



THE JOY OF RESTORATION

Catalog No. 924
Judges 16:22-31
Sixteenth Message
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February 7, 1993

When I was a high schooler in Nebraska, my family visited my aunt and uncle's ranch once and my girlfriend came with us. One evening she and I decided to go to a drive-in movie theater in a town about 20 miles away. I was in a hurry, and I was probably driving faster than I should on the gravel roads that made up much of the distance we had to travel to get to the drive-in. Somehow I took a wrong turn. We were traveling about 60 miles an hour on a gravel road when we came to a hill. At the crest of the hill, I discovered that the road ended right there. The car went airborne, shot right between two telephone poles and touched down in a pasture in the middle of nowhere. The engine made a strange sound before it died. Darkness was falling, and the nearest house was miles away. A sickening feeling, as they say, came over me. I felt my life was finished. Fortunately, I was able to get the car started again and we crawled back to my uncle's house.

Taking a wrong turn is often the first step we make before we dive headlong into sin. Overcome by passion and desire, we head at great speed down the wrong road. The road suddenly comes to an end, but we are going so fast we can't stop or swerve to avoid disaster and we crash. Alone, in the middle of nowhere, that sickening feeling takes over. We feel that our life is ruined, that it can never be put right again.

As children, we sang the nursery rhyme,

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.*

Can our life be put back together again when we crash? Our final study today in the life of Samson, from the Old Testament book of Judges, raises what is perhaps the most important question we will ever have to ask ourselves: Is there any way out of the tangled web of sin we so unwittingly fall into?

In the birth of Samson, God had invaded Israel at a time when "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). Samson was to be a Nazarite from the womb until the day of his death, and his mission was to deliver Israel from bondage — salvation through a son. But Samson's life up to this point, as we have seen, has been a litany of failures. (Last week, we looked at the sorry tale of his affair with Delilah.) Thankfully, our story does not end there. Today, in the closing verses of chapter 16 of Judges, we will find that our hero's life ends on a high note.

As we concluded our study last week we saw that Samson had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, delivered over by none other than his mistress, Delilah. Chapter 16, verse 21:

Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. (NASB)

Samson had fallen into the Philistines' trap following Delilah's discovery of the secret of his great strength. Weak and humiliated, his head shaven, he was easy prey for his enemies. He lost more than his sight, however. He lost his freedom and his purpose, too. Does this sound familiar? These are the very things we lose spiritually when we continually give way to temptation and sin.

Was there any hope for Samson? Could he be restored? If he could, is there any doubt that no matter how badly we have fallen away, we, too, can be restored?

Verse 22, where we take up the story today, begins the process of restoration in Samson's life.

However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it was shaved off.

Restoration was set in motion as Samson's hair began to grow again — a visible indicator that his fellowship with God was being restored. God may have departed from him (verse 20), but he certainly had not given up on him. Samson still suffered from the consequences of his sin — he was still blind — but restoration had begun in his life.

"The hair of his began to grow again." This process of restoration was gradual, as it is with us when we are in need of restoration. The Spirit did not rush upon Samson in a dramatic way, as had earlier been the case. Forgiveness may be immediate, but restoration is gradual; it takes time. It may be a quiet beginning — it might even go unnoticed — but it begins.

The Philistines, however, were unaware that the process of restoration had begun. They set about rejoicing over the capture of their arch enemy. Verses 23-24:

Now the lords of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god, and to rejoice, for they said,

**"Our god has given our enemy into our hands."
When the people saw him, they praised their god, for they said,**

**"Our god has given our enemy into our hands.
Even the destroyer of our country,
Who has slain many of us."**

The Philistines went overboard. They praised their god, Dagon, for their victory, and they assembled for a great celebration at the expense of Samson and his God. They were raising the spiritual stakes. Now the name of God became the issue because Samson's failure had brought dishonor to the name of Yahweh.

We think our sin will not affect anyone except ourselves

but, because we are part of the community of Christ, our failure affects everyone in the body. And, most importantly, our sin causes the name of God to be mocked and cheapened. But God will not allow his name to suffer reproach for long.

When I was in college, I had a good friend and fraternity brother who became a Christian and he eventually led me to Christ. In discussions I had with fellow fraternity brothers about his newly found faith, many of them questioned the reality of this faith, casting doubts on it and ridiculing God. Although I was not yet a believer I went to my friend's defense and proclaimed the gospel. Even as a non-Christian, God still used me because his name was at stake.

The high-spirited Philistines didn't just celebrate, they made fun of Samson. Verses 25-28:

It so happened that when they were in high spirits, that they said, "Call for Samson, that he may amuse us." So they called for Samson from the prison, and he entertained them. And they made him stand between the pillars. Then Samson said to the boy who was holding his hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." Now the house was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there. And about 3,000 men and women were on the roof looking on while Samson was amusing them.

Then Samson called to the LORD and said, "O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."

In a humiliating scene, the assembled Philistines made sport of their captive. But Samson prayed to his God to come to his aid. He had prayed once before, after he had slain 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Then, because he was thirsty, he prayed, "Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of Thy servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" (15:18).

What a marked contrast between this prayer and the prayer he now uttered in the presence of the mocking Philistines! Notice the humility of his words here in contrast to his almost arrogant and sarcastic prayer of chapter 15. "Please remember me," Samson petitioned. There were no more demands, just entreaties to his Lord. He had learned there was no basis for God to act in his life apart from God's grace and mercy. At last he had learned he was unworthy and undeserving of God's favor. Samson's pride had been dealt with. He had accepted God's forgiveness.

His prayer also demonstrated that he had come to know God in a personal and intimate way. In these few words he called upon his Lord, using three different names for God, Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim, in the process. God had become personal to Samson. He was a living and intimate God. He was Samson's Lord, master and owner, his strength and fortress.

Finally, Samson's prayer revealed his faith: "please strengthen me." Never before had he prayed for strength. He expected it to be there at his beck and call, just as we expect there to be milk in the refrigerator in the morning. But, on this occasion, Samson was dependent; he was ask-

ing, trusting that God would supply.

And how God supplied! Verses 29-31:

And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he braced himself against them, the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he bent with all his might so that the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life. Then his brothers and all his father's household came down, took him, brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. Thus he had judged Israel twenty years.

God gave Samson a victory so great that "the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life." Samson died in the process, of course, but for all his past failure, at the end of his life he had become a man of faith.

As we come to the end of this account of the life of Samson, and close out the book of Judges, I want to highlight three spiritual principles from the life of this judge of Israel.

Here is the first principle: *The purposes behind God's discipline are love and redemption.*

Samson insisted on going after and taking whatever he wanted. He gave himself over to his passions even though he knew he was acting contrary to God's will. On several occasions in the past God had bailed him out — at the wedding at Timnah, on the occasion when he took his personal revenge, after his capture, and during his tryst with the prostitute at Gaza, etc. Samson was getting used to this pattern. But with Delilah, he went too far. He insisted on his own way, and God did not stop him. He finally suffered the consequences: he lost his sight, his freedom, and his purpose. His life, you could say, was reduced to a slow grind.

God speaks to us and warns us through his Word. He woos us and whispers to us through his Spirit. He gives us wise counsel and advice through family and friends. But, if we will not listen when God whispers in love, he will force us to listen when he shouts in discipline. His purpose is not to destroy us: it is to break us so that he can build us up and teach us to trust in him. God's purpose is always to refine us, not to punish us. Discipline is designed to produce maturity and to restore us to usefulness. Sadly, much of the discipline that we undergo, even in our homes, is punitive in nature — punishment without a goal. But this is not God's perspective.

God's redemptive action can be seen in the garden, when he disciplined Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve sinned and God pronounced his curse. The woman would have pain in childbearing and in relationships; the man would experience pain and frustration in his work. However, God's discipline was designed to protect mankind from finding fulfillment in anything but God himself. Far from abandoning Adam and Eve, he clothed them in elegant robes to hide their nakedness. Adam even named his wife "Eve" ("Life"), because he believed that through her would come the seed who would bring redemption.

At Ray Stedman's memorial service, a pastor who

shared during a body life time was a good illustration of the kind of discipline I am referring to. This man said that he had fallen into sexual sin and everyone condemned him and turned away from him — everyone, that is, except Ray Stedman. Through his tears, the man recounted how Ray continued to stand by him, support and encourage him through his time of discipline. Ray never gave up on him because he understood God and his ways of discipline.

God may discipline us, but he does not forsake us. He wants to redeem and restore us.

When discipline is set in motion, then restoration and healing can begin. This is God's purpose in disciplining us. During the dark days of Allied failure in World War II, Winston Churchill said this: "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning." Discipline is not the end; it is the entrance to redemption and restoration.

Here is the second principle: *The path of restoration travels through humility and brokenness.*

Samson was humbled finally, his pride shattered, his strength dissipated. But, ironically, this was the very place where he found deep intimacy with and dependence on God. This was where he found inner joy and contentment. He finally stopped trying to satisfy his own lusts. He was now so satisfied with what God offered that he was full, so full that he could even face death. He had to become weak before he found true strength.

My son asked me once whether it was better to become a Christian early in childhood or to come to Christ later in life. Naturally, I responded that it was better to become a Christian early and thereby avoid the traps, the deceptions and the pain that result from falling into sin. But he made a keen observation. He had perceived that people who had been Christians all their lives do not exhibit the same joy, enthusiasm and genuineness as those who had found Christ following a Samson-like experience. Christians can live technically correct lives, but my son noticed that there is a quality of sweetness of faith that comes from travelling the road of humility and brokenness.

Given the opportunity, however, most of us would not choose the biblical road to restoration, would we? Certainly, the world is not familiar with this road. We were exposed to the best that the world has to offer last Sunday during the Super Bowl halftime show, when Michael Jackson sang "Save the World." The message seemed to be that if people work together, if they think good thoughts and grab their bodies in the right places, they can heal and restore their world.

The true road to restoration, however, as we learn from the life Samson, is the road of dependence on God, on prayer and humility. This road brings us through discipline into a deep relationship with God. The death of Samson shows that it takes a death to free us from bondage. Dying to our own selfish desires is the necessary first step to bringing spiritual enemies under control and subjection. The result will be that we will experience greater victory than we could possibly have produced by ourselves. As our text points out, Samson killed more Philistines in his death than in his life.

An evangelist whom God had used in a significant way in the British Isles lost interest in spiritual things and drift-

ed into a life of sin for a time. Some of his sin was done in secret, but ultimately it became public knowledge. At first, he thought he had been ruined for life, but finally he realized what a fool he had been. He came back to God, like the prodigal from the pig pen. And he found exactly the same thing the prodigal did. The Lord welcomed him with open arms and began to strengthen him and bless him.

After a time, he felt pressed to go back into a public ministry for the Lord. He was afraid that his sin would be found out and brought up all over again. But, after he felt sure it was hidden and tucked away in the past, he went back to preaching, rejoicing in the forgiveness of God. One night in Aberdeen he was handed a sealed letter. He read the unsigned letter just before the service began. It described a shameful series of events he had been engaged in. His stomach churned as he read the words, "If you have the gall to preach tonight, I'll stand and expose you." He took the letter and fell on his knees. A few minutes later, he was in the pulpit. He began his message by reading the letter from start to finish. Then he said, "I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I'm ashamed of what I've read, and what I've done. I come tonight not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven." God used that letter and the rest of his ministry as a magnet to draw people to Jesus Christ.

Samson killed more Philistines in his death than in his life. The road to restoration is a road of humility and prayer. Dying to self is the necessary road to healing and greater life.

Here is the third principle: *Any person, regardless of their sin, can experience God's forgiveness and restoration.*

This is a most amazing truth that is revealed in the life of Samson. Certainly, he failed in many ways, but God forgave and restored him. I agree with these words of David Roper, "we focus too much on success stories. Christians, like the champions of Homeric epics, always make it big... Personally, I'd like to hear a few more stories about failures like me...I need some failures to look up to now and then." Left to his own devices, Samson was a failure, but God was committed to restoring him.

We sin. We experience limitations. We taste death. We think our life is ruined and we can never be put back together again. But over and over, the Bible reveals this great truth: No matter how far we fall we never fall beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. We can never out-sin the grace of God. Even in the midst of our worst failures God does not give up on us. If we are willing to accept his discipline, and if we are willing to walk the road of restoration, he can turn the consequences of our sin into instruments for his glory. He can redeem a life that has been wasted. He can restore failures like you and me. He can grow us into godly men and women.

Last year, my mother passed away. On the day when I was to leave her home in Omaha, Nebraska for the last time, I took several photographs of a red oak tree in the front yard. This tree is very significant to me. My parents planted it when we moved into the house 30 years ago, when I was 13. For many years it didn't do much. It just stood there, stark, barren and leafless. Year after year my mother faithfully watered it, using one of those watering tools that goes deep into the ground. Although it hardly needed pruning, she'd prune it in the fall; she'd support it

during the harsh winter winds. She never gave up on that tree. One spring, a few buds appeared. Soon, a few leaves sprouted, and then a branch began to grow. Growth was gradual and slow, but it was growing at last; a few more years, a few more leaves and a few more branches. Her work had paid off.

This tree is significant to me because, in a sense, it mirrors my walk with God. We planted that tree about the time I wandered away from God. I, too, was spiritually dormant and barren for years. But God was always there. He watered; he never gave up. Around the time I came to faith in Christ, that tree in Nebraska began to grow. Every time I returned home from school or visited after I moved to California, I would look at it and reflect on my spiritual growth. Even when I arrived at night I would stand there in the dark and ponder how much it had grown since the last time I had seen it. During telephone calls home I occasionally would ask my mother how the tree was doing. "Oh, it's growing," she'd say. As a matter of fact, it was growing so well she told me once that she even had to hire a man to prune it. One day, when she told me that it had contracted some kind of disease, I almost went into cardiac arrest! But she cared for that tree and it recovered.

That is how God works. There's a tree on Ogden Street in Omaha, Nebraska that will forever be a reminder to me that God restores failures and redeems lives. Even when a life is barren and dormant, he never gives up.

Are you in need of restoration this morning? Do you feel that God has given up on you? Do you think you have outsinned his grace and you are beyond repair? Then remember this: God loves you even though he may discipline you. God is with you even though he may humble you. God forgives you even though you think your sin is beyond forgiveness.

The psalmist wrote,

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,

Whose sin is covered!

How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,

And in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1-2)

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgression from us.
(Ps. 103:10-12)*

Quoting David Roper again, "God doesn't look for perfection. He knows the miserable stuff of which we're made. The godly will surely sin and just as certainly their sins will be found out. God reveals our waywardness to heal us. We will notice defilement because He will show it to us; such work in us is the sign of His presence. And when the sin is faced and repented of, it is forgiven. Then we can go on. And going on, after all, is what matters. God doesn't require perfection, only progress."

The joy of knowing God is the joy of knowing forgiveness and restoration.

The final word on Samson is found in Hebrews 11, in the "Hall of Fame of Faith," as some have called this chapter. The writer says,

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who [who committed adultery? who walked in disobedience? who threw fits of anger and sought revenge? who didn't have any faith? No, that's not what this text says.] who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Heb. 11:32-34).

Like Samson, our names, too, are written in the book of life because God forgives and restores.

If God can restore Samson, he can restore anyone. The cross of Jesus is forever a reminder that he never gives up on sinners.

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