

The End!

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- [0 : 0 0] We're coming to the end of the story of Samson. And very briefly, can I just very briefly remind you of the story so far. We recognise that Samson was a flawed man of faith. He's given a hard ride by so many people, but we do recognise him as a man of faith. We recognise, yeah, he was far from perfect, and we know and understand that he had struggles, but he was clearly a called man of faith. He was a man of God's own calling, and he had a task to do in his life. We've also seen, maybe not so much in this, but particularly through the whole of Judges, if you look at that book, that the people of God, who he was come to redeem to take out of slavery, to take out of oppression from their enemies, they hadn't taken over the promised land, and they weren't living as they should in freedom. They were being assimilated and compromised with their enemies, and they were, particularly in Samson's time, comatose. They weren't even interested, they didn't even cry out to God. In the past, the cycle is that they'd cried out to God for deliverance or for help, but by the time Samson comes along, there's nobody even bothered. They're kind of intermarried, and they're living with them, and they're trading with them, and they're not even, they're worshiping their idols, and there's nothing really happening.
- [1 : 3 1] They're completely dead, as it were, to what God is trying to do, to redeem them and to bring them out. And we recognize, and this is a backdrop of it, that these days that we're reading them out are very different for us, very different culturally. As we understand, as you'll go through this story, we will, and also very different spiritually. You know, there's no longer going to be a nation who will be God's people, and who will fight against other nations in a kind of holy war. It's now a spiritual fight that we face, against spiritual enemies. But there's principles that we can take, and that we can recognize and put into practice, and I hope we'll do that tonight briefly. So I'm just going to mention, go through this story in different bits, and maybe give you a slightly different understanding, or at least challenge you with a different understanding of some of this chapter than what you might be used to. And I'm very pleased with my headline titles tonight. I like the first one, the Gaza trip. I thought that was pretty good. So we have, in the first three verses, the story of Samson going down to Gaza.
- [2 : 4 1] And there's the whole thing about the prostitute, and there's the whole thing about the people, and then he lifts the gates, and he lifts them away and takes them away. And you think, well, what is that about? Is this just a brief interlude, a story of meaningless sex and violence? Is that all we have here? I could have brief interlude into the story, which seems to be pretty brutal and gruesome and lustful in many ways.

Is that what we have, just meaningless sex and violence here? Well, we see that he's gone down to Gaza. So Gaza was a Philistine stronghold. It was one of the five main cities of the Philistine people, and they were, if you remember, God's specific enemies.

They had rejected God. They were violent and brutal and oppressive people, and they were seeking to destroy God's people. And we know from judges, right from early on, and judges when Samson was born, that he had a specific task in verse 5 of chapter 13.

He was a Nazarite set apart from God to birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines. That's what he was to do. He was to begin the deliverance of Israel from this Philistine stronghold.

[4 : 03] So Samson, if it's just a trip to the prostitute, he chooses a strange place to go. He goes into the Philistine stronghold, and he goes, maybe, for a different reason.

Was Samson an omission? Was it just simply a story of, I need to sleep with a woman, I need to get a prostitute? Or was he going with an omission?

He was going into the lion's den. Could it have been that he ended up in the prostitutes' house in the same way that the spies, who remember the children this morning were talking about Jericho?

Where did the spies go when they came in? The spies from Judah. They went and stayed in the house of a prostitute, Rahab. And it may well be, as a stranger came into the town, the place he would go would be the marketplace, and very often the prostitutes would be there.

And if he went to the house of a prostitute, it might not be quite so obvious what he was doing, that he was there on a specific mission, might or might not be the case. But certainly there's no indication in the story of the spies who went to Jericho that they were on a mission of lust, and maybe it wasn't the case for Samson, neither.

[5 : 23] But anyway, he didn't go unannounced. It was soon found out this massive, big, muscular, strong man from Israel, who was there, sworn anyway. Soon the word got round that he was in town, he was in the prostitute's house, so they kind of surrounded the place.

And waited till daylight, but of course he went in the middle of the night. And what he did do, he took up the gates in an incredible act of power and strength. He took the gates from Gaza, this great stronghold, and he ripped them up, and he lifted them, and he walked miles with them.

Was that his wanton violence? Was it just a dynamic show of strength? Well, maybe it was, but there was more to it than that. And as he tore the gates, clearly miraculous, clearly astonishing power, and we know in other cases where he had that astonishing power, it was because he was spirit filled, God was with him.

But it was a symbolic act, what he was doing. He didn't go to the marketplace, he didn't go to the palace, he didn't go to the police station, he went to the gates.

Because the gates of the city were very much symbolic of the power and the strength of Gaza and of these cities. And it was a sign of the protection of these great gates.

[6 : 42] You know, it's a bit like Lord of the Rings, but it's massive, great big gates of Mordor, which with all their strength and kind of power and kind of fearful power.

And to rip the gates off a protected city like Gaza, it was to display great power and was to send a great warning to them.

It was a military act. Samson was taking these gates and he was taking them and lifting them away and calling his own people to arms, as if he was saying, this is the time you can now defeat your enemies and you can conquest this enemy of God, the Philistines.

It seems that the people were completely disinterested. Gates were this great symbolic symbol of the power of this enemy nation.

Now there's a parallel, I would argue there's a parallel in Matthew's goth chapter 16, verse 18, where Jesus speaks about the gates of hell not prevailing against him, or against the church that is being set up through Peter and the apostles and the work of Jesus on the cross.

[7 : 59] The gates of hell will not prevail against this ongoing march of Jesus Christ and of his victorious kingdom. And what are the gates of hell? Well really, that's death, isn't it?

Death is the sign of hell's strength and strength, hell's power. And it's as if Christ has gone straight into hell's stronghold and ripped off the gates of death and taken them and thrown them away so that as we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, we know that the gates of hell and the death of hell is not strong enough to defeat us and that in Christ we have life and victory and strength and that subtext may well be through even the story of Samson.

So you've got the Gaza trip, then you've got the next big section of Delilah. Why? Why? Why? Delilah.

It's a sad bit of the story. I could see that girl was no good for me, but I was lost like a slave that no man can free.

Only the old people here can visualise or can audibly hear Tom Jones singing that. But it's not unlike the story of Delilah here because Delilah was the one who tempted Samson in the story and it's a story of being tempted by a dangerous love.

[9 : 34] Undoubtedly Samson was a man of passion, there's no doubt about that. He was also probably pretty lonely. He was a judge, he was a leader.

The people didn't follow him. His family probably weren't that particularly interested in him for some of the things that he'd done. You can see why he falls in love with this woman.

Is she a Philistine? Is she an enemy of God? Probably not. In all probability she was an Israelite woman. So it was maybe okay for him to fall in love with one of his own people, one of God's people.

However, it's an interesting relationship. There's no sign of any repressor that they get on well together. No sign of that. It's too late on a Sunday night to use that word.

It's all one sided. As far as we can tell from the text, there's not much evidence that she has any real love for him. He falls in love with her.

[10 : 42] There's no sign of any deep commitment from her. There's certainly no mention of marriage here, unlike the first woman that he was with in the story that we looked at.

But it's as if he sets his heart on this woman, this beautiful woman that he's fallen in love with. I was infatuated by her. And as the story goes on, really, really blinded in many ways by what she's doing and what she's involved with.

I wonder if he prayed at all at this point. If he had any kind of relationship with God and asking God, is this a good woman for me to have, a good woman for me to marry? And maybe he spends a lot of time justifying his actions.

But God, you want me to have a partner, don't you? You want me to have someone maybe from my own people? She seems beautiful and right for me, and maybe that's who I should go for. And he justifies what he's doing. But there's also an arrogance in Samson at this point in the story.

Because as he teases, as she kind of teases him, and you wonder if what he's doing with her, as he gives her all these false solutions to his strength, if he's throughout it all relying on his own strength, as if he's got quite kind of arrogant about his position and God working with him, where he says, well, it doesn't matter what she says or what she does.

[12 : 07] I'll be able to break off the ropes. I'll be strong every time, and you know, the text says that, that he thinks even when his hair is cut, that he'll be strong just like before and get rid of the Philistines.

But there's this gradual giving in to her nagging. That's not a typical thing, is it? A woman nagging? Not at all. But we see that happening here in the story.

And he gradually gives in to her requests. And if you notice, even in the answers he gives, they're beginning to move towards his hair.

They're beginning to move towards his hair. It's as if he's moving towards giving in. He talks about ropes and thongs, and then he talks about binding his hair, and then he gives up and he says, right, if you shave my hair.

He's tempted by this dangerous love, and she, all the way through, gives no indication of genuinely loving him, but is trying to defeat him and accept money for a great deal of money for her services to the Philistine people.

[13 : 23] And as they come upon him, and his hair is shaved, his love, the love that he has for her is completely scorned.

Completely scorned. And he's betrayed for silver. It's a familiar story, maybe, isn't it? And there's abject humiliation for him.

And he's spiritually alone. The strength for him wasn't in his hair. That was just symbolic of his relationship with God and his Nazareth vow.

But when he gave in and abandoned God, God turned away from him, and his spirit was no longer with him, and he was defeated.

He was blinded, his eyes were gouged out, he was humiliated, he was ridiculed. It was a heavy price to pay for the love that he wanted to have and share with Delilah.

[14 : 27] And I think sometimes temptation today takes the same kind of principles and same kind of realities for us.

We can be tempted by a dangerous love. It might not be a relational love. It might be. It might not be. But it's a love, it's an idolatrous relationship where we're placing something before our relationship with God.

It can often be relational. It can often be an affair of the heart. It can often be a friendship. And it can often be a friendship that takes us away from God and takes us away from our relationship with God.

And we need to think about the friendships that we develop and the love that we fall into in our lives. Now, this isn't about being isolated from other people. We're always going to be linked with and around other people.

This is not about isolation and not having friends and not having people that we love, but rather it's about influence. It's not about isolation, it's about influence.

[15 : 36] You know, who's our best friends? Who are the people that influence us? Who do we love and who do we listen to? Who's influencing our behaviour, our thinking, our prayer life?

Are the friends that we have godly friends? Are they good friends? Are the friends that reciprocate love with us, both in that kind of human way, but also spiritually?

And if they don't, are we aware of the danger that sometimes friendship has for us and who might influence us? Samson was hugely influenced by Delilah and by her thinking.

And for him it led to moral compromise. He got involved in a relationship where he wasn't even married and everything else along with that went down the tubes for him.

He probably justified it in his own mind or certainly in his own thinking. And we can do the same with temptation, whether it's relational or whether it's idolatry of another kind where we put other people first or other things first or even ourselves first before God.

[16 : 50] We can justify what we're doing, even though it means that we are drifting from God and from our relationship with Him. So much so that sometimes God will take a back seat.

As we withdraw from Him, He withdraws from us. Not forever, not eternally. He doesn't abandon us, but He steps back because that's what we've chosen.

If we choose in our life to be influenced and to give in to temptation and to ignore His ways and His moral structures for our lives, we will find often that are times when He will withdraw His presence from us and we will lose sight of our relationship with Him and the spiritual strength He gives and the help and hope.

So please remember that in your relationships and remember that when we're tempted to put something in our heart before God and His truth for us.

And that takes us to the last section, which is the temple of Doom, verses 23 to the end of the chapter.

[18 : 03] And what we're reminded of here is clearly that what has been happening is not just a story of Samson and different nation states fighting with one another, but there's a clear spiritual, underlying spiritual battle going on.

As the people have rejoiced in taking Samson, gouging out his eyes and imprisoning him, then they have a great feast in their temple to celebrate saying, Our God has delivered our enemy into our hands.

Our God is stronger than their God. Our idol is a better God than their God. And so there's this spiritual battle going on and there's a bigger picture of good against evil happening here that we need to remember and think about.

And it leads us to Samson's last prayer, where he prays in humility and in sorrow and prays knowing he's been forgiven, looking for God to answer his prayer in this powerful way.

And it's interesting, the only two times that Samson is recorded praying, one time he's praying for life, don't leave me to die, let me have life, and this time he's praying for death.

[19 : 20] And God answers both of his prayers. And God has forgiven him. And even though he's blinded, his eyes have been gouged out, at this point in his life he's seeing more clearly than he's ever seen before.

And there's a really nice little verse, I think, in verse 22, but the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

Now you may just think that's an insignificant verse, but I think it's a reminder to us that God was still with him and that he was coming back into relationship with God as he recognized what he was doing.

And so here in the temple he gets a servant, and he puts the servant, asks him to put his hands against the pillars. And one of these temples, there are two pillars, mainstay pillars that would have collapsed the whole temple. And he recognizes, even in his blindness, that if he can push these two pillars, then he will affect a mighty victory for God's people against the enemy.

And as the Bible acknowledges, that he was more effective in his death than he was in his life. So here's this point, Samson at his weakest, at his most vulnerable, when he is most humiliated, when everyone thought he was just a clown, when all his kind of worldly strength has gone, and he's in the middle of the enemy's stronghold, that is where his greatest victory is won.

[20 : 50] He's had a military victory by ripping up the temple gates, and now he has a spiritual victory by destroying this temple of Dagon, this idol that stood against all that was good and all that was God.

That's why Samson comes into the role call of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. Samson's last prayer, and God hears his prayer and uses him mightily.

So very briefly, as we finish off for us, there's clearly a pre-shadowing of Calvary here. Jesus Christ, from human point of view, he's at his weakest, isn't he? He's on the cross.

This Jewish carpenter of no significance has been taken to the cross of Calvary, and he's at his weakest point, and his enemies are around him, and they're parading him in humiliation and degradation on the cross, and there's nothing humanly that could be weaker.

And yet, it's at that place that Jesus Christ works his greatest victory for humanity, for you and I, and against evil. What seemingly seems to be the weakest point of his life is where he works the greatest universal victory against evil and death and the grave.

[22 : 13] It's a reminder to us that Jesus isn't weak, that Jesus is strong, and in his death, stronger still. I think there's also a reminder to us that we also are in a spiritual battle, there's a clear spiritual battle here going on between good and evil, between Satan and God, between idolatry and the living God, and that we too are in a spiritual battle in our lives, and we need to see that as we live our Christian lives particularly, that we recognise a spiritual unseen world that we stand against, and that we are asked to react in all of our situations with God's grace.

When things happen in our lives, which are difficult for us to understand, when we face opposition in any way, when there's trouble in the church, or outside of the church, we react spiritually. We're not sleeping like the comatose people of God here, we haven't assimilated so that we're just so like the world that, well, we're not really in any kind of battle, there's no difficulty for us.

Yes, easy to be a Christian, you follow the church on a Sunday, read the Bible now and again, it's great, it's fantastic, but we see and recognise that there's more to it than that, and if we don't sense any battle spiritually in our lives, it's probably because we're not of any effectiveness in God's kingdom, and Satan doesn't see us as worth targeting.

So we need to recognise and see the battle sometimes that there is, and beware of falling in love with life and with people, and with consumerism, and with ambition, and with our jobs, or with everything else, at the exclusion of God, and the exclusion of who He wants us to be.

Giving into temptation can lead to disaster. If Samson went his own way, he paid a heavy price for that kind of lawless falling in love, as it were, with Delilah, and a huge price, I know God used it, we know that, but there was a huge price for him to pay in terms of his life being shortened, and the humiliation, the degradation, and all that he went through.

[24 : 29] Yeah, it's God used it, I know that. But giving into temptation can lead in our lives to disaster. God's laws are perfect, and for us as Christians, they're there to protect us, he loves us, and he wants us to live a certain way because he's made us that way, and his laws are there to give us the parameters by which to live, and to remind us of the dangers of giving into our own desire, our sinful desires and their sinful temptations.

There are times as Christians when he simply wants us to say, no, and he says, no, I can't go down that road, I can't live like that, I can't think like that, I can't react and act in that way.

He doesn't want us to justify just what we're doing in order so that we can do what we want sometimes, so that we can ignore God, because the time will sometimes come where he will just stand back, and he will let you make your choice, and he will let you pay the price for that choice, even though he will redeem that, and that can lead to disaster in our life.

But we also need to wake up to forgiveness. It's a great story of forgiveness. His last prayer is a wonderful prayer, it's a beautiful prayer, as he recognizes and knows and sees God, who is willing to answer his prayers.

He wasn't paralysed by his mistakes. Many of us are paralysed by failure, by guilt, and by feeling of inadequacy.

[26 : 06] Don't be paralysed. Wake up to the reality and the beauty of forgiveness. He loves us. Best story in the Bible, the prodigal son.

It's not the best story in the Bible. It's God running out of his... God the Father running out of the home and running towards the prodigal son, who'd spent all the money that the Father had given him, who'd basically said he wanted the Father dead, and who wasted his life, and he comes back just with nothing, nothing to offer, the Father runs to him with his open arms, says, I forgive you, my son, you are dead, you are alive again, you are lost and you're found.

Best story in the Bible, the best illustration of the love of God for us, the redemption, the forgiveness that he offers. Go back to God, he just longs for you to say sorry.

He longs to show you his forgiveness and he longs to set you free from the sins that keep you from him. Conscience is a great thing. It's a great thing to recognize conscience and to recognize guilt, but take it to the place where it can be redeemed and taken away and forgiven and where we can be set free.

And lastly, very briefly, ultimately, the victory is God's. Isn't it? This is a reminder that God is sovereign and God is in control here and God wins the victory.

[27 : 25] And he does with Samson what he promised to do, that Samson would begin the deliverance of the people of God from the Philistines. That's what Samson begun to do and did more so in his death and in his life.

And may that be something we recognize and know in our lives. You may think that God isn't acting, God isn't working, and he's abandoned his cause with you.

Maybe we feel that here. Sometimes we feel that here. We hear of Christians, people becoming Christians all over the world and lots of things happening, but nothing's really happening in Scotland. It sees you worse and worse and worse.

There's a spiral downward. Churches are becoming more and more marginalised. But maybe we're reminded that he's got his purposes and his plans and that we are to be faithful to the Great Commission to reach out with the Gospel.

And the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Death is not stronger than the life that we have. And we have to go out with that life and we have to go out with joy and with gladness and with this reality of forgiveness and know that he reigns in this world, but also reigns, I hope, as Christians in our hearts.

[28 : 36] And may that be the reality that we experience. Amen. Let's say bow our heads and pray. Lord God, we ask and pray that we would remind ourselves of Samson and his story and that though it does, when we read it, appear so very different culturally and spiritually from our experience, we'd be able to glean some principles from it and remind ourselves of God's purpose at work and remind ourselves of your astonishing forgiveness.

How often do we feel, Lord, that we've just failed you completely, that we're rubbish Christians, that we are not on the right wavelength, that we have fallen into every temptation, that we've loved the wrong things and the wrong people, and that we've been influenced by secular society in such a powerful way and even maybe by friendships in such a powerful way that we struggle to believe and we struggle to follow.

But we ask and pray that you would remind us that you are forgiving God as we come back to you and seek your forgiveness. We seek that you'd forgive us for our blindness and forgive us for our lethargy and our careless living often, our prayerlessness and our unwillingness to listen to you.

Forgive us for these things. Renew us and revive us and refresh us and help us to live for your glory and know your forgiveness and know the kingdom of God coming.

May we be assured that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church that is being built, that death and the grave have no victory over us, but that we are triumphant and that even though we die yet shall we live.

[30 : 16] May that be our hope and may that be our future in Jesus Christ in His precious name. Amen.