was gloriously magnified on the cross.** God owed us nothing. We owed him everything. God could've been done with us. He should've left us to rot in our sins. **But God, being rich in mercy and full of grace, he sent his Son to die for our sins.** To bear the judgment of God in our place.

- ❖ This is the gospel! By Jesus' death, we have life. **By his defeat, he defeats the enemies of sin, death, and the devil himself.** And by faith alone – not by works, not by doing good and being good – but by faith alone in Christ alone, you and I can share in that victorious defeat. That's the gospel of grace.
- ❖ But having drawn the comparisons, I want to end by pointing out one last crucial difference between Samson and Christ. **In death, Samson's story was over. His rule was over.** We're going to move on from him as we enter chapter 17 next week.
 - ▶ **But in death, Christ's story goes on and on with resurrection hope, and his loving rule continues forever.** If you don't share in this hope, if you want to give your life over to Jesus and be under his rule, then pray with me this prayer of faith.
- ❖ *Father, we confess that we keep falling off the line into legalism or license. We need your grace. We also need you to humble us like you did Samson. Weaken us. That we might learn the secret of true strength found in you, through your Son and through the victory he won for us when he accepted defeat in our place. Spirit of the LORD rush upon us and apply that victory in our lives. Forgive us O Lord and deliver us by your grace. Change us, transform us, by that same grace. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*