

### ***A Little Sunshine (Part II)***

In the name of him who died to set us free from sin, death, and the power of Satan, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten meditations this year we've been working through the time of the judges, which, as we've discovered, might be thought of as the Dark Ages of Israelite history. Though things began auspiciously enough with the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, they didn't end well. The reason for this was that the job was never completed. You see, the Lord had commanded his people to continue to drive out the idol-worshipping Canaanites in order that Israel not be exposed to and corrupted by their immoral ways. But they failed to do this. Instead, when settling their own assigned territories within the Promised Land, each of the tribes allowed little pockets of the original inhabitants to remain. And sure enough, just as the Lord had warned, these leftover Canaanites with their evil practices became snares and temptations to God's people. Before long the Israelites were intermarrying with them. And at that point, all bets were off. What began as tolerance became compromise, and then it was on to full-fledged adoption of the Canaanites' immoral and idol-worshipping ways.

When that happened, the Lord withdrew his hand of blessing and protection for his people. He raised up powerful enemies to oppress them. And don't think of this as peevishness or cruelty on the Lord's part. It was actually his mercy that he did so. If you reward faithlessness and wicked behavior, you only encourage more of the same. So instead the Lord made things hard on his wayward people to show them where the path they'd chosen leads: to destruction and to death—ultimately to eternal death. He caused them to be oppressed in order to turn their hearts back to him – the only One who can save. And when in their misery they cried out to him, he was swift to deliver them from their enemies.

And this has been the repeated storyline: Israel saved by the Lord and blessed by him turns astray. They begin to indulge themselves in the sensual practices of the Canaanite fertility cults. So the Lord causes them to be afflicted by an enemy power. For a while the people are torn. On one hand they want to continue in sin because they love its pleasures; but on the other, they don't like suffering the consequences. Eventually the misery becomes too much to bear. When that happens they return to the Lord and beg him for help. And he does. He sends a judge whom he has appointed and empowered to lead and to save. And thus far we've considered the accounts of Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and Jephthah, who, each in turn in their respective generations threw off the yoke of foreign oppression and then presided over a period of peace and relative faithfulness for God's people.

But the overall trend has been downward. With each cycle of apostasy, repentance, and return to the Lord, the general level of spirituality and virtue of God's people declines. Successive peaks of faithfulness are never as high as the ones that came before. And the valleys of sin and depravity grow ever deeper and darker. The Lord's people don't get better over time. They just keep sinking into farther into rebellion and moral decay.

And the thing to see as we study the time of the judges is that this is not just ancient history. This is the way things are now. In groups of God's people collectively and in each one of us as individual believers, when we allow little pockets of sin to remain in our lives, when we give it a place to dwell in our midst or let it have a place in our hearts, it eventually gets the upper hand. It rots us from the inside out. It burdens us with guilt and shame and fear. And it inevitably leads to other unpleasant consequences: damage to our bodies, to our spirits, and to our relationships with others. And though from time to time we return to the Lord in repentance and are restored and forgiven by his grace, as long as we allow these remnants of our favorite

pet sins to remain undisturbed, they'll eventually come back to haunt and to hurt us. And then the overall progression of our spiritual lives will be downward. This is one of the two big lessons of the Book of Judges.

The other big lesson is that despite our sin and constant turning away, the Lord is always ready and willing to forgive and to save. More to the point, he's always ready to send a redeemer – a flesh and blood person through whom he delivers his people from the oppression that they are suffering on account of their sins. And so we see that each of the judges is, in one way or another, an image and foreshadowing of Christ – who is the ultimate Savior and Judge. Each of the judges tells us something about Jesus and his work to save us.

This being understood, in our last evening meditation we were introduced to Samson, whose name means “little sunshine”. He came across, initially at least, as a rather un-Christ-like figure. He's rough, he's violent, and he's prone to escalating vengeance. Do him a bad turn and he goes off on a killing spree. Bodies stack up like cordwood around him. And, as we heard a bit ago, he's got a weakness for the ladies – particularly for pagan ladies of soiled virtue. There's nothing very Christ-like about that. It almost seems that as Israel has sunk deeper into sin, so the quality of the Christ figure in the storyline has also deteriorated. And yet upon closer examination, even in Samson, we were able to see a little of the light of Christ shining through.

There was, for example, the account of his birth, which, like that of Jesus, was a miraculous birth foretold by an angel. Samson's mother was sterile. She couldn't conceive – until the angel came to her and announced that she would bear a son who would begin the work of delivering Israel from the Philistines. It's easy to see how this foreshadows the angel Gabriel coming to the virgin Mary to tell her she would bear a son who would save God's people from their sins. There was also Samson's being set aside to be a Nazirite from birth. It involved him keeping a sacred vow not to drink wine or cut his hair (among other things); but it also marked him as one set apart for the Lord's service. And it was by this vow that the Lord gave Samson a special endowment of the Holy Spirit, which in his case is manifest in the form of superhuman strength. This foreshadows how Jesus was set aside for a special mission to save God's people, and how he was given the Spirit in a unique way at his Baptism, through whom he also performed superhuman miracles. Surprisingly, we saw that in Samson's seemingly suicidal attraction for unfaithful, inconstant, pagan women there is a picture of the Lord's love for unfaithful Israel and thus also of Christ's love for his bride, the Church – the Church who like Israel, often behaves like an unfaithful, rebellious, and adulterous wife to her ever faithful and always loving husband. Finally, we saw in Samson's triumph over 1000 heavily armed Philistines who tried to take him captive – our hero using nothing but the jawbone of a donkey (a most unlikely and ignoble weapon) – a picture of Christ breaking free of death itself by the most unlikely and ignoble weapon of all: the cross on which he died. So, though it wasn't immediately obvious, there's quite a bit of Jesus that can be seen in Samson.

And that brings us to this evening's text that tells more of Samson's intriguing escapades. It happened that after Samson had slaughtered 1000 of their best men, the Philistines backed off a bit from their oppression of Israel. They were still in control and demanded annual tribute, but they stepped more lightly for fear of Samson. This uneasy situation lasted for twenty years, during which time Samson served as a judge to the people of Israel. It was sometime during this period that Samson visited Gaza, one of the main cities of Philistia. It was a rather brazen thing to do, knowing that the Philistines would like nothing more than to see his head on a platter. But it shows Samson's confidence in the Lord's protection that he could walk right into one of the enemy capitals without fear. While there, he first spies and then decides to purchase the services of a local prostitute. The Philistines use this opportunity to set up an ambush. They place men all around to lie in wait and seize him when he comes out in the morning. They think this time they'll get him for sure. Their most feared enemy will be dead at last. But

Samson springs their trap early by leaving unexpectedly in the middle of the night. And rather than simply open or break down the heavy gates of the city to complete his getaway, he tears them and the frames upon which they swing right off the wall. He then carries these heavy items some twenty miles away. There he sets them on a hill near the Judean city of Hebron, which (not coincidentally) is the city from which King David will rule for the first seven years of his reign.

It's an interesting account – one that showcases Samson's great strength; but again on the surface it seems to have little connection to Christ. We certainly don't want to infer from this story that the Lord sanctions prostitution and promises to protect those who become involved in it. That would be a gross misreading of the account. But once again seeing Samson Christologically is the key to unpacking the theological message of this story. And it goes back to that idea that Samson's attraction for pagan women illustrates the Lord's love for unfaithful Israel. This time however, Israel is not portrayed merely as an unfaithful wife as before, but now as a full-fledged prostitute. By worshipping the other gods and granting them her favors she sells herself to whoever comes along, sharing with them the intimacy and special bond which properly belong to the Lord. As far as she is concerned, the Lord is just another paying customer.

The point of the story is that the enemy, Satan, hopes to use the Lord's almost reckless attraction to Israel – this weakness he has for her – as the means to entrap him. As you consider this story, think of Jesus coming into the city of Jerusalem on Holy Week – the city over which rule the very people who want to kill him. It's reckless love that brings him here. And for the sake of his people he's come to save, he makes himself weak and vulnerable. And the enemy strikes. In the end, they kill him. But things take an unexpected turn when Jesus rises from the dead. Their trap fails to hold him. And by his resurrection, Jesus not only opens the gates of death and hell for those who believe in him – he takes possession of them. He carries them away. He even gives us the keys to open them at will. That's what the forgiveness of sins is. Every time you hear those words, "in the stead and by the command of my Lord, Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins" and "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and "this is the body given and the blood shed for you" you are hearing the gates of hell being torn down and people being set free.

But there is a price to be paid for this forgiveness; and that's what the next account shows. It's the story of Samson and Delilah, which unfolds at the very end of Samson's career. And what is Delilah, exactly? She's not Samson's wife, nor is she a prostitute. But it's pretty clear that the two are living together. We get a hint from Delilah's name, which means *coquette*. It's a fancy word for a woman who toys with men's emotions and leads them on with promises of love, but who has no intention of keeping any commitments. She wants to keep playing the field. That describes her well. And it also describes the way that Israel has been dealing with the Lord throughout the Book of Judges. She wants the benefit of his favor and attention. She wants the good she can get out of him. She wants his help when she needs it. But she doesn't make any commitments in return. She wants to be free to have other gods as well. Mostly she looks for an opportunity to betray him. In her heart of hearts, she's on the enemy's side.

And there's something eerily Judas-like about Delilah. In exchange for a quantity of silver, she'll betray the one man who loves her more (it turns out) than his own life. And so she sets out on a campaign to wear him down and discover the secret of his great strength. And the weapon she uses against him is his love for her. It's hard to hear this account and not think that Samson must be the dumbest man alive. Each time he tells her how he might be subdued, she uses his answer to betray him. And then, when he escapes, she makes *him* the villain. "You lied to me! You don't love me!" To which Samson might very well reply, "You tried to get me killed! How can you say you love me?"—but he doesn't. So blind is his love for her, so great is

his desire to be with her, to hope in her, to believe that one day she will return his love, he sticks with her and puts up with all her evil, backstabbing nonsense. And as time goes on he gets dangerously close to revealing his true secret, which for Samson is the keeping the Nazirite vow not to cut his hair. He's right on the edge when he tells her that weaving his hair into a loom will do the trick. Talk about waking up to a bad hair day. Imagine finding your head stuck to a large wooden contraption for making cloth. Eventually though, through her constant wheedling and crying, she breaks him. He can bear it no more. He tells her that the secret to his strength lies in keeping his Nazirite vow to the Lord – the promise that marks his special relationship with God and by which the Spirit of the Lord fills him with superhuman power.

And then she knows she's got him. She sets the trap, hires the barber, and collects her blood money. Samson wakes thinking that he'll easily defeat his attackers as before; but this time he has no super strength. The Spirit of the Lord has left him. He's chained up. His eyes are gouged out. He's put to work in a grist mill, turning the heavy stone that grinds wheat and barley into flour. And there's a bit of irony in this. When he killed the thousand men, he claimed to have made donkeys of the enemy. Now he himself ends up doing a donkey's work.

We're not told how long he spends suffering in this dark pit of hell; but it's long enough for his hair to grow back substantially, so it's got to be on the order of several months anyway. But the day finally comes when the Philistines have an important festival in honor their god, Dagon. They praise this mute idol for delivering their old nemesis into their hands. And they use the occasion to make Samson "perform" for them. This is the Scripture's nice way of saying that they had a lot of fun humiliating and torturing him. We can only imagine what sort of cruel and painful torments they inflicted upon him in order to delight the vengeful and bloodthirsty crowd.

But the parallel to Jesus and his passion is clear. Like Samson, he's desperately in love with a woman (the Church – made up of people like you and me) who wants all the benefits of his devotion without any commitment in return. But our hearts are full of sin, which means that we're on the enemy's side. And so we betray him again and again by our sins against him – and somehow in our sin twisted minds, we manage to make him the guilty one. But we know his secret. We know how to make him weak and how to take advantage of him. It's not in his hair. It's in his love for us. We know that he will always forgive, always hope, always persevere, always bear the painful burdens we place upon him by our sins; his love never fails because he is love. And knowing this, we abuse him and his love over and over again. In wicked Delilah, in the crowd being entertained at Samson's blind suffering, in the soldiers beating and mocking our blindfolded Lord, see your own laughing face, and then you'll understand what this story is all about.

In his death Samson achieved his greatest victory over the enemies of God's people. So also in his death Jesus achieved the greatest victory of all: the defeat of death itself—for us. By bearing sin's curse on the cross – by giving up the Spirit – he has set us free; set us free so that to sin we may die daily through genuine repentance and contrite tears for the way we have scorned and abused his love. Though we betray him, still, he sets us apart and makes us his own. And he gives us his Holy Spirit that we may rise with him and live with supernatural strength to resist sin, to love him in return, and to love others even as he loves us.

Therefore let us die with him each and every day that our Dark Ages may end, and that a little more of the sunshine of Christ's love may be seen in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***