

GRABBING HOLD THE PILLARS OF LIFE AND DEATH

JUDGES 16:21-31

At first glance, Samson hardly seems like a hero of faith for us to emulate. But Judges 16:21-31 shows us that at the end of his life, "Samson Got Ahold of the Pillars of Life and Death," and we can follow his example in our own lives. You've heard the saying, "Nothing is more certain than death and taxes." But depending on where you live or who is in authority, taxes could change. I think the saying needs to be adjusted. There are two certainties in life—life itself and death. If you are reading this, obviously you are alive, and one day each of us will face death. But how do we deal with the uncertainties of life and prepare for death? How do we get ahold of what counts the most regarding these two pillars, life and death?

Samson provides the answer. Even if you never read the Bible before, you may have heard about him, and the one thing most people remember about Samson is that he was...what? That's right, strong! A lot of people think that his strength was tied to his long hair. But neither his long hair nor his workout routine gave him extra strength. God did, and Samson was to use that strength to defend the Lord's reputation and the people designed to be God's own. The story of Samson covers nearly a fifth of the book of Judges, and the historical record includes great feats of strength. But only at the end of his days could we say that Samson Got Ahold of the Pillars of Life and Death.

CUT DOWN AND CROWNED

God gave the ancient Israelites a special set of rules to keep them unique and separate so the promise of a Savior wouldn't be lost. Among those rules was one that had to do with making special promises to serve God for a certain set of days, weeks, or months. To show that you were serious about keeping your promise, you could make a Nazirite vow, which meant that during the time of your vow, you were to avoid three things—dead bodies, grapes and razors. A few Israelites were set apart to be Nazirites for life. Samson was to be one of those. We would expect to hear Samson say, "Look out! There's a dead deer along the road. Steer around it because I'm not supposed to touch dead things," and "Oh, no! There are raisins in these muffins! I'm not allergic to them, but I'm not supposed to touch grapes in any form," and "I wish I could get a shave and haircut, but I can't because I'm under a special lifetime vow."

But he made a mess of it. On the way to pick out a wife from among the bad-guy Philistines, a lion attacked. He tore a lion to pieces with his bare hands. Later he scooped honey from its dead carcass, told a riddle about it in the midst of a seven-day party, and, after losing a bet to people who tricked him for the answer, wiped out 30 bad guys to pay off the bet. Do you think wine was involved...and dead bodies? On another occasion he captured 300 foxes, tied their tails, attached little torches, and sent them

running in the fields of the bad guys, burning grain, vineyards, and olive trees. More death and destruction! When bad guys tried to tie him up, Samson broke the ropes as though they were thin strings, grabbed a jawbone from a donkey skeleton, and clobbered 1,000 Philistines. More dead bodies! After spending half the night with a prostitute in a Philistine town, he realized he might get caught. So he hoisted the city gates out of the ground and carried them to a hill five miles down the road. When his heathen wife whined and pestered him to tell the secret of his strength, he finally gave in, figuring, "I've crossed the line with strong drink and dead bodies so often, why not tell her about the rest of my vow?" Samson believed he was invincible.

But all the while, Samson was dead, dead to God, dead to real life, real living with God, and "he did not know that the Lord had left him." Because strength from the Lord was gone, "the Philistines [were able to seize] him...Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison." Before this Samson looked so alive. Others around him, including his enemies, considered him so alive, and wanted to stop his life from interrupting their lives. When they finally had the chance, they poked out his eyes and poked fun of him because they could now live a life of partying without worrying about Samson. He who made a donkey of himself by his self-centered attitude and behavior was now treated like a donkey. He who carried away locked gates was now locked in prison. He who burned grain fields was now grinding grain. Samson had been cut down.

But something happened. Only when he realized that he was dead inside did he get ahold of the pillar of life, realizing that real life is a life with God, and with that he got ahold of the pillar of death, realizing that death was the gate to eternal life. Samson prayed, "O Sovereign

Lord, remember me." He had been self-centered for most of his life, but not now. When "the Philistines had assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, 'Our god has delivered Samson...into our hands,'" Samson got ahold of the two pillars that held up the building. "He pushed with all his might, and down came the temple. "That was not suicide but more like a soldier jumping on a grenade to save his comrades. Samson was carrying out his vow to destroy God's enemies and in doing so showed that he got ahold of the pillars of life and death. **When cut down, he finally realized that real life was not about him, but about God's love for him. When cut down, he finally realized that God had given him a crown, the crown of eternal life.**

The devil is like a roaring lion looking to devour us, and too often we've walked along his cage, stuck our hand out to see how close we can get, only to be bitten. Too often we've come up with clever plans and sent them like foxes with tails on fire only to realize later that those plans were all about us, padding our comfort, and burning other people. Too often we've claimed that no one can bind us, rope us, or fence us in, and that we have a right to "the sweet life." After all, we're Americans! Only to realize later that claiming our rights doesn't give us the right to be greedy or selfish. Too often we've worked our jawbones and cut people down to the size we want them, which is a notch below us, only to realize later that we were exercising the jawbone of a donkey. Too often we've relied on our own strength to withstand Delilah-like temptation and given in to what we know is wrong, ignoring God's directives and warnings. And if we don't realize we're behaving like Samson, God finds a way to cut us down so that we can become blind to self-centeredness and the Samsonite baggage and see life in this world for what God says it is,

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not cushy but cross-filled. Only when cut down with crosses like Samson will we get ahold of the pillar of life, that real life is living with God. And right then—when we reach up to put our hand to our head with a sigh of “I give up”—that’s when we realize we are wearing a crown. How can that be? Think of this...

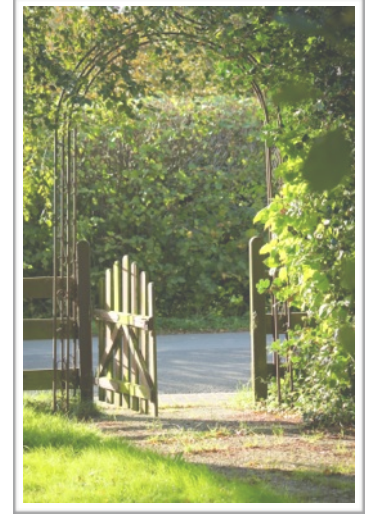
Jesus never tore a lion apart with His bare hands, but He is the lion of Judah who tore Satan to shreds. He didn’t dig honey out of carcass to tell a riddle, but His words are sweeter than honey and can give life to those who are dead inside. On trial before Herod, whom He had described as a fox, Jesus said nothing and burned Herod with silence. Jesus didn’t kill with a jawbone of a donkey, didn’t lift and carry the gates of a city, but rode a donkey through Jerusalem’s gates, not to carry them away but to carry your sins and mine to a hill where He would wash them away from God’s sight with His blood. Jesus kept Himself pure from temptations of prostitutes, but He was not afraid to deal with them, forgiving even them and turning their lives around. No one took Jesus’ strength. He kept it always but put it under wraps and on hold and suffered as God left Him alone—so He would never leave us alone.

Jesus lived the one pillar, called life, perfectly, and conquered the second pillar, called death, to change it into a gateway to more and better life. There is a reason why He did all that. If you want to know the reason, just look at Samson. Then look at yourself in the mirror. Jesus got ahold of the two pillars, life and death, for sinners like us, setting the path that we see in Samson and that we see in our lives, moving from cross to crown.

That’s what gives us the power to get ahold of these pillars of life and death as we live on this earth and move closer to death. We know that there will be crosses to bear—either brought on by ourselves or allowed by God to cut us down—and in those crosses we rejoice. Someone who does not have a hold on the pillars of life and death will think we’re crazy because they’re thinking like Samson in his early days, that physical life is for partying and physical death is disaster. But the Savior God changed all that for Samson and for us. Like Samson in his last days, we now have a grip on the pillars of the real meaning of life and death. The apostle Paul wrote what was on Samson’s heart and is in ours—“We also rejoice in our sufferings...because God has poured out his love into our hearts” (Romans 5:3-5) and “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). We work like beasts of burden week in and week out. A baby miscarries. Bills pile up. Chemo causes hair to fall out. Day in and day out we bear our crosses and are cut down. But through it all, we are wearing a crown. That’s what it means to get ahold of the pillars of life and death.

Read the Bible account about Samson’s life, and you’ll have a hard time classifying him as a hero. There’s no glossing over the dirt and disobedience in his life. But check the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, and you’ll see that God lists him in the Hall of Faith. Our names are not in that chapter, but we’re in that Hall. How can that be? The answer is the same for us as it was for Samson. Because Jesus went from cross to crown, so will we. Amen.¹

Open It!



1. Name some movies or books where the good guy or girl dies. How did the death of that character make you feel?

2. When have you seen God answer a prayer during a time of great need?

READ IT: JUDGES 16:21–31 - Read the entire passage before proceeding to the questions below.

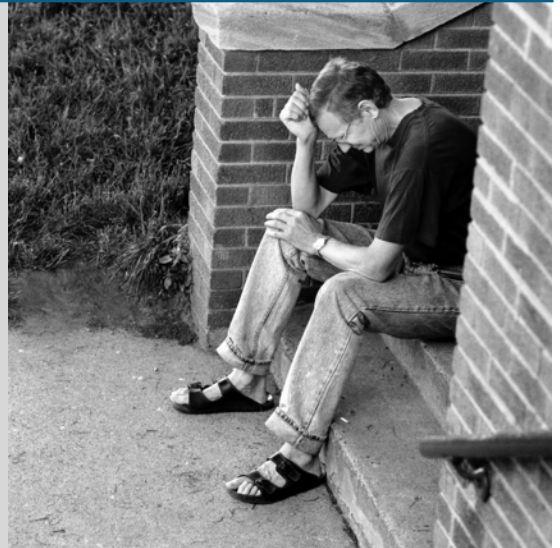
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EXPLORE IT

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1. What were the Philistines able to do once Samson's hair was gone?
2. What did the Philistines do to celebrate the capture of Samson?
3. How many people were in the building when it came down?
4. To whom does Samson call out in his time of bondage in verse 28, and what is his only request?

“WE WHO THINK WE ARE SOMETHING CAN BE RENDERED FOOLS IN AN INSTANT.”



GET IT

In these verses, we see a clear picture of how our strengths are meaningless without dependence upon God. We who think we are something can be rendered fools in an instant. In a moment, a mighty king can be reduced to a wild beast (see Daniel 4:28-33).

1. What are some of your greatest strengths? Do they help you to depend upon God or hinder you from depending on God?
2. When have decisions you made caused you to lose something valuable or special to you? What did you learn about yourself and God because of this loss resulting from sin?

After his haircut, Samson is a pathetic figure. His sinful, impetuous choices in the past have left him in a pit he's dug for himself. His own sin has ruined him. His life is in shambles, and he has nobody to blame but himself. Yet God chooses to use him in these final hours of his life, and allows Samson's sacrifice to land him in the Hall of Faith (Hebrews 11).

3. What area of your life has been weakened by immediate gratification, self-reliance or self-obsession (relationships, work, identity, leisure/pleasure/hobbies)?

Do you ever wonder if there is any hope for redemption in that area of your life? Why or why not?

Judges 16: 21-31 also set up a showdown between Dagon, the Philistine god, and Yahweh, the God of Israel. The Philistine chants to Dagon are a mockery of Yahweh; they steal His glory and give it to one who is no god at all. Paradoxically, God will use pathetic, weak Samson to win the showdown.

4. In what ways do we see these types of showdowns between the gods of this world and The God of the Universe? Why does God use our weakness to display His strength?

A sense of our own uselessness is the starting point of true faith. Without abandoning any confidence in ourselves, we simply are not able to lean wholly on the Lord. Samson's faith springs from his own desperate state. This is a great encouragement to the sinner. Anyone who has made a mess of their life because of their sin can find hope in Samson. He is where he is because of his lusts and hubris. Much like the Prodigal Son, his sin has led him to the lowest low. In his desperate state, he comes back to God – this time not with demands, but with humble desperation. Anything given is not deserved but is grace. The clean, pretty people who grew up in church may not realize their need for a doctor; but the ugly, sinful people who've muddied their lives realize their need. Let us all take note: faith begins when we reach the end of ourselves. Faith comes to God, not with demands, but with a plea for grace.²

5. Have you reached the end of yourself as Samson had? What events or circumstance can lead us to this end?

What obstacles keep people from such desperation?

Samson lived a self-serving life apart from God's plan, and therefore did not achieve the potential deliverance for God's people that could have been possible. But with his last breaths, Samson cries out to God to give him the power to do what God desired for him to do.

6. How is the attitude of Samson different in his final moment of prayer compared to how he viewed himself for most of his life?

7. What solace can we take in Samson's example of faith even after a life of extreme failure?
8. How can the knowledge that God used Samson despite his failures encourage you that God wants to work through your life?

How does that shape your view of the future?

9. It's only through God's power that you can fulfill God's purposes for your life. Why is it such a temptation to rush into life thinking we have all the power to be successful?

How can we utilize God's power more effectively in our lives to accomplish God's purposes for our lives?

It is not our pristine lives or our incredible abilities or our list of spiritual successes that make us useful to God. It is our grasp of our own weakness, it is our complete dependence upon God, it is the sacrifice of ourselves for His purposes – it is these things that make us useful to God. In short, it is true faith that makes us useful to God.³

10. Samson's prayer was answered because it was within the purposes of God. If Samson's prayer had been self-centered and not in God's plan, it would not have been granted. As we ask God to move in our lives, how can we discern between self-centered desires for our own purposes versus God-centered desires for His purposes?
11. Think of an area of your life where God has gifted and empowered you to make an impact for His kingdom. In what practical ways are you seeking opportunity to use that for His glory?

¹ James Huebner

² James Seward

³ James Seward