

Judges 16:21-30
The Day Samson Came Back to Life
Samson Sermon Series #4
March 13, 2016

Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands."

When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain."

While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.

When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform.

Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. (NIV 1984)

You've heard a lot about me in the past month or so. Now it's time to hear from me.

Where you left me after last Sunday's sermon was right where I'd always wanted to be. Well, sort of, anyway.

You see, I'd never really needed anyone. I didn't need my parents. Or at least I sure didn't need their advice. After I'd gone into Philistine territory and seen an attractive woman and commanded my parents to get her for my wife, they got all parental on me and suggested that it might not be a great idea for me to marry a heathen. I didn't need to be told who I should or shouldn't marry, so I went ahead and headed back to the town of Timnah to let her know that I was going to give her the honor of being the first Mrs. Samson.

On the way there a lion came roaring toward me. I didn't need anyone then, either. I didn't need a machine gun, I didn't need a shotgun, and I didn't even need a bow and arrow, the ancient version of those guns. I had my own gun show with these biceps! And I used them to tear apart the lion with my bare hands!

I didn't really need God and the restrictions he'd attempted to place on me as a Nazirite--stupid restrictions like "Don't cut your hair, Samson. Don't touch dead bodies, Samson." When some bees set up a hive in that lion's carcass, later on I wanted some honey so I reached in and took some, no matter what God had said.

I'd tangled with the Philistines on a number of occasions, and I never needed anyone to help me with that, either. Hey, I'd killed 30 Philistines just to help pay off a bet! I didn't need anyone's help to do that. And to kill off 1000 Philistines, all I needed was the jawbone of a donkey!

That came right after something that was really fun. The Philistines were so angry at what I'd been doing to them that they went and scared the Israelites into tying me up and handing me over to them. I let them tie me up and walk me toward the Philistines. I waited until the Philistines started shouting in celebration and then BAM, BAM--another gun show, this time breaking the ropes that had bound me.

At that point I knew I needed no one and that no one could touch me. My behavior became so reckless that I actually went into the Philistine city of Gaza to sleep with a prostitute. Surrounded by Philistines, surrounded by city walls, did I call in a helicopter? Did I call in reinforcements? Did I ask God to perform some sort of miracle and make the walls fall down like he had in Jericho?

I didn't need anything of that. Like some hairy Kool-Aid man I busted right through the city gates and carried them to the top of a hill. Imagine me throwing the gates to the ground and then throwing my head back in mighty laughter.

Finally, my need to live on the edge and to create dangerous situations just so I could have the thrill of escaping them led me to the story you heard last Sunday, in which Delilah and a friend gave me a haircut that left me on my own, all alone. (Even God had left me, taking my strength from me!) On my own is right where I wanted to be. Well, sort of, anyway.

I never would have guessed that I'd be all alone in a Philistine prison, blindly grinding at a mill. And when I say "blindly", I mean it literally--the Philistines had gouged out my eyes! I'd never been more miserable in all my life.

But being alone gave me a lot of time to be alone with my thoughts. And as I thought, I began to see. I began to see things as they were, and I began to see myself as I was.

Oh, I resisted at first. I resisted with the same ferocious energy that I'd once directed at Philistines. I resisted by telling myself that I could even get out of this situation. That didn't last long, though. The exhaustion that I felt from grinding the grain told me that something had changed in me, and that I was no longer the mighty, superhuman warrior that I had been. And even escape was pretty clearly impossible. I couldn't even see my way to the exit sign.

Then I resisted by telling myself that the situation I'd been placed into wasn't really fair. If God had just let me be, things would still be like they were.

But eventually I came to realize that if God had just let me be, things would still be like they were. I would still be an arrogant brute who thought he didn't need anyone, a hypocrite who used the name of God on occasion while being a child of Satan. If God had just let me be, I'd still be headed toward Hell--a place where my tedious grinding at a millstone would seem like vacation compared to the endless agonies and sufferings that awaited me as punishment for my sins.

And that change that took place in me answers the question, "If God had indeed left me (as the last verse of last week's sermon text said), why didn't he just finish me off as soon as the Philistines captured me?" Why did God allow/cause the Philistines to act like villains in a bad movie, keeping me alive with the intent of tormenting me instead of just finishing me off?

Was it because God still had work for me to do? I suppose he did. But by this time I had come to realize that God did not need me in order to accomplish that work.

Was it because the Philistines were worshiping their false god, Dagon, and saying how he had delivered me into their hands--and therefore God wanted to have a showdown with the Philistine gods and make his name great among the nations, wanted to show his supremacy? Almost certainly. (But again, he could have done that without me.)

But I am certain that the main reason that he did it is because God wanted to get me back, bring me back to faith. He left me all alone to make me realize how much I needed him.

He led me to realize that what I really needed him for was salvation. He led me to realize that in my weakness I needed a true strongman. I needed someone who could die for my sins and then turn around and burst the iron fetters of death while at the same time tying up Satan.

You'd probably expect me to say that I wouldn't wish what happened to me on anyone. And when I think about the pain, the suffering, the humiliation (humiliation that burned most intensely when they brought me out to "perform" for them at their pagan feast--as though I was some trained circus bear)--no, I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

But I also wouldn't wish it away for myself. I praise God that he gave me that sort of a wakeup call. No, it turns out that being all alone wasn't where I had wanted to be--not all alone in a Philistine prison, anyway.

But although it took me a while to realize it, I know that I was exactly where I needed to be.

Has God humbled you very painfully? Praise God! Yes, praise God!

In his love, he has allowed you to suffer the earthly consequences of your sins, to realize the severity of those sins, the guilt that they bring, and the eternal punishment that they deserve. He uses these things to make you despair of your ability to go it alone. He uses it to make you realize your need for his Son as your Savior.

I know I said before that I needed a strongman. Jesus was that strongman. But he didn't look like one. Like me, he was mocked. But in his case, it was undeserved. Like me, he was made sport of and forced to perform. Even though he would not dignify their actions by responding to it, he was forced to be a passively performing part of it, as soldiers spit on him and beat him. And when he was finally put on public display on a cross, like me, he reached out his arms and died. I gave myself up in order to destroy the Philistines, but Jesus gave himself up in order that he might destroy death itself so that you and I could have life.

And life is what I came back to on the day of that Philistine festival. It may seem strange to say that I came back to life that day, given which day of my life it was. It was indeed the last day of my life.

And yet my words and actions on that day show that I was now alive in a way that I had not been for quite some time. I prayed to God, "*O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.*" Then I reached for the two pillars on which the temple stood.

Before I go on, I know that my use of the word "revenge" might make it seem as though nothing had changed in me. But consider the humility in my request that God "remember" me. Consider my use of the phrase "O Sovereign Lord." And consider also what happened next: *Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it.*

Note that I didn't ask God to help me escape, but that I accepted my death in order to carry out God's judgment on the Philistines. I knew now that any skill and strength I had was from God--and therefore I viewed those things no longer as toys to be played with but as tools with which to glorify God.

Note also that God granted my request. Finally, guess who is listed in the "heroes of faith" chapter of the Bible (Hebrews 11). I am. I'm as shocked by it as you are--probably even more so.

But the fact is that I am listed as someone who acted “*through faith*” and “*received what was promised*” (*Hebrews 11:33*).

Faith in what? No longer in myself, but in the sovereign Lord who had promised to remember not only me but also his promise to send a Savior from sin. My prayer to God was not based on my own worthiness but on being a forgiven child of God—forgiven through Jesus even in spite of all my selfishness, all of my sins.

Yes, my first days in that Philistine prison were the most miserable days of my life. That last day was one of the most peaceful of my life--because it was the truly most alive that I'd ever been.

May the God who has made you alive in Christ lead you to daily imitate my mightiest act of strength. No, not the collapse of the Philistine temple, but, rather, what immediately preceded it--a humble submission to God's will and a desire to serve and glorify him.

Then you too will be a hero of faith. Amen.