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Judges 13 - 16

Sin, Salvation, Grace, and Glory

One of my favorite movies of all time is the 80's classic, "The Princess Bride." At the beginning of the movie, a kid is in bed sick, and his grandfather comes over to spend the day reading a book to him. But the kid rolls his eyes - he'd rather just watch TV and play video games, doesn't want to waste his time with a book. He asks, "Are there any sports in it?" And the grandfather responds, "Are you kidding? Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles!" In other words, he's saying, "This story has got everything you could ask for in an exciting adventure story!" The grandson replies, "That doesn't sound too bad. I'll try and stay awake."

The story of Samson in Judges 13 - 16 is a lot like that: it's an exciting, engaging story! There may be passages of scripture that you find slower, that you have a hard time engaging with or getting excited about. But my guess is that this story isn't one of them. It's got fighting, intrigue, betrayal, riddles, lions, feats of superhuman strength, revenge, chases, escapes, romance, miracles! Samson is this larger-than-life, outlandish character, with superhuman strength. And if this isn't enough to grab our attention, it's filled with all kinds of scandals, sordid details, dramatic tension, and tragedy. It's an exciting, gripping story. But while the story of Samson grabs our attention, it may leave us wondering: what exactly are we supposed to *do* with Samson? What's the point of the story? On the one hand, Samson is obviously empowered by God to do incredible things! And yet, on the other hand, Samson is incredibly, fatally flawed in so many egregious ways; he's driven by the flesh; he continually disobeys authority; he's angry; vengeful; reckless, a sexually immoral womanizer; he's presented not as godly and faithful, but as sinful and foolish. So what's going on here?

The point of the story is to show us the glorious grace of God. We see here that salvation is God's work, based purely on His undeserved grace for undeserving sinners. We see God graciously working out his purposes, despite the sin of His people - in fact, we even see Him *using* the sin and foolishness of men to bring about His purposes, while never once condoning or approving of the sin; we see here just how foolish and deceiving our sin is; and finally, we see that God's sovereign grace results in Him receiving all the glory, leaving no room to boast in ourselves, mankind, false gods, or anything else. That's what we see here in the story of Samson.

So let's walk through the story, beginning with point 1:

I. God's Gracious Salvation is Undeserved and Unexpected (Judges 13)

The story begins in chapter 13 with a familiar refrain: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years" (v.1). We've seen this cycle played out over and over again in the book of judges: Israel sins, God brings judgment through letting their enemies conquer and oppress them, Israel finally cries out to God for help, and God graciously raises up a deliverer. But here, in the final cycle, the pattern is broken. We see Israel's sin; we see the judgment - they're oppressed for *forty years*, the longest and most intense oppression that they've experienced yet, by a long-shot! And yet - *Israel doesn't cry out to the Lord*. They're silent. Later, in chapter 15, we'll see that Judah doesn't even *want* to fight the Philistines. Israel has settled into the life of oppression to foreign, pagan, ungodly enemies. They don't bother crying out to the Lord; they're too far gone spiritually for that. They've given up.

But thankfully the story doesn't end there. God graciously takes the initiative; even when they don't cry out to Him, he displays the glorious riches of His mercy and grace towards His people by still working for their salvation anyways! We see this in the rest of chapter 13. The angel of the LORD comes down to Manoah and his wife, who is barren and childless. And yet, God proclaims to them that she will bear a son! Furthermore, this child will be special - he is to be set apart to God, a Nazarite from birth. We see this in v.5: "for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." God sets aside Samson to be a Nazarite from birth, for his whole life. This means Samson, and even his mother while pregnant, are required to abstain from alcohol, not have contact with anything dead or unclean, and why Samson can't cut his hair. All of these mark him out as a Nazarite, setting him apart as a special servant of God. V.5 tells us why: God is marking out Samson as the next deliverer, giving him the mission to "begin to save Israel" from the Philistines. And it's important for us to go ahead and note here: God doesn't promise that Samson will *completely* deliver Israel, but will only *begin* to save Israel from the Philistines. That's Samson's mission.

We then see a lot of back and forth between Manoah, his wife, and the Lord - the whole episode shows the Lord's patience and grace with them. And this emphasizes the point of the chapter: God is bringing about a deliverer in a way that is completely dependent upon His own

grace and power alone: *through the child of a hopeless, helpless, barren woman!* He's taking what is humanly impossible to make it clear that this is the work of God; he's showing that His promise of salvation is all by grace: it's undeserved, comes from unexpected places, and is purely the work of God, not man. And this fits into a pattern that we see over and over again in the Bible, where God fulfills His promises to His people through a barren woman miraculously giving birth to a promised child after being visited by the angel of the LORD. Back in Genesis, this happened with Abraham and Sarah, then again with Isaac and Rebekah; it's going to happen with Hannah and her son Samuel, the prophet (1 Sam. 1). Then again with Elizabeth and John the Baptist in the New Testament. And all of this builds up to the most miraculous birth of all: Mary, not barren but a *virgin*, giving birth to Jesus Christ, the God-Man! From the empty womb, God brings forth life; reminding us that after Christ died for our sins on the cross, there was an empty tomb; from death, God brings forth life. This pattern throughout scripture points us to the gospel: that salvation comes not from our efforts, but wholly from the initiative and work of God! That it isn't because we deserve it or even because we seek it out - from beginning to end, Salvation is God's work, based wholly on His grace! And so this should remind us that the same is true in our lives: out of our spiritual death, God can bring forth life, purely by His grace!

For us Christians, even while we were spiritually dead, God sought *us out* - God showed the initiative, called us to Himself, bringing the new birth and spiritual life into our dead, barren hearts, empowering us to believe in Christ! Trusting that just like the miraculous birth clearly came from God, not man, so salvation is purely the work of God in Christ Jesus, not ours! We're saved from our sins by God's grace alone, from beginning to end! And that should encourage all of us, because that means there is hope for *anyone to be saved*, no matter how lost or sinful. Our salvation is undeserved - it's purely based on God's grace!

That's what we see clearly at the beginning of this story, and we continue to see it throughout. God fulfills His promises, graciously working to bring about salvation, even using the most unlikely of means. Which brings us to point 2...

II. God Uses Samson, Even his Sin, to Bring About God's Purposes (Judges 14 - 15)

After chapter 13, we're expecting great things out of Samson, right? His birth is miraculous, prophesied by an angel; he's set apart as a Nazarite to God from birth; 13:25 tells us that the "Spirit of the LORD began to stir him." But as chapter 14 opens, it becomes clear, right off the bat, that Samson is not the paragon of virtue and faithfulness that we expect. In vv.1-3, he

demands to be married to a Philistine woman. Not only is this fraternizing with the enemy, but God explicitly forbade Israel from marrying foreign, pagan women (cf. Deut. 7:1-5). Samson's parents push-back, encouraging Samson to marry a nice Israelite girl instead - but Samson defiantly demands that he marry *this Philistine girl*. He gives his justification in v. 3, saying, "For she is *right in my eyes*." We're going to see this phrase pop up several more times in Judges, and everytime it's an indication of just how sinful and evil Israel has become. This phrase is meant to tip us off in a big way: what Samson is doing here is sin, being driven by the desires of his flesh. He doesn't care what God said in the Law; he doesn't care what his parents say; he wants to marry her because he saw her, and she looked good to him; he's being driven by the lustful desires of the flesh. This is even repeated again in v.7.

But then, in v.4, we're reminded that there's more going on here than meets the eyes: "His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel." Now this is a bit of a controversial verse. There's two main ways it can be interpreted. One possibility is that "he" refers to Samson - so that "Samson was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines." Some people try to argue that this condones Samson's forbidden marriage. But I don't think that's right. As I've already said, Deut. 7 forbids the marriage, making it sin, and the author tells us *twice* that Samson's motivation comes from his eyes and flesh, sinful desires, not to obey the Lord or save Israel. Which is why I think the second interpretation of v.4 is most likely: that the "he" refers to the LORD; this is from the LORD because he, the LORD, was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. So then, we have to ask: does this mean that God condoned what Samson was doing? No, of course not; Samson was still sinning, doing what was right in his own eyes. And yet, this verse tells us, at the exact same time, God was completely sovereign over it all. While He did not approve of Samson's sinful desires, motivations, and actions, God was allowing it to happen, even *intentionally planning to use it for His own purposes*. It's like in the story of Joseph, where Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery, wrongfully accused of a crime, put in prison though innocent, and then God allows him to interpret dreams, rise to second-in-command over Egypt, and save not just Egypt, but the nations, even the family of Israel, from a massive famine. Then, in Gen. 50:20, we read, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." This is remarkable and profound: God is sovereign and in control of all things, and yet perfectly good; this means he even causes the evil, sinful plans of

humanity to be used as part of His own plans to bring about His good purposes - namely, for the salvation of His people.

I think v.4 is reminding us of that principle in order to show us that this is the key to understanding the rest of Samson's story. We see Samson sin over and over again; yet we also see God empower and use Samson over and over again. We see the two themes of sin and salvation run side-by-side throughout, especially in chapters 14-15. So let's run quickly through the story and see this play out.

As Samson and his parents head down to meet the girl, in vv. 5-7, a young lion comes roaring towards Samson, but the "Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him and... he tore the lion in pieces" with his bare hands (14:6). Clearly, this is an amazing feat, showing God's power upon him! But fast forward a few days, in vv.8-9. Their going back down for the wedding, and Samson passes by the dead lion; but something strange is going on: there are bees making honey inside the carcass! Samson scoops some honey out, eats it, then later gives some to his parents. Now aside from it being unhygienic to eat honey he found inside a dead lion, this is also problematic because he is *breaking his vows and disobeying God*. It was unlawful for all Israelites to eat unclean food (and this would count since it touched a dead body), but especially so for a Nazarite like Samson! Nazarites weren't allowed to have any contact with the dead. So Samson breaks the first Nazarite vow, once again being driven by sensual desires rather than faithfulness. We see a scene of divine power, immediately followed by a scene of sin.

The story continues: the rest of chapter 14 revolves around Samson's wedding feast. In v.10, Samson prepares the feast- literally a "drinking party," implying that he now breaks the second Nazarite vow. Then he makes a bet with a bunch of the Philistine men there, giving them a riddle. But they can't figure it out, they get angry, and finally threaten Samson's wife, forcing her to get the answer out of him. Samson is tricked, loses the bet and feels betrayed. But then, in v.19, the "Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him" again, he went down to a different Philistine city, killed 30 men, and gives their 30 suits to the men who won the riddle game. But then Samson storms off, angry, and his wife is given to another man. Then in chapter 15, Samson comes back, expects to still be married to his wife, but when he finds out that she's been given to another, he's enraged again: "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm" (15:3). Samson goes and 300 foxes, tied them to torches in pairs, then set them loose, setting the Philistine's farmland ablaze. Now this one scores points for creativity, doesn't it? And

catching 300 foxes is a feat in itself! But this is no idle prank: he's destroying the region's entire food supply. So the angry Philistines find out why Samson did this, and go burn up Samson's ex-wife and her family, thinking that will solve the problem - but it just makes Samson angrier. He strikes them with a mighty blow, in v.7, wiping out an untold number. Then goes off to hide in Judah.

An army of Philistines come looking for him, and when Judah sees it, instead of rising up and fighting off their enemies, they instead go out of their way to hand Samson over to their Philistine oppressors. But when they do, "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him" for a third (and final) time; God causes Samson's ropes to "melt off his hands" (v.14), and he kills 1,000 Philistines by himself, with only a donkey's jawbone! This is clearly an amazing feat, displaying the power of God at work through Samson! But right after that, instead of praising and thanking the Lord, we instead see him complaining of his thirst to God: "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?" (v.18). It sounds like the Israelites in the wilderness, complaining and questioning God. And yet, remarkably, God graciously opens up a spring of water in the ground for Samson to drink. THE power of GOD at work in Samson's life is undeniable. And yet, Samson's motivations are driven by fleshly desires, sensuality, lust, pride, and revenge. He doesn't set out to save Israel; doesn't use his strength to raise up an army and overthrow Israel's oppressors. Yet God uses Samson anyways; what Samson intends out of sinful desires, God uses for His good purposes, using Samson to fight the Philistines, beginning the process of salvation.

And this should encourage us today, reminding us that God has promised that He will "work all things together for the good of" his people (Rom. 8:28) - that is, for the spiritual, eternal good of our souls! If you are trusting in Christ alone this morning, you are part of God's people, and God has promised that He will save you, will hold you fast, and will even use all things in your life - even the bad parts, even sin, failures, and mistakes - for your spiritual good, as apart of bringing your salvation to completion! So be encouraged: God can and will work in your life and mine, despite all our sin, brokenness, and foolishness. He doesn't need us; we're not going to mess up His plans - we can't! He's already ordained to use even our messes to bring about his plans of eternal good and salvation. So let us rest in God's sovereign grace.

But we may ask: does this mean it's ok for us to go on sinning? As Paul says in Romans, "By no means!" But just in case we're tempted to think that way, the next part of the story gives us a sobering warning against sin...

III. Samson's Sin Deceives Him and Leads to His Downfall (16:1-22)

In chapter 16, Samson's sin comes even more to the foreground. We still see God empowering him, but notably, we're never told that the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him. Instead we see a picture of Samson squandering and wasting his gift. We see this in two more episodes dealing with Samson lustfully going after women (once again his weakness). In vv.1-3 he visits a Philistine prostitute (doubly wrong), and thought the city plans to capture him at dawn, Samson escapes at midnight, ripping up the locked city gates - which were massively heavy, probably two or three stories tall - and *carries them 40 miles away, uphill!* Clearly an impressive sign of power and strength! But I think we're supposed to ask: why would he do this? What's the point? He didn't even use his power to fight the Philistines this time!

Then we come to the most infamous part: Samson and Delilah. Once again Samson fell in love with a forbidden woman; she might be Philistine; either way, they're clearly not married, and they are living together, making her forbidden. And she clearly doesn't love Samson - she's mercenary; the Philistine lords pay her off, and she manipulates him into telling her the secret to his incredible power and strength. She's looking for the kryptonite to take away his superpowers. Samson lies: "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man" (16:7). That night, while he's sleeping, Delilah ties him up and yells out, calling in an ambush of Philistine soldiers. But he easily snaps the bowstrings and fights them off. But here's the thing: Samson doesn't learn from his mistake. She's already played her hand; he knows that she's trying to find his weakness in order to betray him. But he keeps sleeping with her! Which is sinful - but also stupid! AND she does this two more times - he tells her new ropes will work, but they don't; then says if she weaves the seven locks of his hair together, that'll work - but it doesn't either. And then, finally, on the fourth try, Delilah manipulates him into telling her the secret: "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazarite 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" (v.17). That night she shaves his head, calls in the ambush, and this time it worked, he was powerless - and it's because the Lord left Samson (v.20). Samson's last Nazarite condition had been broken. His sin led to his

downfall. He is captured by his enemies; they even physically blind him - fitting, for he has already been spiritually blind.

This tragic story shows us the deceitfulness of sin. Samson was so foolish with Delilah because he didn't *want* to put 2 and 2 together: he wanted to continue pursuing his sinful desires, no matter how irrational and disastrous it might be for him. Sin is deceitful; it *blinds* us. When we give into sensual temptations and desires of the flesh, we're not being rational; the more we do it, the more driven by lust and flesh we become, the more *blind and foolish we become*. If we go down this path, we eventually stop caring about the consequences of our sin; if you're not careful, it's far too easy to reach the point of being so spiritually blind and foolish that we say, "I want to give into this sinful desire so badly that I *don't care* what it will cost me, how much it will harm me or other people!" That is a very dark place to be; and yet it is *far too easy* for us to get there. We see this all the time, when we or those we know make terrible, disastrous decisions because they're being driven by sinful desires. It's when you start a relationship that you know is wrong; it leads to worse and worse consequences, yet you refuse to get out of it. It's when you keep nursing that addiction, that bottle, that joint, those pills, that click on the internet, even though it's costing you dearly, because all you care about is getting just one more burst of pleasure - and yet every time it leaves you worse off, less happy, more broken. Sin is not your friend. It wants to destroy you. This is why we must *fight and flee* sin, turning to God's grace and strength to fight by crying out in prayer, resting on His promises in Scripture, and reaching out to the others in the church for help in the fight. This is why we need to warn each other, and be held accountable - because every single one of us can fall into this level of being blind and deceived by our sin. Some of us have been there - and we also know that God's grace is more than sufficient to open the eyes of the blind and bring tremendous healing and grace to our lives. So let us not use God's grace as an excuse to sin - let us use it as a weapon to fight sin!

And that's where the story ends: with another picture of God's glorious grace.

IV. God's Gracious Salvation is to His Own Glory (16:23-31)

In the final scene, Samson is enslaved to his enemies. The Philistines throw a party, with thousands of Philistine elites and lords there - the house is full, with another 3,000 on the roof - and have Samson there to entertain them. But this isn't just a party: they're in a pagan temple, offering a sacrifice to their pagan god, Dagon, praising him for giving Samson into their hand! We see this in v.24: "Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon

their god and to rejoice, and they said, ‘Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.’ They falsely praise their pagan god, not giving glory to the true God! But God *does* glorify His name. And he uses the final act of Samson to do so.

Samson prays in v.18, “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.” Notice, Samson doesn’t pray that God would defend the glory of His name; Samson doesn’t seem concerned about that - he still only cares about *his* pride and vengeance. Still, he recognizes that what power he had only came from God; and God graciously answers his prayer. In vv.29-30, Samson performs his last incredible feat: he pushes down the structural support beams, bringing the entire temple crashing down, killing thousands of Philistines, including the lords and leaders. “So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life” (v.30). In this final act, God uses Samson one last time to deal a massive blow to the Philistines, fulfilling His promise to use Samson to “begin to save Israel.” And in doing so, God *glorifies His name*. He doesn’t let the Philistines have the last word, doesn’t let Dagon get the praise. But he also doesn’t let the glory go to Samson either. This story, from beginning to end, leaves us with no doubt that *all the glory goes to God*. All that Samson and Israel contributed was sin and foolishness; everything good and useful was brought only by the hand of God, purely by the mercy and grace of God, resounding only in the glory of God.

As we come to the conclusion of the story of Samson, I think the main point is clear: while all we can contribute is sin, God brings salvation for His sinful people, purely by His grace and for His glory. But that’s a lesson that can be hard for our stubborn hearts to accept. One commentator I read this week told this historical anecdote: Back when cake-mix packages first came out, all you had to do was pour out the mix and add water. But people at home couldn’t believe this; how can you make a cake without adding milk or eggs? So most ladies would add a little milk, or eggs, as their own personal touch - but it just ruined the cakes every time. It was such a problem that sales were plummeting; and so, the marketing team said: change the product so you can change the message; let them contribute something! So they made it where you had to add eggs - there was something you had to contribute. And it worked.¹

It’s human nature: we demand to be able to contribute. We don’t like the message that we can’t contribute to our righteousness before God and salvation - but that’s the clear gospel

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, p.159-160.

message of the Bible. We are utterly sinful, driven by the flesh. And it's not a matter of power or capability, as if we just had more knowledge, or more willpower, or more strength, *then* we could really be righteous and please God! Samson shows us: it's not about power and ability. Samson was set apart from birth, had extraordinary power - and he used it for sin. This story drives home the point that we, being sinful and foolish people, do not deserve salvation and can contribute nothing to it whatsoever; it can only come from God! And thanks be to God, it does! That's the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who came and perfectly obeyed *for us, in our place*; he even died on the cross for our sins, and rose again, so that we can be saved! Not by contributing something on our own, not by meeting him part of the way, not by doing enough good works or religious things - no, we could never do enough to contribute to our salvation! But that's the best part: *it's a completely free gift!* It's all based on the grace of God - salvation is God's work, from beginning to end! He accomplished salvation for His people in Christ, and even *seeks us out*, working out salvation in our lives! And that means that *God alone* gets all the glory and praise! So let us rejoice in our salvation and praise the Lord for His glorious grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

And if you're not a Christian, I invite you to turn to the Lord and believe this good news, that God will save *you*, despite all your sin, purely by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ! Turn to Christ and believe; and then make your faith public through baptism. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.