

St Andrew Bebington  
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## **Judges chapter 16**

### **Samson: the depths and the heights**

The joke is often told of a visitor to Ireland getting hopelessly lost on the roads while trying to drive to Dublin. He sees a man walking along the road and stops to ask the way, only to receive the reply, "Well, if I were driving to Dublin I wouldn't start from here."

And if I were God, looking for a saviour to rescue my people from oppression, I wouldn't start with Samson. I wouldn't choose him.

But God did. Amazingly, God chose Samson. And Samson is even listed, along with Gideon and Barak, in the list of heroes of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. He is included, I suggest, because for all his failures and disappointments he did achieve God's purpose for him to conquer kingdoms, become mighty in war and put foreign armies to flight – as Hebrews puts it.

So from Samson's life we find both warnings and encouragements; in particular, I want us to take note of the warning not to presume upon God, but the encouragement still to trust him. Don't presume, don't take God for granted, but do trust him utterly.

Let's see how that comes out of these four lessons from the life of Samson. What do we see?

#### **The stupidity of God's people**

The key verse here is verse 20:

But he did not know that the Lord had left him.

If you are at all familiar with the story of Samson – it is a long one, running from chapter 13 through to 16 – when you get to this encounter with Delilah (his hairstyler, as Flanders and Swann so memorably dubbed her) you want to bash his brains out; that is, if you think he's got any brains.

He fell victim to a wheedling woman many years ago. She nagged and nagged him until he gave in and told her his secret – a different one at that time – and the consequences were very unpleasant. So look back to chapter 14 and verse 16:

Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer." "I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him.

Here is a virtual repeat of the story. Verse 15:

Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death. So he told her everything.

And she cut his hair and that was that.

He hadn't learned. He hadn't learned from his weaknesses. Just as king Saul didn't, as one disobedience grew into another until he, too, discovered that God had left him.

God's people – we – can be so stupid in failing to heed early warnings and failing to learn from our weaknesses.

Samson had a particular weakness in the sexual arena, and how many good Christian lives and good Christian marriages and fruitful Christian ministries have been ruined by failing to recognise weakness in this area and failing to deal with it. I'm sure that some of you here will have had painful first-hand experience of this and you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Your weakness may be a different area. May be you tend to blurt out a quick lie – only a white one, of course – when you're caught out unawares. May be you spend money you haven't got – just one more time, that is – and the habit grows. May be you have a violent temper. May be you let others get the upper hand over you, even though you always regret it later. May be you are in the 'just one more drink' danger zone.

Whatever our particular weaknesses are, we need to learn them from our lest, like Samson, they grow and prove disastrous.

And those of us who have children need to help them to learn from their weaknesses. Years ago we would talk through the dangers of lying with ours – don't all children lie at some point? – because, we pointed out, if you lie as a child and don't learn to deal with it you will become a liar as an adult.

Know your weakness and learn from it.

A second way in which Samson is stupid – and so are all God's people if we're not careful – is that he failed to take God seriously. Let's pick up the story from verse 19:

Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

"I'll go out as before and shake myself free." It always works, never lets me down. Good old God, he always turns up. No problem.

But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

This is the attitude that says, "Of course God will forgive me. That's his job." This is the attitude that says too quickly and too easily, "God is always there for me." He is – there is a profound and wonderful truth there – but it is a fine line that we cross when we think we're expressing trust in God when in fact we are presuming upon his kindness.

Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience [asks Paul, in Romans], not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Many is the Christian who has had a cheap view of God's love and a flippant presumption of his forgiveness only to discover that his faith has, in fact, ebbed away to nothing.

Let Samson's flippancy with God be a warning to us. How stupid God's people can be. Don't presume upon your creator. Take his character seriously.

So – if God's people fail so miserably, will God's enemies in fact win?

Well, we know they won't, but one of the reasons they won't win is that God's enemies are even more stupid than his friends.

### **The stupidity of God's enemies**

And the key verse this time is verse 22:

But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

If you read the three chapters covering Samson's adult life you will discover a pattern that repeats many times. The Philistines corner Samson, apparently gain the upper hand, only to find that he beats them into dismal failure. Again and again it is apparent Philistine victory followed by humiliating defeat by Samson. Even in this one chapter it happens three times – first the seven fresh threads, then the new ropes, then weaving him into Delilah's loom – none of them works – until, at last, the Philistines have a real and total victory. They shave his hair, Samson loses his strength, he is blinded, set to the most humiliating and lowest form of work in the prison, and then brought out like a medieval dancing bear to entertain the crowds. The pattern is broken; theirs is the final victory.

But they are even more stupid than he is. He may have lost his eyes but the really blind ones are the Philistines. They've failed to spot something. In one of those wonderful Old Testament one-liners, which don't often make their appearance in the text but are so satisfying when they do, the writer records, verse 22: But the hair on his head began to grow again. Samson's hair is growing! Watch this space.

And if you were an Israelite, hearing the story for the first time ever, wouldn't your spine be tingling at this point? Samson's hair is growing! God hasn't finished with him after all. Something big is on the way. How is it all going to end?

How stupid it is to think you can for ever get the upper hand over God's people.

The Philistines are stupid, too, because they misunderstand God far more seriously than Samson did. Listen to their absurdity in verse 23:

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."

You can here the choruses, 'To Dagon be the glory, great things he has done' and so on.

Listen. No one ever delivers God's people into his enemies' hands. God alone does that. Dagon didn't exist and doesn't exist and could do nothing. The only reason that Samson was in their hands

was that God had removed his protecting cover. This wasn't Dagon's doing. It was God's. How stupid to think otherwise.

And a third way in which the Philistines were stupid was to gather vast numbers of their people together, including their entire leadership, under one roof with Samson. He wasn't the only one not to learn from his mistakes. They think he will entertain them – but the entertainment he provides was not quite what they entertained, if you get me. He brings the house down that night, but it wasn't terribly funny for the Philistines.

Though it probably is meant to be funny for the readers – but with a grim warning. Don't dare to think that you can get the upper hand with God. And God's people: don't ever think that his enemies can seriously pull one on God.

In 1941 Hitler went into a rage with Yugoslavia when a new government there refused to become his allies. He ordered Goering's bombers to flatten Belgrade as a punishment, which they did. This meant that the surprise invasion of Russia began four or five weeks later than originally planned. Towards the end of that year, when the German armies had to turn back when they were almost within spitting distance of the gates of Moscow, Hitler's general's said that if they had had just three or four weeks more they could have done it. It is possible that Hitler's act of unnecessary spite cost him the conquest of Russia which cost him the entire war.

Tyrants overreach themselves and fall. The Philistines did. And the devil did, on Good Friday. When Jesus breathed his last did the devil, I wonder, punch the air with a cry of victory? Did he crow and exult in what was, in fact, his utter defeat and the seal of his downfall?

When the devil looks victorious in the world or in the church or in your life, remember the stupidity of God's enemies.

There's a lesson from Samson and a lesson from the Philistines. Here are two lessons from God.

### **The patience of God with his people**

My key verse for this one is verse 28. Samson is brought out, as we've heard, to entertain the crowds and – at last! – we hear him actually praying:

O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more.

Please remember me. Just once more.

Why should he? Why should God bother with Samson ever again?

The answer is, of course, that he shouldn't. There is no reason – except one. And that reason is nothing to do with Samson but everything to do with God. The only reason is God's grace, God's sheer kindness and undeserved patience.

God's grace and patience, in fact, is written all over this Samson story. For example:

So far, with Ehud, with Barak and Deborah, with Gideon, we've read how the Israelites were oppressed, then they cried out to the Lord, and he heard them and sent a saviour.

If you read chapter 13 you will see that the pattern is broken. The Israelites are oppressed, again. But there's no crying out to God, almost as if they just accept defeat and can't be bothered. And yet God sets about visiting a barren woman, promising a miraculous birth, and bringing Samson in to save his people.

There's a lovely encouragement for us there. I wonder how many of us here found God after heartache and long searching. A small minority, I suspect. For most of us, I suspect, we were brought up as believers or came to faith with no great searching or pleading on our part. If God only met those who sought him and cried out to him how many of us would be here tonight?

On the contrary:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved; 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

God is so patient with his people. When he left Samson that should surely have been the end for him. There was no reason, on Samson's part, for God to return. But he did. Even after all Samson's miserable failure, God had a purpose for him.

In 1555 Thomas Cranmer, former Archbishop of Canterbury, renounced his protestant Biblical faith and returned to the fold of the Roman Catholic Church. It was a dismal chapter in his own life and a dismal blow for the cause of the gospel in England. Had Queen Mary then released him or simply left him in prison that would probably have been how his story ended. Instead, a bit like the Philistines, she wanted a greater revenge, and the following year he was brought out for public humiliation in the church of St Mary's Oxford followed by public burning. To the horror and deafening cries of the packed congregation Cranmer declared that he had reneged only out of fear and did indeed hold to what he had long preached. And when he was burned he famously plunged his right hand – the one which had signed the deed – into the flames, declaring repeatedly, "This unworthy hand; this unworthy hand." And it was that death, perhaps more than anything, that ensured that England would now never go back to Catholicism.

God is patient with his stupid failing people. So when we next wonder that God chose such a one as Samson let's look in the mirror and say, "What a wonder that God chose me."

A last lesson from Samson:

### **The persistence of God in his purposes**

Verse 30 – this is how the story ends:

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. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

And that is important, because that is what God had planned from before his birth. Look back to chapter 13 verse 5:

"No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

That was Samson's whole purpose: not to finish, but to begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines.

Then look on to chapter 14 verse 4. Here is Samson wanting to marry a Philistine – typically – and we read, in another of those 'watch this space' comments:

His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines.

And so it goes on. God has a purpose and in spite of all Samson's dismal failures he persists in it.

I think that the film Die Hard is on the box yet again this week. In that film our hero Bruce Willis, resplendent in white vest, is unstoppable in his efforts to save a whole building full of people captive to terrorists. At one point one of the baddies asks, in sheer disbelief, "Does this guy ever give up?" Shoot him, bomb him, burn him, do what you can, you just can't stop him.

So here: God just can't be stopped. His enemies are powerful, his people are useless, there's no one on his side proving any help at all . . . and he just keeps going. He has one purpose, his mind is set in one direction, he has his eye on one great goal, and nothing will deflect him. God is persistent to the end.

I suggested a couple of weeks ago that a good theme verse for the book of Judges would be Jonah chapter 2 verse 9: Salvation belongs to the Lord. Here we see that in action. Against the best efforts of his enemies to defeat him and the best efforts of his people to deflect him, God wins. He saves his people.

And in the fullness of time there will be another miraculous birth, of which this one is only a shadow. God's angel will visit another woman and promise another saviour. But the Lord Jesus Christ will have all of Samson's grace and strength and none of his weaknesses and he will not merely begin the salvation of God's people but will complete it. He too will defeat evil and save his people by his death, but his dying words will not be merely "Let me get revenge for my two eyes," but, "It is finished." In Jesus we see the full loving persistent purposes of God in all their glory.

So Samson's life is a serious warning to us not to underestimate God, not to presume upon him, not to go down that road Steve warned about recently of making God weightless and a soft touch.

And Samson's life is a great encouragement for us because it puts before our eyes the wonderful patience of God with his rotten people and the wonderful persistence of God in achieving everything he has planned.

Don't presume upon him but do trust him completely.