

Introduction

In early 2002 or 2003 my wife and I became aware God was calling us to the northeast side of town. We were living in the southeast at the time and loved our home. God was calling us to move to the northeast so I was *strongly encouraged*—that’s a polite way of saying I was *dragged*—through so many houses for sale. Dawnae told me yesterday it was about 40 houses but I’m fairly certain it was closer to 400 houses—and that doesn’t include all the houses we looked at online or pulled up to and then refused to go inside.

During our two-year-long search, certain houses stuck out to us. We nicknamed them and still refer to them occasionally. I remember the beautiful house on Coit. We still walk by it regularly and I still love it. It was dated on the inside but the house itself is beautiful. There was the dead bird house. As soon as Dawnae saw it the tour was over, even though I assured her we could write it into the purchase agreement that the dead bird had to be removed before closing. There was the cat litter house. We made it about six or seven feet in the front door, nodded to the homeowners who were there watching TV *during the open house*, and immediately left, watching where we stepped, but also not wanting to step too loudly as doing so might make the mountain of dishes in the kitchen sink collapse.

There was the evil house. It was lovely, bright and airy. Dawnae was ahead of me on the tour but when we got to the top floor she just about flew out of a bedroom and left the house. It wasn’t exactly a look of terror on her face but it was clear she did not want to be there. I walked into the room and immediately felt evil. I’ve never felt that before—or since.

I didn’t know why my wife flew past me on her way out of that house that day until I walked into that room and felt what she clearly felt. I don’t know what it was, but it was evil. As modern Americans we’re not used to thinking of evil forces inhabiting the physical world but this is a modern understanding that is unique in human history.

I’ve pointed out a number of times that as Western Christians we often struggle to get out of our cognitive environment—our default assumptions about the world and even history. It colors how we read Scripture. It affects how we perceive the world itself. If we can’t see it, feel it, taste it, smell it, or hear it, we simply dismiss it.

When we come to a passage of Scripture in which people bow down to a physical image of a god, we tend to dismiss what’s really happening in the spiritual realm, for most of the time we are unable to see, feel, taste, smell, or hear it. Nevertheless, it is as real as the things we can experience with our physical senses. There is an unseen reality that we operate in without fully understanding. It is important for us to recognize this. We’re in Judges 16 this morning.

Jdgs 16:23 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.”²⁴ And when the people saw him, they praised their god.

For they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.”²⁵ And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars.²⁶ And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, “Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them.”²⁷ Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained.

²⁸ Then Samson called to the LORD and said, “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.”²⁹ And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other.³⁰ And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.³¹ Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.

Judges 16:23–31

The Nazirite

After the Lord bound himself to Samson’s choices and Samson was captured, the Philistines gouged out his eyes and humiliated him by forcing him to grind grain while in prison. We need to understand something about the Philistines: they were culturally superior to the Israelites. We know from history and archaeology they were more technologically advanced. In the time of Saul the Israelites were going to the Philistines for iron production. They had far superior weapons and armor on account of their superior metallurgy.

Their cities were more advanced. Excavations at Ashdod and Ashkelon and Ekron—three of the five major cities of the Philistines—show advanced city planning, with paved streets and even drainage systems. Their pottery was far more sophisticated. This is very evident in their pottery, which was wheel-formed whereas Israelite pottery was hand-formed. Their pottery had far more intricate art, especially since Israelite pottery was generally undecorated during this time.

They had superior textiles—they could weave better cloth. The Philistines had already established extensive trade networks and had standardized weights and measures, which were necessary for such trade. They were wealthier and technologically superior in nearly every way.

From the world’s perspective, the Philistines were simply better people. God had chosen Israel, however, and the far simpler Israelite culture endured far longer than Philistine culture. As God explained to Israel back in Deuteronomy 7 he had not chosen them because they were such great people. He had not chosen them because of their technology or their culture. He had not chosen them because of their military superiority. Quite the contrary,

God said. He chose them because he loved them and had made a promise to their forefathers, a promise he will keep.

Given Samson's current plight, however, it doesn't seem likely. Samson was the deliverer God raised up yet Samson had steadfastly insisted on ignoring God's call on his life, a call to deliver Israel from the superior Philistines. As with all Israel throughout the entire book, all he had to do was enter into the battle in faith and the Lord would have given him the victory. While there had been battles, they had been Samson's quest for petty revenge. He killed the 30 men to pay a debt. He killed a thousand Philistines because he was angry. He waltzed into Gaza to show his lack of fear and then ripped the gate weighing several hundred pounds right off its hinges and carried it to the top of the hill. He allowed himself to be tied up on several occasions just to show off his ability to break the ropes.

God finally relented and allowed Samson what he wanted. When Samson allowed Delilah to cut off his hair, he finally and completely rejected his role as Israel's deliverer. He was then delivered over to the Philistines. There is nothing in this to suggest God was going to do something—except for one seemingly unnecessary comment. In verse 22 the author went all Captain Obvious and told us Samson's hair began to grow, which is what hair does.

After last week's sermon Andrew made an observation to me that made even more sense of the author's comment, and it has to do with Nazirites and their vows. As we've seen, most Israelites, whether men or women, who took on a Nazirite vow did so for a limited period of time. It would be a lengthy period, but still a limited period. Samson's role as a Nazirite was to be so unique and so important that his mother was also placed under a Nazirite vow while she was pregnant and while she nursed him.

The prohibitions were simple: no alcohol or any grape product whatsoever, no hair cuts, and no touching dead bodies. A Nazirite was forbidden to go near a dead body, even if it were his or her parents. The statement in Numbers 6 is clear: "All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD". A Nazirite was set apart for the Lord, consecrated to him. Samson was to be holy to the LORD his entire life!

The rules governing those under a Nazirite vow were clear about what was forbidden. They were also clear about what was to happen if the vows were broken accidentally. In Numbers 6 Moses says if someone dies very suddenly next to a Nazirite and touches him, the Nazirite's vow is broken. Specifically, it says this:

Num 6:9 "And if any man dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing; on the seventh day he shall shave it.

Numbers 6:9

Moses then gives certain offerings and sacrifices necessary for renewing his vow, but these were offered *after he shaved his head*. His Nazirite vow was then to begin all over again. Verse 12 in Numbers 6 says the Nazirite vow was void up until that point, meaning the man or woman was to begin the period of the vow all over again.

Samson is unconcerned about his Nazirite vow, about being holy to the Lord. He doesn't care that he's defiled himself. He doesn't care that he's cavorted with prostitutes and loose women. He doesn't care that he's partied with wine. He doesn't care that he's broken his vow by touching the donkey jawbone, by piling up dead bodies, by encouraging Delilah to

tie him up with fresh bowstrings that would be considered part of a dead body. He just doesn't care!

God, however, does care. Though Samson has no interest in maintaining his vow and remaining consecrated, and though Samson has defiled himself and sinned against the Lord, and though Samson despised his Nazirite vow and allowed his hair to be cut, God has great interest in these things. Just as the Philistines were determined to capture Samson in order to humble him, God was determined to humble Samson. And just as the Philistines paid Delilah to shave Samson's head, so God wanted his head shaved, for shaving his head would consecrate him to the Lord once again.

All the previous defilement was over. God was starting anew with Samson. The Lord was at work in Samson and was planning to work through Samson. Meanwhile, the Philistines thought they had accomplished something.

Dagon

In verse 23 the Philistines threw a party. They were offering a great sacrifice to Dagon to celebrate his "victory" over Samson, and presumably, Samson's God. They declared, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand". They assumed Dagon, believed to be the highest god, the father of Baal, to be the one who handed over Samson to them. YHWH God of Israel was not defeated, however. We see in verse 20 that the Lord left Samson. He departed from him that the Philistines might overpower him. Dagon did not take Samson from the Lord; the Lord handed him over.

Still, the Philistines worshiped Dagon for it. They praised him as they stood before him. We need to understand something of the nature of idolatry in that day. People knew the idol they bowed before was not the actual god. The object was still sacred and holy to them but it isn't as though they carved an idol and suddenly believed the idol was the actual god. Instead, an idol, the physical object, was the place the god would occupy in this world. If you destroyed someone's idol, he didn't think his god suddenly ceased to exist. He would have thought, "Aw, man...now I have to make another place for my god to dwell." The physical idol was where the god would manifest in this physical world.

They are at the temple of Dagon, the place they believed Dagon inhabited. There would be a statue or some other physical representation of Dagon as the focal point for his presence. They praise Dagon for giving into their hand "the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us". Remember Samson had burned their crops and several of their orchards. He had, in fact, ravaged their country. He had, in fact, killed many of them. Now he was their prisoner, blinded and forced to mill grain, all because of the power of Dagon, the god of grain.

They don't know they're being played. They think they have the victory. What can Samson do now? He's blind. While he's still strong, he's no longer *that* strong. He hasn't broken the bronze shackles they had him in when they brought him there. He hasn't broken whatever ropes or shackles they used to keep him there. He does what he's told and walks in circles at the mill, grinding grain.

Sometimes they bring him out as a trophy. They do this in verse 25 "when their hearts were merry". It's likely they had gotten drunk. While he's their prisoner, they're not quite

sure if it's all that safe to bring him out, yet the wine has given them either confidence or a profound lack of judgment—probably both.

There are thousands of people there in the temple of Dagon, celebrating Dagon's incredible victory over Samson. Verse 27 says the house—the temple of Dagon—was full of people, men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there. All the influential people were there, whether government officials or military officers or just wealthy individuals with a lot of social capital. To give an idea how many there were, the author says there were 3,000 *on the roof*. When you hear “roof” don't think of a roof like the one on your house. The roof was an extra room that was open air. It was designed for people to congregate there. These 3,000 on the roof were in addition to those inside.

Samson is dragged out of his cell and into the temple to entertain them. We're not sure what this means, exactly, but it's not hard to imagine. Some have suggested they forced him to dance, for the word “entertain” suggests this, but how would you make such a powerful man dance? I suppose if you hit his feet with sticks he'd jump. They probably engaged in some mock fighting with men brave enough coming up to Samson to hit him. He's blind; how could he fight back?

Dagon seems to be victorious. Samson has been humbled. The one who once destroyed their grain now mills their grain. The one who once killed them *en masse* now entertains them *en masse*. Samson is truly at his lowest point. God has been working, however.

After entertaining them for a while Samson asks the young man tasked to lead him around to let him rest against a pillar. The entire roof of the temple would rest on a couple central pillars. If these pillars collapsed, the entire building would collapse. Samson is tired and asks to be led to one of these pillars. The young man recognizes his need for rest so he leads him to the pillar.

Prayer

As he's resting by leaning against a pillar Samson prays. This is not the first time he prayed. We saw in chapter 15 that after killing the thousand Philistines, defiling himself with a donkey jawbone and by piling up the bodies, he demands the Lord give him something to drink. Rather than strike him dead for his insolence, God caused a spring to appear, providing him with fresh water. (Why are we shocked at God's kindness to evil men? He's kind to us...)

Samson's prayer in verse 28 is almost entirely self-centered. Notice, however, how he addressed God: “O Lord YHWH”. This is a very formal way to address God, indicating Samson's disposition toward him has changed. When he prayed for water he didn't even address him as God. He simply said, “*You've* given me victory, now give me water”. In verse 28 he calls him by the name by which he has revealed himself, and adds the title “Lord”—O Lord YHWH. There is a change in Samson.

He pleads with the Lord as one who recognizes he is a beggar—an arrogant beggar on the path to humility, but a beggar nonetheless. To be remembered by the Lord is powerful as it is a covenantal word. After the flood the Lord promised he would remember his covenant and never again flood the entire world. When he brought Israel out of Egypt he said he was remembering his covenant. For God to remember is for God to recall the obligations he has placed upon himself. As we saw last week, God binds himself to his own character, his own

promises, his own word. Whereas Samson is bound because of his foolish sin God is bound because of love.

Samson pleads with him, acknowledging him as the one who is Lord—YHWH, the covenant God. He pleads to be remembered. Earlier Samson had demanded water. Now he pleads with God as one who has no right to demand anything. He asks the Lord to strengthen him *only this once*. This has the idea of “just one more time”. The Spirit has rushed upon him multiple times before this, and Samson wasted it. He threw it away. He used this divine empowerment for his own foolish ends. Samson finally understands it was the Lord’s power the entire time and he knows he has no right to ask for more, yet he pleads with the Lord.

His request is selfish. It is self-centered. He pleads with the Lord for more vengeance. They took *his eyes*. For the first time in his life Samson is weak. He has never known weakness. He assumed weakness is the normal state for *all other men*—even those most would regard as strong. Samson has nothing and he knows it. He knows, for the first time in his life, he can do nothing apart from the Lord. Just as he could not just go out and shake off the ropes as he had always done, so he can do nothing about his present condition. He finally turns to the Lord.

While his prayer is self-centered, seeking personal vengeance, Samson’s desire for vengeance aligns with the desires of God. Barry Webb expresses this tension quite well.

There is grim irony in the fact that Samson should invoke this relationship now, given that he himself has shown so little regard for it in the preceding narrative. In fact, it was his effective repudiation of it by allowing Delilah to cut his hair that has led to his present distress. Nevertheless, the enigmatic statement about his hair beginning to grow again back in verse 22 implied that God intended to use him against the Philistines again. So far, though, Samson has known only weakness. Strength has lain entirely with his captors and tormentors. But now in his extremity he dares to hope that Yahweh may not, after all, have utterly abandoned him. It is not a cry of repentance, and there is nothing noble about it. All Samson wants is vengeance for the personal wrongs he has suffered. God wants something more, but at least there is confluence of their two desires: what Samson wants for his own reasons, God wants for other, greater reasons, so Samson’s prayer is answered.

Barry G. Webb, NICOT

The truth is this is not Samson’s finest hour, for having a finest hour would imply Samson had a *fine* hour. He has not. He has the barest hint of faith in YHWH. He has no strength apart from the Lord and at the very least, Samson is now aware of this fact. For the first time in his life Samson does not, for he *cannot*, rely on himself. He had to rely on the young man to lead him to the pillar. Now he has to rely on the Lord to strengthen him. This is Samson’s faith. It’s tiny. Oh, so tiny, but God is big.

In verse 29 Samson grasps these two central pillars that hold up the entire roof. He cannot see the structure but it’s likely a typical sort of building. He knows these pillars could take it all down. They were close together enough that he could put a hand on each pillar and push. After shouting, “Let me die with the Philistines” he pushed with all his

strength—his divinely empowered strength—and the roof collapsed, killing all five of the Philistine lords, and all the people who were in the temple.

In this one act Samson killed more Philistines than he had in his entire life prior to this. His epilogue is as brief as it is sad. His brothers and family, having heard what happened, went to claim his body and they buried him in the tomb of his father. The author ends the story of Samson by saying, “He had judged Israel twenty years”.

God’s Presence

As we come to the end of Samson’s story we are reminded yet again that Samson is presented as the ideal Israelite. He is everything Israel was supposed to be. Consecrated to the Lord. Set apart for a purpose. Called to represent the Lord. He is also everything Israel actually was. Stubborn. Rebellious. Disobedient. Again, if we look at the story simply for a quick takeaway, a shallow bit of application, it’s simple: don’t be like Samson. If we dig a bit deeper, however, something else emerges.

Throughout Samson’s life there has been a battle taking place. This battle is a spiritual battle, even as it manifests itself in the physical world. God placed Israel in the land of Canaan and gave them the task of removing idolatry from the land. The religious furniture of the Canaanites—and this includes the Philistines—was to be destroyed.

Why? Why was it so important for the Israelites to destroy the altars and the carved images and the Asherah poles of the Canaanites? Obviously the Israelites were not supposed to bow down before those carved images and were not supposed to offer sacrifices on those altars. God had given them the right way to sacrifice. There is, of course, the issue of being tempted to worship those gods so for the sake of protecting Israel all that furniture was to be destroyed.

There is another reason. The readers of the Old Testament, including those who were alive when the various parts were written, understood there were spiritual powers at play. There are real spiritual forces locked in a battle for God’s world. The religious furniture of the Canaanites was seen as places where these various gods and goddesses would enter into the physical realm. If you destroyed a carved image the response was not, “Oh, no, my god is dead” but “Oh, no, now I have to make another one”.

The temple of Dagon housed an idol that represented Dagon. Israel was supposed to destroy this temple and destroy this altar and destroy this idol. The land—the physical place the Israelites were given—was to be the place inhabited by YHWH God of Israel. No other gods were to be worshiped there. In fact, no carved image or physical representation of YHWH God of Israel was to be made, for God did not require a physical structure in order to be present in his world.

However, God gave Israel an incredible gift: the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the place God’s presence could be experienced by Israel. It wasn’t that the tabernacle functioned like an idol or a carved image, providing a physical space for God to inhabit. The tabernacle provided the opportunity for sacrifice so that a holy God could dwell among an unholy people. God would dwell in the midst of his people through sacrifice. Further, the tabernacle protected the people because it prevented them from getting too close.

The covenant God gave was gracious. It enabled God to dwell in the midst of Israel—close, but not too close. No other nation had a god like this. No other nation had real

Divinity in its midst. No other god had promised a people what YHWH had promised Israel, for no other god could promise YHWH's presence. The tabernacle was the means for it, but not in the way an idol was the means for a god to inhabit a physical space. The tabernacle was the place for sacrifice, and sacrifice allowed Israel close to the one true God.

This is where Samson's real problem lay. We are physical creatures who live in a physical world yet we are also spiritual creatures. In our bodies the physical and spiritual are connected. We are whole. This is why "heaven" is not our ultimate goal. In Revelation 5 the souls of the saints in heaven are under the altar crying out for justice. To live is Christ and to die is gain, Paul said, yet our ultimate hope is resurrection. Resurrection is the reuniting of our souls with our bodies, that we might live forever in a physical world as physical beings united with our spiritual selves.

Samson lived only for the physical world. This is why he fed his appetites, whether with women or with violence. When he despised his Nazirite vow he was rejecting the spiritual world entirely, choosing only the physical. He ended up blind and enslaved in prison. The one who once acted as though his only real purpose was to satisfy his own desires ended up satisfying the desires of his enemies by entertaining them.

Israel was supposed to cleanse the land of idolatry by destroying the places evil spiritual forces would inhabit. Samson continued to allow evil in this world in himself, in his foolish and sinful choices. God desired to inhabit that "land"—the land that was Samson. God allowed Samson to be captured and imprisoned, for God had a plan to rescue him. God had to bring Samson to the end of himself so that he might look to God in faith.

Though God had "left" Samson that the Philistines might capture him, God was clearly not finished with Samson. To save Samson he had to allow him to be broken. He had to allow Samson to become completely lost, that he might look to the Lord for his salvation. Samson finally, in his final moments, looked to God. Imperfectly. Selfishly. With the barest hint of faith.

Application

What Samson's story highlights is the importance of rooting out idolatry, of cleansing the land of evil. Israel had a physical land with physical idols that were to be destroyed. It's easy to think of idols as mere objects with no real importance. We tend to think this is the reason we shouldn't bow down to them, because it's just a block of wood or it's just a block of stone or it's just a bit of metal. That idol, however, represents an unseen reality that captures our heart.

We never read of Samson bowing down to an idol. We never read of him worshiping a carved image. We never read of him offering sacrifices to Dagon or Baal or Asherah. Instead, Samson's idol is himself, his own selfishness. I doubt any of us here is tempted to bow down before an image and worship it, yet how many of us bow down to pleasure or comfort or laziness or pride or greed or worry? What a strange idol worry is, yet how many of us bow before it? How many of us chase after empty and vain things that can never satisfy?

Whether we realize it or not our struggle with pursuing such vain things is a spiritual struggle. Your addictions, whether to porn or alcohol or social media, are a *spiritual* struggle as much as they are a physical struggle. Your—*my*—struggle with pride is a *spiritual* struggle that manifests in the physical world.

Here's what Samson didn't understand until he was blinded and in prison grinding grain: the spiritual battle we are all in cannot be won using physical means. Yes, God would use Samson and the army he was supposed to raise to defeat the Philistines in armed combat, but the battle was spiritual. Just as Gideon's "army" of 300 was supposed to blow trumpets as a call to worship, perhaps this is what God had in mind. Samson never pursued the Lord in this way so we simply don't know. The cleansing of the land, while it took place in the physical world, was always a spiritual battle.

Spiritual battles are not won with physical means. This was Samson's downfall. Everything he did in life was purely physical. It was in his own strength and even in the supernatural power God gave him, yet it was purely physical. It shouldn't be all that surprising that when he was used most powerfully by God he was at his physically weakest point.

It wasn't until he recognized how insignificant he was that he was able to be used by God. You see, the battle that was won that day wasn't on a battlefield and it wasn't between two human armies. It was a spiritual battle for the Lord's kingdom advanced and began to overtake Dagon's kingdom. The Philistines thought Dagon had won, for Samson was humbled. They didn't realize it was YHWH God of Israel who had humbled Samson and had victory in hand the entire time.

We tend to think of sin the way the Philistines thought of Samson: a purely physical problem to be overcome. We think if we place enough safeguards around us we'll be fine. If we place enough distractions around us, we won't be tempted as strongly.

Samson was empowered by the Spirit of God to be a deliverer. He was to rescue Israel from those oppressing them, yet even more, he was to urge them to remain faithful to the Lord. It was their failure to do this that led to their physical oppression.

Sometimes physical struggles are meant to point us to the spiritual reality of a great battle around us, a battle we need to be fighting. I don't know how your week went, but Lent as a whole has been a battle for me this year. The whole point of Lent is by denying ourselves something physical we are awakened to spiritual realities. As my body craves what it is being denied, I should be reminded to engage in the battle in faith.

It is a reminder that Jesus, the Son of God, took on physical human form. His body is where his divine presence would manifest itself in this physical world. Whereas Samson should have been the ideal Israelite, Jesus *is* the True Israel. He is the perfect union of physical and spiritual. He is the place where God dwells on earth.

He is where we must take refuge. He is where we find safety and security. He is the one who goes before us into battle, for he has already conquered. In a few weeks we will worship together in a Good Friday service with our brothers and sisters from Fourth Reformed. In that service we recall the strange rending of the spiritual and the physical as we remember the death of Jesus. This will be followed up, of course, with resurrection on Easter Sunday where the spiritual victory won by Christ is achieved in the physical realm as he defeats death.

God was ever working for victory for Samson, but it wasn't until Samson himself entered the battle in faith that God gave him the victory. When God demanded water from the Lord he accused the Lord of wanting him to be handled by the unclean hands of the Philistines. Now Samson cries out, "Let me die with the Philistines", for he knows he has been one of them. With his dying breath Samson cries out in faith knowing he deserved nothing more.

He threw himself on the mercy of God.

This is how we engage in the battle. In faith we surrender ourselves to the Lord. We trust him with our very lives. Church, whatever you're struggling with, whether it's something you've given up for Lent or it's a sin that won't release its grip on you or fear or worry or doubt, whatever it is, remember the battle is a spiritual battle, and the battle belongs to the Lord.

Hebrews 12 tells us Jesus is "the founder and perfecter of our faith". That is, he is the one who originates our faith. He starts it. He causes it to begin. He is also the one who perfects it. He completes our faith. He *finishes* our faith. This word, "finisher", is simply a noun form of the word Jesus declared on the cross as he perfectly surrendered his life to his Father in our place: "It is finished."

If you learn nothing else from Samson, learn this: God can be trusted. Cast yourself on his mercy. Seek his strength and his power to live for him. Rely on him rather than yourself, for there you will find true power for the unseen battle we are all in.