

**STUDIES IN JUDGES No. 18**  
**Judges 16:1-31**  
**November 28, 2004**

**Review**

We have considered the account of Samson's birth and his divine call in chapter 13, taking note of the emphasis that falls there on the divine initiative. It is the Lord who acts to deliver his people. None of them seems much to care and certainly no one is crying out to him. In chapters 14 and 15 we found God again at work, as the narrator makes a point of saying in 14:4. He must drive Samson to the work of dealing with the Philistines because Samson doesn't seem too interested in his life's calling. He would rather marry a Philistine woman than lead Israel in battle against the Philistines. We pointed out how God used even Samson's sinful foolishness, his temper, his self-centeredness and sensuality to accomplish his purpose in the life of his people Israel. We cannot escape the rule of God even in our sins. God brings his will to pass no matter whether men serve or defy him. Every man is either God's willing servant or his dupe: there is only the single alternative. One is either the one or the other.

**Text Comment**

- v.3 This short narrative raises as many questions as it answers. How did Samson know that a plot to kill him was afoot? How did he get past the men who laid in wait for him? Why did Samson carry the gates to the top of the hill? [Probably a nearby hill that faced and gave a prospect toward Hebron. Keil and Delitzsch, 418-419] But we see the same Samson here we saw in chapters 14 and 15 – a spiritual midget with unbelievable strength [Block, 451] – and we learn that he was now public enemy number 1 in Philistia. These few verses also introduce Gaza which will be the scene of the climax of Samson's life and work.
- v.4 Samson's problem from the beginning has been his attraction to women. He is a sensual man whose lusts and desires are not tempered by the higher commitments of his character. As the church father Ambrose put it:

“Samson, when strong and brave, strangled a lion; but he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes, but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned up the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame enkindled by a single woman.”  
[*Apol.* ii, *David*, c. iii in Keil and Delitzsch, 417-418]

Now the Valley of Sorek does not, by itself, settle the question whether Delilah was a Philistine or an Israelite. The Scripture doesn't say though most scholars feel the geographical notice is intended to convey the fact that she was a Philistine. Obviously we already know that Samson had a penchant for Philistine women. We've seen him with two so far. Delilah would make a third.

- v.5 Perhaps more important than her nationality is this intelligence that she was persuaded to do what the Philistine lords wanted her to do, not by any appeal to her loyalty to her own people but by the promise of money. Perhaps that is an argument in favor of her being an Israelite; perhaps not. In any case, she betrayed her husband for money.

Hedy Lamarr played Delilah in Cecil B. DeMille's 1949 epic and in that movie Delilah was not only a Philistine woman but patriot. She is also a patriot in Saint-Saëns' opera based on this history. In both of these presentations Delilah is a tragic figure, torn between two loyalties – her love for Samson on the one hand and her patriotism on the other. She is a conflicted figure, torn by doubt and inner conflict. Like Samson, Delilah too repents at the end in DeMille's movie. There is nothing in the text, however, to suggest that we should view Delilah in this way. That is the way the modern world wishes to portray her, as someone confronted with a regrettable but unavoidable dilemma (something like a woman needing an abortion in today's thinking) whose betrayal is morally justifiable if it follows enough internal moral agonizing. [Patrick Henry Reardon, "Calculating Delilah," *Touchstone* (June 2004) 52] But, the fact is, she did it for the money, pure and simple and there is nothing to suggest that she loved Samson. They are never said to have married and, frankly, it is somewhat hard for us to believe, by this point, that Samson would have won the heart of any woman. She did the math in her head – there were five Philistine rulers, each promised to give eleven hundred shekels of silver, that's 5,500 shekels, which was a huge amount of money – took the money and ran.

It is worth pointing out that if Delilah was an Israelite, from the tribe of Dan or Judah, perhaps, for the Valley of Sorek was partially in the territory of Dan, partially in Judah, and partially in Philistia, Samson was betrayed by an insider and Delilah becomes a Judas figure, who also betrayed with a kiss.

In any case the Philistine rulers know from experience that they can't manhandle Samson. They need insider knowledge, some way of counteracting his great strength. Given the fact that another woman had deceived him into disclosing a secret, we naturally wonder if Samson will have learned his lesson.

- v.7 Once again the adjective "fresh," as before in 15:15, indicating another violation of Samson's Nazirite vow, as "fresh" sinews would have been regarded as still parts of the corpse that a Nazirite was not to touch.
- v.9 Perhaps it makes the most sense to suppose that Samson never saw the Philistines who were there to take advantage of his weakness. They were hidden and stayed hidden when it was obvious that the secret of his strength had not been discovered.
- v.13 It's hard to know precisely what these instructions entailed, but Delilah apparently understood and did what she was told.
- v.16 Her appeal is the same as that of the Timnite woman in 14:16 and she nags him as that woman had.

- v.17 Samson tells the truth and the whole truth, even his having been set apart to God, and Delilah knows that finally she possesses the secret of his strength. The reader is reminded by this that Samson has known all along where his strength came from. He knew all about his consecration to God and chose to ignore it time and again.

A passage like this reminds us that the real defeat comes at the point of giving into the temptation, not when the Philistines arrive and capture him. In the same way, the real victory of the cross was won the night before, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Lord refused to capitulate to the Devil's temptations and gave himself over to the death for which he had come into the world.

- v.20 Why did God leave Samson for this, the cutting of his hair, when he had not for Samson's other violations of his Nazirite vow? The answer seems to be that God wanted Samson to be taken to the temple of Dagon and, being there, to be able to engineer its destruction. [Webb, 170]

At this point we see Samson as an unmitigated fool. Unable to learn from past events – his deception by his Timnite wife – he can't even learn from Delilah's deceitful behavior – if he knew that the Philistines were there – or from the danger of a Philistine attack at any moment – if he had not realized that the Philistines were present and ready for him on the previous occasions. Delilah had cried, "The Philistines are upon you" three times already.

In any case, here is our familiar Samson, sure that he can do whatever he wants as he has always been able to do before. He has never taken his vow to God seriously and still does not. He had told Delilah that if his hair was shaved his strength would leave him, but somehow he didn't really think it would. His other violations of his vow hadn't robbed him of his strength. This is so much like sinners, like us all, who assume that because we have not been found out when we sinned previously we would not be found out if we sinned again.

- v.21 The description is of abject humiliation for this man. Blinded, bound, he grinds flour in the prison mill.
- v.22 "One of those pregnant sentences that is the mark of genius" in a narrator. [Crenshaw in Webb, 168]
- v.23 Though the Philistines migrated to Palestine from the Aegean, they quickly embraced the prevailing religious ideas of the area. Dagon was the father of Baal in the Canaanite pantheon. The Philistines credit their success over Samson to their deity. Dagon had proved himself superior to Yahweh in their view.
- v.24 Again, the capture of Samson resulted in the heartfelt worship of Dagon.
- v.28 Samson calls *to the Lord*. In v. 17 he had used the more general "God." And he pleads that the Lord would remember him, which is to say, act on his behalf, come to help him.

When all is lost, in a foreign, pagan temple, Samson knows to whom he must call, who alone can help him. He still says nothing about the larger issues of his life and of Israel's spiritual situation. He still seems to be thinking largely of himself and of his own vindication more than that of the Lord's name. He wants revenge. Yet there is a simple dignity in Samson's acceptance of his own fate and desire to take the enemy with him when he goes. [Webb, 174]

- v.30 The final outcome of Samson's act demonstrates that Samson really had *begun* to deliver Israel from the Philistines as had been prophesied before his birth – the killing of the national leadership would have been a great blow – and also the tragic character of Samson's life. He was more useful to Israel dead than alive. Though God used him, the great promise of his life was squandered terribly.

Now two points bear mentioning again in regard to this last episode in the life of Samson. Both are points that have been made before and several times before. We have already noted that Judges is a repetitive book. The Bible is a repetitive book. It hammers away at fundamental truth and at the key lessons of life. There are not so many of them to learn but they are all hard for sinners to take to heart and to incorporate into their living.

The first is the divine sovereignty that is displayed in Samson's final destruction of the Philistines. God had said, before Samson was born, that Samson would begin to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. And, sure enough, no thanks to Israel or to Samson really, that is just what he did. God's control of seemingly fortuitous events, even sinful events, led inexorably to this blow struck against the Philistine state. In this way Judges underlines the folly of Israel's attraction to the gods of Canaan. What this history demonstrates, of course, is that Dagon is nothing compared to Yahweh. When the Philistines gleefully worship their idol for his supposed triumph over Samson, they are but moments removed from their death and destruction. Indeed, God orchestrates the whole affair *precisely so that all the Philistines would die in Dagon's temple*. Did you notice that in v. 26: they were all *in the temple*. This will happen later, you remember, when the ark of the covenant falls into Philistine hands, early in the book of Samuel, and Dagon takes another tumble.

The theological message of this history and its recital in Judges is that total loyalty to the Lord, to Yahweh, to the God of the covenant, is essential *precisely because he is the only true God, the only one who exercises real control in the world*. If Israel would only remember this, remember which God ruled over all, she would not be tempted to give her allegiance to the false gods, the pathetic non-entities of Canaanite idolatry. [Cf. Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 52]

Of course this history has been repeated on a grand scale in human history and is being repeated in our own time. No one worships the gods of the ancient world anymore, however impressive their worship may have seemed to their supplicants and even to foolish Israel in those days. No one worships Marduk, or Dagon, or Baal. No one worships Aton or the other Egyptian gods for which such impressive temples were built in ancient days. But hundreds of millions of people today still worship Yahweh and confess him Lord and God. Marxism has come and gone; it appears likely that Darwinism is on its last legs and may, even in our lifetime collapse like Dagon's temple. Both of these philosophies are really simply modern versions of the old nature

worship of Canaan. They will be forgotten as quickly and the church of Christ, for all its failures and foibles, will go on and on and hundreds of millions and billions more will be added to the roll of Yahweh's worshippers as the years, the decades, the centuries pass.

It is an old story, often told. It is time you and I and all Christians got the lesson and got it so well we would never forget, never act as if Dagon were real, never think or act as if Yahweh, and he alone, will not do what pleases *him* in heaven and on earth. There is a very simple calculation here; no less simple than Delilah's counting of her shekels. There is a winning side and a losing side. We know already whose is the winning side. It should be a principle of our daily living to remember that and act accordingly – always in loyalty to the Lord God, the living God, the sovereign God.

Young people, when you see a person, a sports hero, or actor or singer, some celebrity, worshipping the pagan gods of our culture for his or her success, or when you see someone seeking hard after that worldly reward in the expectation that in such things he or she will find fulfillment, you keep in your mind the image of Dagon's temple coming crashing down. Dagon will never win against Yahweh. His loss, his destruction, and the destruction of all who trust in him, is a foregone conclusion, a certainty; there is no possibility of any other outcome. You keep in your mind's eye the sight of Dagon's temple as it begins to fall – the look of horror on the faces of those people as they realize they are about to die, to be crushed in the ruin of that temple.

The second lesson is that of treasures in jars of clay. We elaborated this in regard to Jephthah some weeks ago and we have the lesson still more starkly taught in the personal history of Samson. The Bible teaches us to regard him as a believing man, a man of faith. We wish there were more in the narrative itself to encourage us in this belief. Even at his best, Samson leaves a very great deal to be desired. How differently we would think of him if, in his prayer in v. 28 he had said, "O Lord, I have sinned against you; all my life I have sinned against you. Forgive me, I beg you. O merciful Father, show mercy to your unworthy servant. All my life I have neglected the gift that you gave me. I have used my gift in sinfulness and worldly pride and not to accomplish your holy will. I am blind and a prisoner because I deserve to be. I have no appeal whatsoever but to your mercy and love. Let me die serving you, serving Israel. At least this once, let me be the man I was appointed to be and the servant you called me to be. Let my last act be my most faithful act."

Why, if Samson had prayed such a prayer – perhaps he did but we have no evidence that he did and the prayer we are told he prayed leaves much to be desired – but if Samson had prayed such a prayer, we would not hesitate to place him among the heroes of the Bible, however late his heroism of faith. But we must, as God obviously did, take Samson's little for a lot. Therein lies God's mercy as much as in anything: that he constantly takes our so little as if it were so much.

J. Gresham Machen says somewhere that we will never know how little a person must believe in order to be saved. When John Newton says that he will be surprised to see certain people in heaven he is saying that he expects to see people there that he thought would not be there, whose lives did not betray to him the evidences of true faith and the new birth. And the Bible forces us to accept that the righteous may, far too much of the time, look like the unrighteous, just as the

unrighteous can often be taken for the righteous, which fact Jesus turns into one of the most solemn warnings in the Bible at the end of the sermon on the mount.

It is true that we will know true Christians by their fruits. It is also true that we can mistake what we take to be an absence of fruit for an absence of faith in some cases. There should be no encouragement found here for living a half-hearted Christian life as if Samson proves that you can consort with prostitutes and neglect God's call and still go to heaven when you die. If Samson proves anything, it is that real Christians can do very bad things, live very foolish lives, and suffer terribly for it. God will not be mocked, even in the life of one of his sons or daughters. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.

But Samson is also an immense encouragement to every Christian who ever feels – as every Christian sometimes feels – that he or she couldn't possibly be saved when there is as much sin still left, as much foolishness, as much ingratitude to God as there is. We are, at the last, saved by Christ's righteousness and not our own and it is, perhaps, entirely predictable that God should prove that fact to us in flesh and blood, as he certainly did in Samson's case. It is not your faith that saves you, but Christ. Faith is only your connection to him and if it exists at all, you are connected and you have his righteousness. Samson is the proof of Paul's doctrine of justification: not by works, lest any man should boast. And when you despair of yourself and your heart and your life, when you think your sins are too bad to permit you to be a Christian, take Samson to heart. But then, having taken the comfort and the encouragement from the fact that this sinful man was a man of faith and a man on his way to heaven – as the Bible says he was – also take pains to learn his hard lesson so that you don't have to be sunk in public humiliation and private despair in order to make good on your loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Now take note of the way in which the Samson story ends: with a funeral and a burial. We are left thinking about Samson as he died and his loved ones as they buried him.

It is no blessing to live such a life as to leave serious Christians wondering if you are a Christian at all, or to have lived such a life as to evoke surprise in the godly when they see you in heaven. It is no blessing to you and none to anyone else. One of the great blessings that David Allison has imparted to his family and loved ones is that no one, not a soul, has any doubt whatsoever where David has gone. He wore his faith in Christ on his sleeve and it filled his mouth. He confessed Christ and he lived in Christ and so everyone who cared for him can confidently know that he died in Christ. I know so many of you who carry the burden of hoping that your now departed father or mother, your brother or sister, your wife or husband, your son or daughter was really a Christian. All you can do is hope, perhaps against hope, because there was so little to support a sturdy confidence in his or her salvation.

Live so as to remove all doubt. It is one of the greatest and the last gifts you can give to those who love you. Fulfill your calling. Live as one must live who knows that Christ rules over all and that his will is done in heaven and on earth. Live on Christ's side and serve him and his cause. What a story Samson might have written had he lived for the Lord his God as he should have and so easily might have! I hope not a one of you will live so that your Christian loved ones are left hoping that perhaps you were a Christian after all.

Like Samson, you are going to die. Your loved ones will sooner than you think have to arrange for your burial as Samson's loved ones did for his. Live so that your death does not have to make up for your life. As anyone who has seen death in its modern form will tell you – the dying asleep, drugged for the pain – you cannot count on Samson's clear head at the end. You cannot count on time and wit to set the record straight at the very end of your life, to make your commitments clear, to settle all doubts about your loyalty to Christ. Let your dying be simply the end of faithful living. Then it will be a good death and will send your loved ones confidently, even cheerfully to your funeral.