
He Died Better than He Lived (Judges 16:22-31)
9/17/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.” In Charles Dickens’ novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, a man utters these words just before giving his life. He recognized that he had wasted his life, but the death he died would be more meaningful and do more good than the sum of his years. He Died Better than He Lived.

In Judges 16, we read about the death of Samson, another man with a wasted life, but who died well. Samson’s life serves as a lesson for us. God give us wisdom so that we do not make the same mistakes that he did. Today, through the life and death of Samson, God calls us to walk the same path that Jesus walked: first the cross, then the crown. Jesus first walked the path of the cross. He lived a life of suffering, but his suffering bought the crown of salvation for the whole world!

As Christ’s followers, we walk that same path. We walk the path of the cross, dying to ourselves, and dying to the world. We do not walk it to earn salvation; Jesus already did that. Instead, we walk that path so that we might serve God and help our neighbor. We walk this path with the confidence that the crown of salvation will be ours one day, because Christ has promised it to us. Today, our God calls us to die to the world because it is far better than living for the world.

Samson learned that lesson the hard way. Samson lived for the world, and he got it! The man had it all. He was powerful. He was feared by his enemies. Samson could do anything he wanted! He was famous, a living legend! Everywhere he went, people had heard of his incredible acts of heroism. His power and fame brought all kinds of other perks too. Samson could have any woman he wanted. He could enjoy anything he desired. He could go anywhere, do anything. Nothing seemed impossible for Samson.

Samson’s power seemed to extend even to heaven itself. Samson’s strength came directly from God, after all. His entire life was dedicated to God, which Samson showed by never cutting his hair. And God was certainly on Samson’s side. Once, after defeating 1,000 enemy soldiers single-handedly, Samson called out to God because he was thirsty and God supernaturally provided water for him right there.

Samson had everything going for him, but there was still something missing. Yeah, he had the power, the fame. Yeah, those were the things he wanted. They were everything he yearned for, but somehow, he was still missing something.

As we walk through Samson’s life, recorded for us in Judges, we see him chasing after earthly pleasures. He tried to find a woman who could please him, but

none of them seemed to work out. He tried to gamble for wealth and riches, but that didn't work out either. The Philistines kept getting in his way and he made sure they got exactly what they deserved every time. But in all that, Samson still never felt satisfied.

Finally, we hear that Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah. She asked him the secret of his great strength. Three different times, Delilah asked Samson for that secret. Three times, Samson lied to her and said he would be weak if she tied him up in some specific way. Three times, Samson woke from a nap bound exactly as he told Delilah with enemy soldiers surrounding him. But he still had his strength. Three times that happened!

The fourth time Delilah asked, Samson actually told her the truth! He told her about his dedication to God, that his hair had never been cut. I always thought, "How could you be so dumb, Samson!? You know she's gonna do it! You know she's gonna cut your hair off! You know you're gonna lose all your strength!"

I think Samson did know. I think Samson knew exactly what he was doing. I think Samson was fed up with the fame he had. I think he was exhausted from his strength getting him nowhere. I think he was tired of nothing being able to satisfy him even though he had the world at his fingertips. Even the woman he loved clearly was plotting against him and trying to get him killed! What more did Samson have to live for? So, Samson told Delilah the truth.

Samson lost everything. Samson lost his hair, that sign of his dedication to God; and with it, he lost his strength. He lost his power and fame. His enemies who once feared him now laughed at him. They threw him in prison and gouged out his eyes. Samson had lost it all. Although, for Samson, it seemed he never really had much to begin with. It's at this point where our lesson for today begins in Judges 16:22, and it starts on a hopeful note. "The hair on Samson's head began to grow."

In prison, Samson had some time to think. I bet he began to realize that, even though he lived those outward signs of dedication to God, even though he had never cut his hair, Samson's life had never been truly dedicated to God. It was instead dedicated to his own pleasures. God had called Samson to defend the people of Israel so that the promised Savior could be born from their nation, but Samson had instead fought those battles for mere personal revenge. Samson had wasted his life seeking earthly pleasures and they had never really satisfied him. He had tried to find his life, but instead he lost it. The thing that had been missing from Samson's life was God.

Samson remembered that his God is one who forgives sins and wickedness. Samson knew that God would even forgive his wasted life. Samson remembered

how God graciously provided him with his strength even though he used it for his own sinful purposes. He remembered how God had graciously provided for him day after day, even as he ignored God. God's grace humbled Samson far more than the Philistines' laughter could humble him.

And so, in repentance, Samson gave up that life. He gave up his sinful life of revenge and earthly pleasure. Samson wasn't free from his sins yet. We still see that thought of revenge in Samson's words, but in his final words, "Let my life die with the Philistines," he says that he would give up himself, his life. He was dying to himself and to the world. He would be the man God called him to be. He would defeat Israel's enemies. He would protect God's people.

So, Samson died with the Philistines, fulfilling his mission. He Died Better than He Lived. The writer of Judges even tells us that he defeated more of Israel's enemies in his death than he did his entire life. But more than that, Samson was finally repenting. He Died Better than He Lived.

God teach us what you taught Samson. Our call is different from Samson's in some ways. Our call is not to take life. Our call is not to defend one nation of people so that the Savior can be born from them. Samson's call is different from ours in that way.

But our call is like Samson's in this way: we are to give up our own conceptions of life just like Samson did. Samson thought life was about gaining fame and power for himself. God taught Samson that his mission in life was not gaining power, but protecting God's people from whom the Savior would come. As Christians, God calls us to give up our sinful purposes and worldviews so that we might learn from the Creator of Life what life is all about.

Our sinful nature sees our friends and family for what they can do for me. It sees other people as objects for our enjoyment. That's not what relationships are all about. Spouses and children, family and friends do make life more enjoyable, to be sure; but that is not their purpose. God gives us relationships so that we can love them as ourselves, so that we can serve and build them up. God calls us to give up using other people for our own pleasures.

Our sinful nature sees our jobs and careers as just a way to meet the cost of living or to amass wealth so we can retire comfortably. That's not what work is all about. Yeah, our money and work can bring a lot of enjoyment to life, absolutely; but that is not their purpose. Their purpose is to give us opportunities for meaningful service as we contribute to society and meet the needs of other people. God calls us to give up pursuing happiness from earthly treasures and luxuries.

Our sinful nature sees ourselves as the "good people," and to look down on

everyone else. Like Samson, we think we are better because we have some outward show of dedication to God. But that's not what being a good person is all about. Morality isn't about puffing yourself up and putting other people down. Morality is about accepting what God says about us, that we are thoroughly and utterly sinful; and that being a good person, being a perfect person comes not through anything that we do, but comes through God's mercy to us in Jesus Christ alone.

Giving up those things will be painful. Our sinful nature doesn't want to give those things up. Our sinful nature doesn't want to see life in God's ways. And we will suffer as we do those things. Loving our neighbor as ourselves will be painful at times. Using our money and careers for serving others means we will miss out on some good times. Accepting the message of sin and grace is a humbling and painful reality. But life isn't all about minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure. Life is the path of the cross.

In heaven, we will know life as it is meant to be. We will know life without pain, not just minimized pain. We will enjoy life fully, completely. We will know perfect relationships with God and each other, where we actually will love unselfishly. We will enjoy true meaningful service. We will enjoy real moral perfection, no longer stained by sin.

And so, we walk the path of our Savior Jesus. Jesus walked the painful path to the cross. And by his road he earned the eternal crown of salvation, not only for himself, but for the entire world! Samson learned to walk that path and He Died Better than He Lived. God teach us to walk that same path. First the cross, then the crown. Amen.