

“O Lord God, Please Remember Me”

The one hundred and fourth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 15:1-16:31; Hebrews 11:32-40

In the days of the judges, the nation of Israel had become so thoroughly Canaanized that even though the people living in the southern part of Israel were forced to endure forty years of oppression at the hands of the dreaded Philistines, we read not a word of the Israelites crying out to YHWH for deliverance. In fact, the Israelites were living side by side with the Philistines, one of Israel’s traditional enemies and fiercest foes, who are described throughout the Old Testament as the “uncircumcised,” a reference to their godlessness. Because YHWH loves his people, he refuses to allow the Israelites to assimilated by the pagan Philistines. Even though the people of Israel are so comfortable living in the midst of the Philistines that they do not cry out to be delivered, YHWH intervenes by sending the angel of the Lord to an unnamed women from the tribe of Dan. The angel informs her that even though she is barren, she will give birth to a son (Samson), who will live as a Nazirite—he will not drink wine, nor strong drink, nor cut his hair. God will use this child to disrupt the cozy relationship between Israel and the Philistines. Samson is a man who is given God’s Spirit, but who struggles with his temper and narcissistic personality, the lusts of the flesh, and who becomes one of the most tragic figures in all of redemptive history.

As we near the end of our series on the Book of Judges, we come the account of Samson, the sixth and final Judge recounted in this book. When we left off last time in Judges 14, Samson had been born to Manoah and his unnamed wife, he had killed a lion with his bare hands, and despite the objection of his parents, had taken a Philistine wife. Although the angel commanded Samson live as a Nazirite, he broke his vow by touching the corpse of a dead animal, and by participating in week-long drunken bash at his new bride’s home. Although Samson was feared by the Philistines because of his great strength—so much so that they posted thirty security guards to keep things from getting out of hand during the wedding—Samson’s response was to mock the guards with a riddle about the lion he had killed, making a bet that they would not be able to come up with the answer to his riddle.

But the Philistines in her home town of Timnah, pressured Samson’s new wife to get her husband to reveal to her the meaning of the riddle. When Samson refuses to tell her what the riddle means, his wife spends the honeymoon week crying, pleading with her husband to tell her his secret. When Samson finally gives in to her at the end of the week, his wife immediately tells the Philistines, who now mock Samson with the answer to the riddle. Samson has lost his bet. In a rage, Samson kills thirty men from a neighboring town, and then gives the thirty security guards in Timnah their countrymen’s clothing and weapons as a payoff for coming up with the correct answer to the riddle. Still in a rage, Samson angrily returns to his father’s house and abandons his wife, leaving her with his best man. Such is the man (Samson) whom God uses to rescue his people (Israel).

We pick up where we left off last time with verse one of chapter 15, when Samson returns to his wife in Timnah, only to be rebuffed causing him to take revenge.

According to the author of Judges, “*After some days, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat. And he said, ‘I will go in to my wife in the chamber.’*” An unspecified period of time elapsed and Samson has cooled off—temporarily. Samson now seeks to regain the wife he abandoned to his best man. The young goat was not a present to his wife (to win back her affections),

but was an offering of some sort to her family—a way to make amends after giving their daughter to his best man. But the family was not satisfied, and so we read that “*her father would not allow him to go in.*” Refusing permission for Samson to enter his bride’s chamber (room), her father does offer Samson their younger daughter. “*And her father said, ‘I really thought that you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please take her instead.’*” Samson is not amused. Deeply offended by the fact he was not allowed to sleep with his wife and was offered her sister instead, Samson’s anger is rekindled and he seeks revenge.

“*And Samson said to them, ‘This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm.’ So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchards.*” Such an act would have brought disaster upon a family. Not only would a fire like this completely wipe out the family’s ability to feed and provide for themselves, burning the grain and the trees would have prevented the family from ever recouping their loss. Apparently, the fire spread to neighboring farms, and the men-folk from the entire community were up in arms. Someone would pay.

As we learn in verse 6, “*then the Philistines said, ‘Who has done this?’ And they said, ‘Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.’*” Although Samson’s father-in-law was seeking to regain his family’s honor, instead the neighbors turn on him, believing that his rash actions set in motion this whole series of events which led to the fire. “*The Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire,*” the very thing the bodyguards had threatened to do earlier if Samson’s wife did not learn the secret to the riddle. Although it was Samson who is ultimately responsible for this, it his father-in-law who was wiped out.

Samson now vows to take revenge. “*And Samson said to them, ‘If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit.’ And he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow, and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.*” It is hard to tell what exactly the author’s quip means, but the consequences are crystal clear. Samson dealt the Philistines a great blow, and afterwards was forced to hide at a place named Etam. More important to the story, YHWH has used Samson to disrupt the peaceful relationship the Israelites had established with the Philistines. Since Israel would not seek to be rid of the Philistines, YHWH now ensures that the Philistines seek revenge upon the Israelites. Samson’s rage is God’s means of turning the Israelites and the Philistines against each other.

So, it should come as no surprise when we learn that the Philistines are angry with the members of the tribe of Judah for harboring Samson. They decide to take revenge upon Samson and those harboring him. As we read in verses 9-11, “*then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. And the men of Judah said, ‘Why have you come up against us?’ They said, ‘We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us.’*” The Philistines want to arrest Samson, but instead of protecting him, the men of Judah give in to the Philistine demands. Samson’s own countrymen would rather turn him over to their oppressors, than drive the Philistines from the land as YHWH had commanded. And so “*3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, ‘Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?’ And he said to them, ‘As they did to me, so have I done to them.’*” Having no stomach for a fight with the Philistines, the Israelites rebuke Samson, and refuse to accept his explanation.

According to verse 12, “*And [the Israelites] said to [Samson], ‘We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.’*” Samson is worried—rightly so—that his own people will

kill him, if it will reduce the threat of war with the Philistines. “*And Samson said to them, ‘Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves.’*” Again, his own countrymen refuse to protect him. “*They said to him, ‘No; we will only bind you and give you into their hands. We will surely not kill you.’*” And so Samson gave in and submitted to them. We read that “*they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.*” Samson’s strength will now be put to the test.

The main theme of the story surfaces again as the author of Judges makes it clear that not only is YHWH orchestrating the end of the peaceful co-existence between the Israelites and the Philistines, but that YHWH will use Samson (foibles and all) to do it. According to verses 14-15, “*when [Samson] came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men.*” God gave Samson the strength needed to break his bonds, thereby enabling him to use a the most unlikely weapon (a jawbone) to kill a thousand Philistines. There can be no doubt that God brought this to pass, and yet after the battle, Samson, ever the narcissist, sings the following song: “*With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men.*” Not one word of YHWH’s Spirit, or YHWH’s help. In fact, Samson seems completely unaware of YHWH’s hand. The account ends in verse 17, with the declaration, “*As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi,*” literally, Jawbone hill—apparently, a reference to the mound of Philistine bodies.

But after boasting about his amazing feat, Samson was completely worn out and in need of water. Finally, Samson calls out to YHWH, although even in this cry we see that the braggart Samson sees himself as a New Moses of sorts, and the Savior of Israel.¹ “*And [Samson] was very thirsty, and he called upon the Lord and said, ‘You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?’*” While we are glad to see Samson finally acknowledge YHWH, we are taken aback by the fact that Samson dares speak of himself as YHWH’s servant (as Moses did), and as a savior through whom YHWH will rescue Israel. And yet, despite the hubris, YHWH will indeed use this man to accomplish his purposes. Samson will be spared. “*And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day. And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.*” God’s miraculous provision of water is surprising in light of Samson’s narcissism. Nevertheless, after God’s Spirit came upon him, Samson serves as a deliverer in Israel for some twenty years—a remarkable thing in its own right.

But just when you think Samson has finally submitted to YHWH and will live up to his promise, we learn that Samson’s struggle with the sins of the flesh intensifies. Nevertheless, YHWH will still use this very flawed man to accomplish his sovereign purposes for Israel.

Although we’ve been led to expect a change in Samson, the first three verses of chapter 16 tell us otherwise. “*Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to 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*

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 446.

carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.” Samson’s reputation among the Philistines was such that when he is spotted in a brothel in Gaza, nearly forty miles from Zorah (his home), Samson was recognized, and the building was surrounded in the hopes of catching him. But Samson was aware of the plot, and humiliated the Philistine authorities by tearing the city gate loose from its posts. Samson then carried the whole thing to a hill in the direction of Hebron, where the inhabitants of Gaza could see it. The Philistines would be continually reminded of Samson’s ability to indulge his lusts, while escaping any Philistine attempt to capture him. This riles the Philistines all the more. They want this guy dead!

Samson’s lust, however, will give the Philistines another opportunity, as the author now brings us to the story of Samson and Delilah—the main part of the Samson narrative. The scene is set in verse 4. *“After this [the incident in Gaza] he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.”* While Delilah’s background is not given, the fact that she lived in the Valley of Sorek, which was near the Mediterranean coast, tells us that this woman was not an Israelite, but most likely a Philistine. This marks the third time Samson has fallen for a Philistine woman. Although YHWH has used him to deliver his people for some twenty-years, this time Samson’s pursuit of sinful pleasure will lead to his death.

Afraid to take Samson on directly, the Philistines come up with a devious plan to discover the source of his strength so that they can rob him of it. According to verse 5, *“the lords of the Philistines came up to [Delilah] 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. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver.’”* More interested in the money—a very considerable sum—than in Samson’s love and affection, Delilah eagerly complies. Putting the plot into action, we read in verse 6 that *“Delilah said to Samson, ‘Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you.’”* Samson may have been strong, but he seems like a rather dim-bulb. You would think that Samson would have learned from his previous close-calls, but he doesn’t. Samson is in love, again.

On its face, Samson’s answer indicates a playful spirit, and it looks as though he’s making another quip. *“Samson said to her, ‘If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.’”* But the fact of the matter is that bowstrings were made from animal gut, an indication of Samson’s continuing disregard for his Nazirite vow. Delilah reported Samson’s admission to the Philistine lords, and the plan was put in action. *“Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings 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 bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.”* Samson obviously had given her an answer he knew to be untrue. And the fact that she actually bound him, and tried to turn him over his enemies, should have alerted Samson to Delilah’s true loyalties—money and her Philistine people. But Samson was dumb enough, or smitten enough, or narcissistic enough, to continue to engage her in this on-going charade.

Despite the setback, the Philistines are not going to give up and go away. In verses 10-12, they try again. *“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.’ 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.”*

Undeterred with their second failure, we read in verses 13-14 that the Philistines try a third time to trap Samson. *“Then Delilah said to Samson, ‘Until now you have 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.” Strike three.

Delilah will try one more time. This time she will succeed. As we learn in verses 15-17, overcome by her whiles and his own weakness, Samson finally reveals to her the secret of his strength. *“And she said to him, ‘How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have 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. And he told her all his heart, and said to her, ‘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.’”* Finally, Samson gives in, and reveals the secret—he has taken a Nazirite vow and is devoted to YHWH. With the admission made to Delilah that he has never cut his hair, Samson is doomed.

As we read in verses 18-22, *“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. But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.”* With his eyes gouged out, Samson is defenseless. He was taken to Gaza, where he was publicly humiliated before the Philistine people as payback for his earlier exploits. Samson was tied (like a mule) to a grind stone, and then made to walk endlessly in circles in the town mill. Even worse, the Spirit of the Lord, the real source of Samson’s strength, had departed. Samson’s sin, and his complete disregard to his Nazirite vow and calling to deliver Israel, have brought him to the point of ruin. Samson is now a carnival amusement to the Philistines. The one who openly mocked the Philistines is now a spectacle in the town mill—doing the work of a draft animal.

But, as you know, Samson dies a hero in the end. We should not be surprised that a man with the hubris of Samson will find a way to redeem himself in the end. As we learn in verses 23 and following, *“now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god [i.e the corn 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.”*

Samson seems utterly helpless. He’s a captive, he’s been blinded, and now totally humiliated, apparently requiring the help of a young boy to feel his way to the pillar, so that he might get his bearings. But Samson isn’t finished. According to verse 28, *“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.” Finally, Samson acknowledges the source of his strength, and makes an impassioned plea to YHWH. Samson cries out, *“O Lord God, please remember me.”* With that, *“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.”*

In a strange but heroic act of both faith and a desire for revenge, we learn in verse 30 that *“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.”* And so Samson died just as he lived—a complete and total enigma. His remarkable saga ends with the following declaration, *“Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.”*

What are we to learn from the story of Samson?

Although we have cited the passage from Hebrews 11:32 several times throughout this series—*“for time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets”*—it is important to start with the fact that the New Testament looks back on Samson as a man who believed God’s promise to save sinners. What is more, the account of Samson includes a birth narrative, placing him in the company of illustrious figures like Moses and Samuel. From birth, Samson is set apart for YHWH’s sovereign purposes—hence the Nazirite vow. But as we have seen, Samson struggles with the lust of the flesh, his temper, and his narcissistic personality. Sadly, he shows little interest in keeping the Nazirite vow. Despite all of this, God uses Samson to disrupt the all-too peaceful relationship between Israel and the Philistines. By the time Samson dies—when he kills hundreds of Philistine leaders and their families in the process—Israel and the Philistines will no longer co-exist, side by side. When we come to the time of the monarchy (Saul and David), the Philistines and Israel are in a constant state of war. God has accomplished his purpose. The Israelites will not be assimilated by the Philistines.

In terms of redemptive-historical application, Samson serves as an antihero of sorts. Like the rest of his countrymen at that time, Samson did what was right in his own eyes. He ignores his vows, takes Philistine women, explodes in anger, while mocking his enemies. Samson has no children, squanders his gifts, and never does realize his potential as leader (judge) of Israel. Yet, while Samson likes Philistine women, he never calls out to their gods. And then when he is about to die in the desert, he calls upon YHWH to spare his life. When Samson is about to die in Gaza, once again he calls upon YHWH for strength. Samson knows and confesses that YHWH alone can deliver him. In spite of himself, God will still use this man to accomplish his purpose. Like Gideon and Jephthah before him, Samson is living proof that God must provide Israel with a king, and his people with a Savior. If God is going to save Israel from their enemies, he must raise up a king to lead them. If he is going to save his people from their sins, it will take the eternal son of God, come to earth in human flesh, to do it.

As for application for us today, there is much to learn from the life of Samson. No question, his allegiance is to YHWH. No question, his sin—especially his dalliances with Philistine women—was his undoing. Like Israel during the time of the Judges, when God’s people possessed the land but were constantly being pulled away from YHWH to pagan gods and pagan practices, we too live in a situation of relative peace and safety. Yet, like Israel dwelling in Canaan in the midst of pagans, we too live in a pagan land. Along with our children, we are constantly being pulled away from Jesus Christ toward every sort of pagan temptation. Like Samson, we all have our favorite sins and weaknesses.

It is important to notice that God didn't reject Samson and then cast him away because he sinned, or because he struggled with the lusts of the flesh. In the life of Samson, we witness how Samson's sin and weakness ruined his life and brought about terrible humiliation at hands of his enemies. This tells us that *if* we are Christ's, then God will surely save us from our sins—he has promised this to all who trust in Christ, rather than in their own righteousness. But if we are Christ's and continue to live like pagans, God will intervene. He will often allow the consequences of our sins to come crashing down upon us as the means to draw us to repentance. We may even find ourselves in the same place Samson was—humiliated, and hated by those who have tried to lead us away from Christ, and who have turned upon us the very second they figure out that Christ will never let us escape from his grace. That is a very bad place for a Christian to be—having to cry out “Lord, please remember me,” because we've gotten ourselves into a mess. And even then, God is so gracious, he will hear our prayer and come to our aid.

God may even chose to do to us what he did to Israel. If we ignore him and seek to go our own way, he will come and disrupt our relationships with those around us who deny the gospel and the Savior and who may be pulling us away from Christ. God does this because he loves us. He will make us absolutely miserable in our sin. The lesson then “is why even go there . . .” thinking we can do what is right in our own eyes without any reference to God or his word.

In all of this, Samson is an illustration to us of how God uses us, his sinful people, for his purposes. In spite of ourselves, God always remembers us, because he has chosen us in Christ and sent his blessed son, the true Savior of the human race to redeem us from our sins. Since he always remembers us, let us remember him, not only with our words, but also with our lives.