

# Samson

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[0:00] So we're still in our great stories series and in our great stories series we are looking at the children's storybook stories. We're having an adult's look at the theology in those stories and Samson is obviously one of those stories.

There's no children's storybook Bible out there that doesn't have Samson in it. And that's because whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, pretty much everybody in our society knows about Samson for his strength.

And that's why he's so well known. He was very strong. And for that reason he's very popular.

People often times will talk about Samson in the language of a hero.

He's like the original Superman, if you will. He's the true king of the jungle. If a lion comes around they better watch out.

He dominates beehives during his lifetime. When it comes time to choose a weapon he doesn't pick a sword. He goes for a donkey's jaw bone. He catches foxes and he ties them together by the tail.

[1:04] Who knew that was possible? But he did it. He rips city gates out of the ground with his biceps and he pushes over an enormous temple like the prop on the New Zealand rugby team.

Apparently they're good. I don't really know. The point is that he must have done CrossFit in his day. And even more than all that his hair is like kryptonite.

So he's the original superhero. But in literary terms he's actually the definition of the anti-hero.

A hero is a conventional savior, a conventional hero. One who follows the rules, one who is morally upright, who saves people through following the rules, through doing the right thing.

Anti-heroes are also saviors. They often in the end of the story end up doing the right thing, doing good, saving people, but they always do it badly.

[2:06] They're morally corrupt. They're amoral in a way. They save people but they do it through the wrong ways. And Samson is the definition of the anti-hero.

Examples of anti-heroes that you'll know. Iron Man, Wolverine, James Bond, Scarlett O'Hara, Severus Snape, Captain Jack Sparrow.

Hopefully there was something in there for everybody. Sherlock Holmes, that should do it. Samson, he was a womanizer.

He was motivated by revenge throughout the whole story. He was very selfish and he's the definition of an anti-hero. And Hebrews 11, the roll call of faith, verse 32 says Samson is an example to us of true faith.

And you say, how? Why? How could he be listed in Hebrews 11? If you read from chapter 13 to 16 and read the whole story, he is a mess of a human being.

[3:14] And so I just want to look at two things to say how could Samson possibly show up in Hebrews 11. I think you first got to look at the bigger picture, which is that the story of Samson is a story that's actually not about Samson at all, but about a cosmic war.

And then secondly, in the more immediate picture, as an example, Samson's strength is weakness. Okay, so first, the big picture. The story about Samson is actually about a cosmic war.

Samson is the final judge in the book of Judges. And the book of Judges is cyclical and we get that in the opening of the story in chapter 13.

It says that the people of Israel sin against God. God gives them over to a foreign power because they want to worship the gods of some nation. And then he sends a judge to save them.

And what that means is that a judge is not a judiciary. The word judge in the Hebrew and the Old Testament does not refer to a judiciary. It doesn't refer to an elected official who stands behind the bench and it administrates according to law.

[ 4 : 25 ] A judge, Judges says, it does yashar, does salvation. A judge is a savior. A judge is a deliverer, not a judiciary.

And that's what it says about Samson. It uses the word twice from Judges 13 to 16 that he's a judge. Ralph Davis, one of the great commentators on the book of Judges, says, calls the story of Samson, Samson the savior.

Samson the judge, the yashar, the one who saves. And so there's two episodes in the Samson story that tell us how Samson was a savior, how he was a judge.

And the first is in chapter 15, the chapter before the one we read. Now Samson's background, he was born of a barren woman. The angel of the Lord prophesied about the boy, the boy that would begin to save Israel.

And his mother vowed to God that he would be a Nazarite. In other words, that he would be especially set apart for the service of God his whole life. But as soon as he grows up, he's completely immature and morally bankrupt from a young age.

[ 5 : 36 ] And he goes and he tries to marry a Philistine woman, which is against the law of Israel. And when he goes to marry her, he throws a big party, literally the text says in chapter 14 that he threw a drinking party.

And during the party, just for sport, he makes a bet or he gives a riddle to the Philistine men trying to get them to guess something. And if they can guess it, he'll give them a bunch of money basically.

And if they don't get it, he gets the money. And his fiancée cheats and tells the Philistines the answer to the riddle because they threaten to burn her alive.

And for that reason, Samson loses the bet and he goes and he murders 30 of the Philistine men because he lost the bet.

And in retaliation, the father of his wife won't let Samson see her. So in retaliation, Samson goes and burns the Philistines crops with foxes that he sets up.

[ 6 : 35 ] He lights the foxes on fire basically. In retaliation, the Philistines come up and burn his wife. They murder her. In retaliation, Samson goes and slaughters the Philistines that attacks his wife.

In retaliation, the Philistines then forget about Samson and they go attack Judah. And that's where we are in chapter 15 when Samson's heroic story begins.

The people of Judah come to the Philistines and say, why are you attacking us? We didn't do anything to you. And they say, we're attacking you because of Samson, because of what Samson did on your behalf.

And so the men of Judah decide that they're going to send 3,000 people to go up and capture Samson and deliver him over to the Philistines. So that the Philistines can kill him because they won't rid of Samson.

They don't want him to cause trouble between them and the Philistines. And they say to Samson, don't you know that the Philistines are the rulers over us? In other words, the people of Israel, they don't want to be saved.

[ 7 : 43 ] So God has sent Samson as their judge, as their yeshah, as their savior. And they say to him, we don't want your salvation. And so we're going to give you over into the hands of a foreign power so that they can kill you so that we can stay exactly where we are.

Now historians and commentators, they talk about how dangerous of a time this was for the Israelites, how risky of a time this was. Because previously in the book of Judges, they had gone under the oppression of Midian, of the Canaanites, of the Mesopotamians.

And in every single instance, the people wanted out. The people wanted out of slavery. They wanted out from under the yoke of the Midianites or the Mesopotamians or whoever it was.

Because those guys were wicked oppressors. They were beating them down.

They were treating them like true slaves. The people in Israel, commentators will say, did not want out from under the yoke of Philistia. They actually liked it because the Philistines were well known as basically nice slave masters.

They didn't treat the Israelites bad. And so the Israelites didn't want to be saved. They did not want a savior in this instance. And historians note that this was one of the most dangerous moments in history for the Israelite people.

[ 9 : 01 ] Because they were about to be annihilated by assimilation. They were intermarrying. They were losing their distinctive character as Israel. And they were going to be annihilated by assimilation.

And what that would mean is that we lose the covenant people of God. We lose the hope of the Messiah. We lose the hope of the prophecies. And so it was an incredibly dangerous moment in the life of Israel.

And so what happens is they come to Samson and say, we're giving you over to the foreign power. Because we don't want a savior. We don't want you.

And we're going to let them kill you so that we don't have to be free of this yoke. And Samson says, yes, and he surrenders himself. He surrenders himself.

Now ultimately at the end of this passage, he breaks free of captivity and slays a thousand of his enemy with the jawbone of a donkey.

[ 10 : 00 ] And in chapter 15 verse 18, it says that he had delivered a great salvation for Israel that day. Now commentators will note that Samson looks like Christ in this episode.

Jesus was named Yeshua when he came to earth. And the judges were called Yeshua's, which means salvation, saviors.

And Jesus was named by the same name. Yeshua, God saves. And that means that Jesus is the ultimate and final judge. He's the fulfillment of all the judges in the book of Judges. And he's the fulfillment of Samson.

The Son of Man came into the world in John chapter one. And the world did not want him. His own people, he says, did not want him. And he stood over on the hill looking over the city of Jerusalem and saying, oh, how I longed for Jerusalem to come to me, to come under my wing so that I could be their Yeshua, their saviors, so that I could care for them.

And they didn't want him. And so what they did is they said, we won't kill you, but we'll send you into the hand of a foreign power to do it. Just like the people of Israel took Samson and said, we're not going to kill you, but we don't want to be saved.

[ 11 : 21 ] And so we're going to send you into the hand of a foreign power and we're going to let them kill you. And in both Jesus' case and Samson's case, self-surrender was ironically the only way that the people could actually be saved.

The fact that the Savior came and said, sure, take me. I'll give my life. You think that you're killing me for good, but actually your rebellion is the very means by which you will be saved.

Acts chapter two broadens it. When Peter's talking to the people in Acts chapter two, he turns to the crowd and he uses the plural and he says, all of you crucified Jesus.

All of you talking to the people there and his reader, every single one of you and me, you crucified Jesus. You gave him up. You were the Israelite that didn't want him, that didn't want a Savior when he came into the world.

And Ralph Davis, he puts it this way, if God's help had only been given in this life to you when you asked for it, only if you really wanted it, would an orphan you would still be.

[ 12 : 39 ] The point is that through the picture of Samson, God doesn't save despite our rebellion. He actually saves through the means of our rebellion.

And so in Acts chapter two, when Peter says you crucified him, that's the condemnation of the worst sin that's ever been committed. You crucified him and at the very same time, it's the secret of salvation. You crucified him.

That's the first way he looks like Jesus. There's a second way though and it's in chapter 16. And the passage we read, judges 16, Samson falls in love with a woman named Delilah, a Philistine woman.

And the text says that she entices him and she entices him because the Philistines are trying to get her to get Samson's secret, his secret of his mighty strength.

And so she says, please, oh please, oh please, oh please, oh Samson. You know how people talk to each other when they're madly in love. Please tell me what's your secret. And four times he tells her something. First he says, bring fresh cords and bind me, bring new ropes, braid my hair and put it up in a pen. And if you do those things, I will lose my power. I will lose my strength.

[ 13 : 59 ] And every single time she does what he told her and the Philistines come attack him and he murders them all. And so it doesn't work. Now Samson knows exactly what Delilah is up to, right?

After the third time of you telling your secret and the Philistines coming to try to kill you, you would probably figure it out that your girlfriend is telling everybody your secrets. He ends up telling her exactly what his secret is. If you shave my head, I will lose my strength. And she does it in the middle of the night and the Philistines come for him, they take him, it says that they gouge out his eyes and they make him a mill grinder in prison. In other words, a person who grinds grain at the mill, doing it blindly. But then the lords of the Philistines call him in sometime later, we don't know how long, and they put him in the middle of the temple of Dagon. And it says in the text that they use him for entertainment. In other words, they mock him. Now Dagon is the great god of the Philistines. And Dagon is the god of grain. [15:15] He's the god of producing wheat and grain, things to make bread. And so it's no coincidence that when they capture Samson and they gouge out his eyes, they make him the grinder at the mill.

They make him serve Dagon by grinding the grain that Dagon provides, you see. And then it says when they bring him in the temple of Dagon, they use him for spoil or entertainment. And it says that they declare that Dagon is the great god who has defeated Samson, the Yashar, the savior of Israel. He's Yahweh, he's God's man. And Dagon, our great god, has defeated him. And so when they bring Samson into the middle of the temple of Dagon, they're using him in worship ritual. That's what's happening here. They're using Samson as a spectacle for their worship practices for Dagon. They put him to work at the mill grinding the grain that Dagon provided, and now they're making fun of him in the temple. And so what the Book of Judges does is it ups the ante. [16:19] This story at this point is no longer about Samson. It's no longer about the Philistines, but the text is clear. It's about Yahweh versus Dagon. It's about what God is actually the ruler of the world.

And so it sets things in the terms of a cosmic war, a cosmic battle, a cosmic fight, that God is going up against Dagon, that Dagon has defeated the god of Israel. And Samson is the mediator they use as the spectacle to worship Dagon in this instance. And so the big picture is that this story is about a cosmic war. As was the rest of the conquest in the Old Testament, the conquest is a really difficult thing, and Derek and I have both preached on passages about it in the past few weeks. And it's been tough for us to talk about. The conquest is difficult for modern hearers. The conquest is about a cosmic battle between the gods that are associated with each nation and the god of Israel is the true god. And the people in the Old Testament did not think Dagon was just some wood or stone. They thought he was real. He's a spirit. He's a demon. He's a son of the serpent. He's a son of Satan. And he's taken hold of the Philistines.

[17:29] And this chapter is about Yahweh versus Dagon, the false god, the one who's rebelled against the true god. And the only way that Dagon can be defeated is in the final moment when Samson says, Lord, I will kill myself. I will give myself up. I will self-surrender. I will bring the temple down on my own head so that the enemies of Yahweh can be defeated.

And commentators note that this looks a lot like Jesus. This looks like a lot like Jesus. In other words, the final ultimate point of the story of Samson is that Samson is meant to teach us that salvation is ultimately about victory over the powers of darkness. Victory over the powers of darkness. What is salvation? What is salvation? The purpose of the cross is the forgiveness of sins. Absolutely. We went to the cross bearing our sin, giving us his righteousness, being our substitute. The purpose of the cross is the forgiveness of sins. But the forgiveness of sins is not the end of the story. And if you don't go beyond that, if you don't know what else the cross is about, then you don't get the whole picture of salvation. And what Samson is here to teach us is that the whole picture of salvation is that Jesus Christ came to bring an ultimate kingdom into this world, the kingdom of God. And the only way to establish the kingdom of God in this world is by casting down the powers, principalities, the ruler of this world, the elemental spirits.

[19:12] And that's the way Paul puts it. In other words, what Paul is saying as the ultimate picture of salvation is that Jesus came into the world, died on the cross in order to have victory over the

powers of darkness.

And Paul calls the elemental spirits of the world. So Christ on the cross is our substitute. And Christ, as theologians have often put it, is Christ's victor. Christ the victor, the triumphant one. Over the devil, over the serpent, over the powers of darkness. And Samson is picturing in chapter 16, Yahweh over Dagon.

That the mediator of God, Samson, the Savior, will self surrender. He will take his own life in order to defeat the powers of darkness, defeat Dagon, Yahweh's enemy, spiritual darkness.

Samson goes toe to toe with Dagon, losing his life in order to have victory. And Jesus goes toe to toe with the cross with the devil, giving himself into the powers of darkness, being consumed by darkness itself in order to have victory over that darkness.

And that's ultimately what forgiveness of sins brings us to, is victory over the powers of darkness. And so it's critical to understand the full picture of salvation offered in the New Testament and the story of Samson.

[ 20 : 27 ] That's what it's about. Just think about the Old Testament. Genesis 3.15, the first prophecy of Jesus Christ the Son, the boy would come for what purpose?

To crush the head of the serpent. To crush the head of the serpent. The original prophecy, salvation is put in the terms of victory over the serpent, over the powers of darkness.

The New Testament, Jesus says this, now is the time for the world to be judged. Now the ruler of this world, the devil, will be thrown out. I will be lifted up from the earth.

And when this happens, I will bring all my people to me. Colossians 1.13, this is how Paul puts it. He, Jesus, has delivered us from the domain of darkness and he's brought us into the kingdom of God.

How? Chapter 2 verse 15, Christ has disarmed the spiritual rulers. He's disarmed the spiritual authorities by putting them to shame on the cross.

[ 21 : 30 ] Hebrews 2, finalized verse 14 to 15, since human beings, the children, share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same thing that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death.

That is the devil and deliver all those who through the fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. From Genesis all the way to the book of Hebrews, the picture of salvation, the great picture of salvation is the mediator, the savior, the judge who would come to destroy the powers of darkness. And that means the devil, the demonic spirits that rule over the world and ultimately death, the last enemy to be defeated, death, as Paul puts it.

This is why, just to close this point, Paul puts a choice for Christians after describing salvation in these terms. He says, this is why life matters so much.

This is why the what you choose, how you choose to live in this life, matters so much. He basically asked, will you serve the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of God? And that's the ethical choice that Paul presents to his readers in the New Testament.

[ 22 : 45 ] And this is what he says. Listen to what he says in Ephesians 6. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

How? Putting on righteousness, peace, forgiveness, prayer and truth, he says. Or in Romans 12, don't be overcome by the evil one, but be overcome with good.

Evil cannot hold you forever. Repay no evil for evil. Live in peace. If your enemy is thirsty, give him drink. If he's hungry, feed him. By doing so, you fight the powers of darkness, says Paul.

How do you fight the powers of darkness? Because Jesus has defeated the powers of darkness at the cross, you defeat the powers of darkness. You fight against the power of darkness in the most ironic way.

And he says, through forgiveness, through love, through peace, they're not repaying evil for evil, they're loving your neighbor even when they act like your enemy.

[ 23 : 57 ] And so that means that for us, Jesus Christ is our Savior who destroyed the powers of darkness, and that life lived well or poorly has cosmic consequences.

A life that's lived well or poorly has cosmic consequences. Okay, so secondly, and we only have a few minutes left, how is, and this will be very brief, how is Samson an example?

There are two lessons here, but I'm only going to give one of them, and we'll save the other one for another time. Hebrews 11, the big picture of Samson is that he points to Jesus. He points to the fact that Jesus is the victor in the cosmic battle against the forces of darkness.

That's the big picture point, but Hebrews 11 also tells us that Samson is a true example of faith. And when you read through the story of Samson, he just does not look like that.

And so it's confusing, and you ask, how in the world could he be included in this list? It makes it seem like maybe even I or one of you could be included in the list in Hebrews 11.

[ 25 : 16 ] It gives a list in verse 32 in Hebrews 11. It's a lineup of anti-heroes that includes not only Samson, but also Jephthah. And if you know the story of Jephthah, Jephthah made a vicious, nasty vow to God that if God would grant him victory in a battle, he would give a sacrifice of the first human being that walked out of his house when he came home, which is an evil vow to make. And when he got home, the first person to walk out of his house was his daughter.

And he burned his own daughter alive and claimed that it was for the sake of the Lord. Of course, the Lord did not accept it because it was evil. And Jephthah is right next to Samson in the roll call of true faith.

Now, to get why, I think, well, I'm not going to be able to fully explain because we don't have time why, but one aspect of it, and we'll stop, and we can talk about it after if you want to talk about the other aspect.

The structure of Samson's story is important to get what's happening in Samson's story. And I think people have framed sometimes Samson's story in terms of the way he relates to different women throughout his life.

But I think a better way to look at it is that Samson's story from Judges 13 to 16 is structured according to how he relates to the vow that he made, the Nazarite vow that his mother made for him.

[ 26 : 44 ] Now, we don't have time to explain the Nazarite vow, but the rules of the Nazarite vow are you are set apart your whole life to God, and the three rules are this, do not drink alcohol, do not touch a dead body, do not cut your hair.

And in each chapter of the story of Samson, in chapter 14, he throws a drinking party, and he drinks alcohol, he breaks his vow. In chapter 14 and 15, he touches two dead carcasses, a lion and a donkey, and he breaks his vow in a second way.

And then in chapter 16, the chapter we just read, of course, he, in the moment of weakness, gives up the secret and tells Delilah, cut my hair. And in each of these instances, what's happening is he's giving up his Nazarite vow.

And so people say, why does he give in to Delilah knowing that she's going to cut his hair and the Philistines are going to come capture him, and everybody, most of the commentators want to say it's because he loved her. It's because he was madly in love with her, and I don't think that's it.

I think that if you look at it according to the structure of the Nazarite vow, he wants out. He doesn't want to be God's man. In every single instance in his life, he's done something so he can get out of the vow.

[ 27 : 53 ] He's broken the vow in very specific ways. At each moment of his life, he wants out. He does not want to be the Yashar, the Savior. He doesn't want to be the judge. He wants out.

He's the most reluctant judge in the book of Judges. He doesn't want to be a believer. He wants out of his commitment. And that's why he gives himself over, cut my hair. And I think he didn't really think he was going to lose his power.

I think he thought maybe it's superstitious because the next day he, knowing his hair was cut, he still tried to fight, thinking he would win. He wants out. He is the definition of reluctant believer.

Yet Hebrews 11 says he was a believer. He doesn't desire God throughout most of his life. And neither do we.

Neither do you. This week, some of us, multiple instances, we don't want God. We don't desire God. We don't care. And we're faced with moral dilemmas and we know the right thing.

[ 28 : 52 ] We don't care. We choose our own desires. We go the way of the flesh. We're just like him. We're every single Christian's reluctant believer at times. And so just briefly, here's the lesson that we'll close with.

Take care and be very slow to make pronouncements about who is in the kingdom of God and who is out of it.

We have no access to the names in the book of life. And we have no ability, based on the things people do, to declare them if they profess faith, if they say they believe, as out of the kingdom. If there's two people that I would have been quick to say it of, it would have been Samson and Jephthah. And there they are, listed in the Roll Call of Faith. True Believers. Hebrews chapter 11. We'll just close with this. We sang Psalm 15 just a moment ago. A beautiful rendition. Now if you pay careful attention to the Psalm that we sang, you got to pay careful attention to that rendition of the Psalm to get the point of it.

[ 30 : 01 ] Just listen to the lyrics and see if you can catch it. Oh Lord, who will stand on your holy hill? Who will dwell on your holy hill? And here's the answer. Who can stand on the hill of God?

And here's the answer in the song. He who walks with integrity. All of his works are righteousness. He who speaks the truth always, deep within his heart.

He who is not slandered with his lips. He who loves his neighbors well. He who does no wrong unto his friends. Who shall dwell on God's holy hill?

The one who is honest in all they do. You get it? It's rhetorical. The answer. Who shall stand on the holy hill of the Lord? Nobody. Not you, not me, not Samson, not Jephthah.

None of us will. None of us except by the one, the one who pulled down the temple on top of himself, who went under the forces of cosmic darkness in order to defeat cosmic darkness.

[ 30 : 57 ] Jesus, it's only by grace. And so we have to take care and be slow to not pretend we know who's in and who's out in the book of life.

To paraphrase Ralph Davis again to close. For if God's help, if God's grace were given only when we prayed for it, only when we asked for it, only when we desired God, only when we were without secret sins and misdeeds dark, only if we had sense enough to seek it, what paupers and orphans we would all still be.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, we give thanks to you for the grace of Jesus Christ for the Savior, the Yashar, the one who came and pulled the temple down on himself, the one who gave himself up in the darkness of death in the great irony of history that through our rebellion, through our giving you up, oh Lord Jesus, you saved us.

We couldn't have guessed it would be that way. It's the love of God, it's mercy, it's salvation, and as we come to the table, oh God, would we celebrate the victory that you have had over the kingdom of darkness and the fact that as our substitute, we share it.

And we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.