

JUDGES The Blind Victor

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It would be good if you had Bibles in front of you. We are turning our attention today to the Arnold Schwarzenegger of the Bible, and his story begins in chapter 13, so we've been looking at chapter 13 to 16, so it would be good if you have the text in front of you.

He's a man who is all muscles and testosterone. The life of Samson is an exciting life in some ways, full of sex and violence and death and power, but it's a tragedy as well.

It's a disturbing and disappointing life. There were two women initially that he used, and the one that he fell in love with used him. It is such a relational tragedy.

He is, in fact, the last of Israel's judges, and with him we discover the most flawed judge in the book.

He's a violent, impulsive, sex-driven, ungodly, and complacent man. He uses his God-given strength to selfishly get himself out of the trouble that his weakness gets him into.

[1 : 12] He is, in fact, a picture of the state of God's people of Israel rolled into one individual. He's a flawed saviour who points us to a flawless saviour.

And so there's three things I want to kind of nail as we look through this text today. I want to see, first of all, Israel's flawed vision. I want to see, secondly, Samson's flawed vision.

And thirdly, the flawless saviour and a vision for a changed life. So firstly, Israel's flawed vision. The story of Samson begins in chapter 13. So if you've got your Bibles, you can flick back there.

And it begins before he is even born. We see in the opening verse the now very familiar statement, again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

We've seen this phrase consistently pop up in Judges. It's the beginning of each of the cycles as Israel descended into idolatry once again.

[2 : 21] And this is the last time it's used in the book. It's the final time, again, Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord. It is, however, there is another statement that's used twice.

The book had two introductions. It's got two conclusions. And twice, once in each one of those conclusions, there's another phrase which is used. It's the same kind of phrase, but in a different way.

It goes like this. In those days, everybody did what was right in his own eyes or as they saw fit.

And that there is the perfect definition of sin. Sin does not ultimately consist in us violating our conscience or violating our personal standards or violating community standards.

It consists in violating God's will. This is very different to the moral code of our culture.

[3 : 33] Our society continually affirms that whatever our hearts wants, it must be true. Only I can determine what is right and wrong for me.

In other words, my own eyes, that is my own feelings, my mind's perceptions, are the only way to determine what is right and wrong for me.

It's the definition of sin that you see right back in Genesis 1 and 2, where Adam and Eve determine for themselves what is right and wrong for them.

And common sense contradicts this view. Even if you don't have a Bible, it contradicts the view. If evil is determined by my own eyes, how can we ever tell the Nazis it was wrong for them to exterminate 6 million Jews?

They thought they actually thought they were doing the human race a favour by providing justice for imagined wrongs in history.

[4 : 44] And so if our own eyes are not entirely in and of themselves sufficient, then whose eyes are sufficient?

Maybe the eyes of experts can determine what's right and wrong. Maybe the eyes of the majority can determine what's right and wrong.

However, these eyes don't avoid holocausts either. The Bible says that sin is violating God's will and therefore our relationship with him.

What God sees is sin, is sin. Regardless of what the experts say, regardless of what our culture thinks, it's what God determines is sin.

And the key here is that sin is so deceptive. Sin is so deceptive that Israel had by this point rationalised their sin. They in fact weren't uncomfortable living side by side with the Philistines.

[5 : 56] There's a group denial. Excuse me. There's a group denial of God's will here. They're collectively doing it.

They thought that there was nothing wrong with their lives. And as we've said several times in this series, idolatry is not abandoning God and pursuing something else.

It's pursuing other things alongside God, with God. And of course, this should lead us to be very careful and constantly evaluating ourselves through reflection on the Bible and personal accountability to others.

We are always finding ways to rationalise sin. Sin in our culture like materialism, sin like bitterness, sin like pride, rationalising it.

As Thomas Brooks, the 17th century Puritan wrote, Satan paints sin with virtues colours. And this is the approach to life and morality that Israel has.

[7 : 09] And in fact, they've had all along doing what was evil in God's eyes because it was right in their own eyes.

That's Israel's flawed vision. And we see that Samson, he has a flawed vision as well. He is no different than Israel.

He is introduced as the new judge in chapter 13. He is in fact, the only judge who is chosen before he is born. And from birth, Samson is set apart for service to God as a Nazarite.

And the Nazarite vows can be found in Numbers chapter 6, verses 1 to 21. And there are three basic stipulations to the Nazarite vow. Hair wasn't to be cut.

They weren't to drink any produce from the vines. And they were not to have any contact with dead bodies. And the intention of the vow was to seek special help from God during a crucial time.

[8 : 21] And so the vows had a limited time factor associated with them. It was a sign that you were looking to God for help in this moment, a special help with particular intensity and focus.

And in Numbers 6, the vow was taken voluntarily and for a select period of time. But Samson's different.

Samson is put under God's rule as a Nazarite before he's even born. As the spiritual condition of Israel plunges even further, chapter 13 prepares us right at the very beginning to receive the greatest of judges.

A miracle birth to rescue God's people. This is the greatest judge yet.

A wonderful deliverer. A powerful deliverer. And instead we have by far the most flawed character in the book. At the beginning of chapter 14, in fact, throughout the entire section of Samson's life, he is stirred by much more physical impulses.

[9 : 51] This is a man who doesn't think with his brain at all. Instead of him living out the promise as the one who will deliver Israel from its enemies, the first thing Samson decides to do as an adult is, in fact, to marry one of them.

His parents attempt to dissuade him. But in verse 3, he says, Get her for me. She's the right one for me. Or literally, in the original language, Get her for me because she is right in my eyes.

She's right in my eyes. And so Samson is not the judge we thought he might be. Rather than fight God's enemies, he moves amongst them.

It's interesting that Samson found the woman at Timnah. That is deep inside Israelite territory. He was free to come and go amongst the Philistines.

There's no threat there. The Philistines are living amongst the Israelites. They were settled, living normal lives inside Israel. This is a peaceful occupation.

[11 : 20] You see, there's something significant that is missing from this final judges cycle that we've been introduced to. There's a very significant element that's missing.

It's in every one of them prior to this. For the first time, Israel is not crying out to God for help.

They're not asking for release from their oppressor. Israel doesn't groan. They're not resisting their captors.

It's like they are virtually unconscious of their enslavement. It would seem that they have adopted and adapted to the values and the idols of the Philistines.

And so, therefore, they haven't even asked for Samson. God had to miraculously raise him up because they weren't looking for him.

[12 : 25] They didn't want him. We cannot exaggerate the danger that Israel was in. They are on the brink of the extinction and they don't even know it.

As Michael Wilcox says in his commentary on this passage, there is no such thing as harmonious coexistence between the church and the world.

For where there is no conflict, it is because the world has already taken over. Be careful of wanting to become acceptable.

Israel and Philistine here are so intertwined that God has to do something special in order to pry the two nations apart because they're not looking for it.

Have a look at chapter 14, verse 4. His parents did not know that this was from the Lord.

[13 : 37] That is, Samson marrying this woman from Tibna, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines, for at that time they were ruling over Israel.

God is using the weakness of Samson, that is his sexual appetite, his vindictiveness, his notoriously bad temper, to bring about a confrontation between Israel and Philistine because they've been so settled, God is going to use his weakness to drive a wedge.

It is Samson's weakness and his sinfulness that causes friction between the two nations. And it's a friction that Israel doesn't want.

In fact, at one point, the leaders of Israel bind Samson and hand him over to the Philistines so that we can go back to our peaceful, complacent lives.

Now, by the time we get to chapter 16, the friction has grown and Samson has killed over a thousand Philistines. He's caused a bit of a stir. Israel, however, at this point, is no closer to their freedom and living in obedience to God.

[15 : 10] And it would turn out by the time you get to chapter 16, Samson hasn't changed a bit either. The next woman his weakness leads him to is a prostitute. His behavior is becoming more and more reckless.

For some reason, he decides to pick up the city gate. I mean, he could have just smashed it. But he decides to pick it up and carry it forever and dump it on some hilltop.

It's like, is everyone watching me? I mean, goodness me. This is Mr. Universe kind of stuff. His behavior is more reckless and pointless than in verse 14 of chapter 16.

We're introduced to his next woman. And it's the first time in the book where it says he fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah.

And Delilah, the woman he loved, will be his downfall. She is paid off to betray him. He is totally reckless with her, goading her.

[16 : 23] And eventually she wears him down, down, down, down, until he is fed up with it. He's fed up with it because he wants to settle down now and live a comfortable life.

All his days of fighting with the Philistines, he wants them to be over. And yet she will be his downfall. Her name sounds like, in the original language, her name sounds like the night.

Samson has finally climbed into bed with darkness. He eventually tells her the secret of his strength. His head is shaved.

Verse 19 says that his strength has left him, but more importantly, verse 20, it says God has left him. The Lord has left him. And Samson now really is like every other man as verse 7, 11, 13, and 17 indicate he would be.

The strong man is finally seized, he's shackled, and the man who saw and grabbed whatever he wanted is now blind.

[17 : 44] His eyes are removed and he can no longer see. The man who burnt the Philistines grain in chapter 15, he's now reduced to grinding it in chapter 16.

And so for the first time in the book of Judges, God's judge is defeated and humiliated. For the first time, God's judge is defeated and humiliated.

And then in verse 22, it contains a somewhat, another one of these obvious statements that don't need repeating, but the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved, which is generally what happens.

You know, like, even my hair will grow back. Not as much as I want, but it will grow back. And Ian Francis, you have the same issue, and it will grow back.

And what's there? I mean, they still charge you the same amount even if it's not a lot. Apparently, it's a search and fine fee. So why record the obvious?

[18 : 57] The point is the Philistines let his hair grow back. And I'm assuming that they were, they weren't completely clueless here, I'm assuming.

I'm assuming they didn't just fail to notice that his hair had grown back. They simply must have assumed that once his hair was cut, he was no longer a Nazarite.

And there is truth in that because number six indicates that the Nazarite vow was effective until the hair was cut and then it was all over. It was for a certain period of time. They had a, such a narrow view of God.

Samson's strength did not come from the vows he made, it came from the God who he made them to. You see, the Philistines didn't know the God of Ehud, the God of the unexpected.

They didn't know the God of Gideon, the God whose strength is made perfect in weakness and who never breaks his word. This is the God who said to Samson, said to Samson's parents, he will be a Nazarite until the day of his death.

[20 : 12] You see, God's abandonment of Samson here is temporary. the promise held, even though Samson despised the promise, the promise of God still held.

This is abounding grace to even the worst of sinners with this God, which is what we have sung already this morning. In 2 Timothy 2.13 it says, if we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself.

You see, the Philistines only ever knew of conditional gods. Their gods could be manipulated. As I said last week, the God of the vending machine. The God of the Bible is the God of grace who is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him.

This God is not bound or limited by the terms of the Nazarite vow. They don't understand that God's work and power are not constrained by or contingent upon his servants' obedience.

And that's really what's going on behind the scenes here. The true contest here is not between Samson and the Philistines.

[21 : 31] It's between the Lord God and Dagon, their God. The false God of the Philistines. Who is stronger? Who will Israel finally serve?

And it seemed at this point that Dagon had won. See what the rulers of the Philistines are saying in verse 23? This is the moment of celebration for them. Our God has delivered Samson our enemy into our hands.

The setting for the gathering of the leaders and the people is the temple of Dagon. They celebrate and they praise Dagon as Israel's God's failed rescuer is brought out to entertain them, mock them, to be mocked and humiliated in verse 25.

And yet God's rescuer is not yet finished. In verse 26, he asked to be put where I can feel the pillars that support the temple so that I may lean against them.

Under the roof that is held up by these pillars is a great crowd, including the rulers of the Philistines and crucially the statue to their God Dagon.

[22 : 57] Verse 27 says there's a further 3,000 people on the roof. then for only the second time in his life, Samson prays.

On every other occasion, Samson just assumed that I'm going to be strong here and used his strength to save himself. Now for the first time, he's blind, he's weak, he's humiliated and he simply asks in verse 28, Sovereign Lord, remember me.

Please God, strengthen me just once more and let me with one blow take revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes. Now this is perhaps the first time that Samson exercises real and genuine faith as Hebrews 11 commends him for.

Can't see him exercising faith anywhere else. It is true that there is no mention here of Samson doing what he's doing in order to save Israel.

He seems to be pulling the temple down as revenge on his own eyes. There is however a newfound humility. Samson had been humbled into the dust but more importantly he knew he was humbled into the dust.

[24 : 29] The request he makes of God here is different to his previous feats of strength. Verse 28 he first of all asked Sovereign Lord remember me. It's so simple. It's humble.

It's a request for attention. He knows he's forgettable and that God has every single right to ignore him. And then he asked God to strengthen him just one more time.

And at last Samson acknowledges his dependence. Finally acknowledges his dependence on God's grace. And as he reached for the two pillars he did not know in that moment that God would in fact grant his strength or whether this would just be another humiliating act where they will mock him.

And his final prayer comes in verse 30 let me die with the Philistines. And having uttered that prayer it says he pushed with all of his might and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it and thus he killed many more when he died than when he lived.

The most important moment of Samson's life is his death and the most faithful event of his life is the manner of his death the most triumphant episode in his life is his death as he at last and at the last performs the role for which he was miraculously given life for.

[26 : 05] he starts to rescue God's people as the angel said he would in chapter 13 verse 5. A rescue that finds its fulfillment and ending Jesus centuries later.

You see Samson the flawed saviour shines the spotlight on Jesus the flawless saviour. the death of Samson has so many similarities with the death of Jesus but it is different in two very crucial ways.

Firstly Samson is in the temple of Dagon because of his own inability to live under God's rule and for God's glory. His downfall is brought about by his own disobedience.

On the other hand Jesus always lived for his father's glory and died because of his obedience. Secondly Samson's death achieved a limited salvation for Israel.

When the angel came to his mum to announce his birth in chapter 13 verse 5 it records the angel saying these words to her. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.

[27 : 31] Or literally he will start the process. He will begin to deliver Israel. And it's a deliverance that finds a fulfillment to a degree with King David and David's defeat of Goliath.

But ultimately God's enemies are defeated by great King David's great son Jesus. Hebrews 10.10 describes it like this.

We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. In a similar way 1 Peter 3.18 says puts it like this for Christ also suffered once for sin the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God.

And yet in so many ways Samson's end is a picture and a shadow of Jesus' death. Both Samson and Jesus were betrayed by someone who had acted as a friend, Delilah and Judas.

Both were handed over to their Gentile oppressors. Both were tortured, both were bound and put on public display for ridicule. Both were asked to perform. Samson does, Jesus didn't.

[28 : 54] Both died with their arms outstretched. Both appeared to be completely defeated by their enemies but both in their death completely crushed their enemies. Samson destroyed the Philistines and Dagon and Jesus the ultimate enemy, Satan and death himself.

Colossians 2.13 to 15 says this about Jesus triumphant death. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.

He forgave you all of your sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailed it to the cross and having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them triumphant over them by the cross.

cross. The cross of Christ took away the penalty of our idolatry which is death. Jesus was so triumphant that Satan can no longer successfully prosecute the people of God.

Jesus' death also took away the power of sin in our lives enabling the spirit of God to live in us and to break the lure of idols in our hearts.

- [30 : 17] It took the death of Jesus to destroy Satan, the unseen power behind our idolatry and death. As Samson is the last judge of and saviour of Israel in this book, so Jesus is the final and the greatest saviour of all people.

Samson and Jesus are not just the final saviours, but they are also the lone saviours. Othniel and Ehud, they rallied all of Israel with them to fight their oppressors in chapter 3.

Deborah and Barak took two tribes with them in chapter 4. Gideon had his 300 and Samson's act of deliverance was by himself.

He wasn't asked for, he wasn't even wanted by Israel. God showed in Samson that he doesn't need an army to deliver his people.

He doesn't even need his people to ask for it in order to deliver his people. Doesn't need 300, he can deliver his people through the death of just one.

- [31 : 40] And in Samson, even more than all the other judges, we actually see the pattern of victorious defeat. Rejected, beaten, chained, alone, and finally dying under the avalanche of his enemies, Samson triumphs.

God delivers his people in all time and eternity through the victorious defeat of just one savior. This is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel is the heartbeat of this church.

Jesus, the God who made everything and rules everything, became weak to rescue the weak and in so doing became immeasurably strong. And this is the last and crucial difference between Samson and Jesus.

With Samson's burial, his rule was done. It was over. See that in verse 31, then his brothers and his father and his whole family went down to get him and they stuck him in a tomb and he had led Israel for 20 years.

That's it. Done. It's the end of Samson. His story's finished. But with the burial of Jesus, the story has just begun. Jesus ruled over the grave as the creator God and he rules beyond the grave as the resurrected Lord of all.

- [33 : 13] The one who became weak to save the weak rules now in strength and power eternally and immeasurably becoming and continuing as a Christian follows this same pattern becoming weak to become strong.

Only those who admit they are unworthy receive the approval of God. Only those who know their weakness are unable to know. Only those who understand their weaknesses are able to know the God-given inner strength.

strength. It's the sort of strength that enables us to avoid the pitfalls of Samson's life. Eyes that love sin.

Eyes that are comfortable with pride and lust and anger and vengefulness and complacency. These are the pitfalls that must be avoided.

Samson's story is Israel's story. Samson was called by God and separated out from all of Israel to serve God in a special way.

- [34 : 32] Israel, likewise, a holy nation, separated to God from the rest of the world for the purpose of serving their God. Purpose of revealing him to the world.

And yet Israel was consistently looking over its shoulder to the other nations and wishing that it could be like them and do what they did to worship their gods and adopt their ways.

Samson was a holy man. Israel was a holy nation. Samson went after other women. Israel went after other gods. Samson's story is Israel's story and it's our story too.

And his tragedy may be our tragedy if we resist the call of God on our life as he did. Everyone who has come to Christ in weakness and dependence on God is a holy person separated from the world for the purpose of serving God.

1 Peter 2:9 calls it like this. A chosen people. He calls us. Those are in Christ. You're a chosen people. A royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness, called you out of the night into his wonderful light.

[36 : 06] God's intention according to 1 Peter is take the fight to the enemy through his people, through us being different and through us being light in the darkness, exposing our world's gods for what they are as hollow shams.

we exist for the praise of the one who calls us out of the darkness, away from the clutches of the light, into the light. We exist to declare his praises so that more and more people might be called out of darkness into his light.

Will we embrace God's call on our life? That's the trajectory of judges. Will we run with it and find our joy and our reason for living in being what God has called us to be?

Or will we be the reluctant saints as Samson was, as Israel were, always looking over the shoulders wishing we could be as other people?

Will we be separated or will we consistently pursue the idols of our society? Will we like Samson be led with our eyes and covetedness of our hearts?

[37 : 42] Will we lie down comfortably with the night? The greatest danger to the Christian and the church is becoming just the same as everyone else?

To become settled and comfortable with idolatry and exchanging the glory of God for things made by human hands? Will you be driven by your eyes?

many years ago, I grew up on a farm. We had pigs on our farm and you could give the pigs really nice food.

I mean, I would need it, but it was nice food. But what the pigs got used to for me is food scraps and other rubbish, whatever it was, any junk, you throw it in a bucket and every day or two you take this stinking mess up to the pig pen and they would see me coming and they would make this little noise and they do this little dance and you'd put this slop down and they would wolf it up like it was hot apple pie and ice cream.

Pigs eyes delighting in muck and rubbish, exchanging the glory of God for things that are significantly less.

[39 : 08] thinking it's more valuable. Will we serve God because we must or because, will we serve him because he, we must or even because he gives me what I want him to give me or because he is truly valuable and I love him for the gospel, for what he has done for me.

Horatio Gates Spafford was a prominent American lawyer and Presbyterian church elder in the 1800s.

He lost nearly his entire fortune in the great Chicago fire of 1871. In the same year, his four-year-old son died to scarlet fever.

Two years later, the family decided to take a holiday to Europe, but Horatio was held back because of business. So his wife and his four daughters traveled ahead of him and across the Atlantic and on November the 22nd, 1873, while crossing the Atlantic, their ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel and 226 people lost their lives, including all four of Spafford's daughters.

His wife got to England, sent back a telegram and said, saved, alone. Spafford immediately jumped on a sailing boat, head to England.

[40 : 49] As he sailed over the location of the accident where his four daughters lost his life, he penned a hymn, it's called how it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blessed assurance control that Christ has regarded my helpless estate and he has shed his own blood for my soul.

My sin or the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not impart but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.

Will the call of God on your life to be his saints, to be his servants, still captivate your heart, still fill you with a sense of wonder and privilege and move you to continue to be his faithful soldiers and servants rejecting the idols of your culture in the next five years, ten years, twenty years, twenty five years until your life's end.

Let's