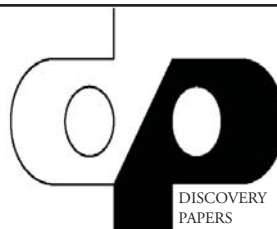


BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



Catalog No. 20120610
Judges 16:23-31
21st Message
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June 10, 2012

In a basketball game I played in many years ago, several of our players fouled out, so we had to finish the game with only four players instead of the usual five. I relished the prospect of taking on a superior team as the game headed into overtime, I think because I'm a sucker for long odds and desperate causes. I tried to rally my exhausted teammates by screaming, "This is what it's all about! This is what it's all about!" In overtime, however, I don't think we scored a single point. After the game, as my teammates and I slumped over in exhaustion, one of them mumbled to me, "So, this is what it's all about, huh Scott?" My speech notwithstanding, we were outnumbered—and crushed.

How does it feel to be outnumbered? Those of us who hold to a biblical worldview in the Silicon Valley are surrounded by vast numbers of people who do not share our worldview. Surveys routinely rate this region as among the least churched in the nation. No more than five percent fess up to being evangelicals here. Hey, it's not as bad as, say, Pakistan. Still, we're outnumbered. What's a disciple to do? What's a church to do? Samson, called by God to begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, was outnumbered—three thousand to one, as a matter of fact. We learn from his story.

In Judges 16:4-22, Samson succumbed to the charms of Delilah, his Philistine lover and told her that if his head were shaved, in violation of his Nazirite vow, then his supernatural strength would leave him. Delilah relayed Samson's confession to his Philistine enemies, who shaved him, after which the Lord, the source of his strength, left him. The Philistines apprehended him, gouged out his eyes, imprisoned him, and put him to work grinding grain in Gaza. While in prison, however, his hair began to grow again, raising the question for readers: can Samson come back?

Philistines make sport of Samson

Judges 16:23-27:

²³Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands."

²⁴When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying,

**"Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands,
the one who laid waste our land
and multiplied our slain."**

²⁵While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.

**When they stood him among the pillars,
²⁶Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." ²⁷Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform.**

The Philistine leaders assume that their god, Dagon, has triumphed over Samson's God, the Lord (YHWH). In reality, Dagon isn't responsible for anything. The Philistines were able to capture Samson not because their god delivered him into their hands but because the God of Israel left Samson (Judges 16:20). The Philistines are as blind in a spiritual sense as Samson is in a physical sense. The Lord delivered Samson into the hands of the Philistines—the Lord, who promised that Samson would begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines (Judges 13:5, 14:4). Perhaps, then, the end of the beginning has not yet come, and perhaps Samson's imprisonment represents an occasion for the Lord.

The Philistines bring out Samson from prison to make sport of him, placing him among the pillars—evidently, the pillars of the temple of Dagon—so that everyone can see him. Samson asks the servant who was leading him to position him in such a way that he can feel the pillars. Ostensibly, he wants to feel the pillars so that he can rest against them. On the other hand, why would the narrator include such a minor detail? If Samson wants to take a

load off, why do we need to know about it?

We might remember that earlier in this very city, Samson dislodged two posts, along with the city gate, to escape from the Philistines (Judges 16:3). However, that was back then, when he was at the height of his powers. Then again, since the Philistines captured him, his hair has begun to grow again. In any event, for his “performance,” Samson has a full house, including all the Philistine leaders and about three thousand men and women who are positioned on the roof.

A full house

Those of us who hold to a biblical worldview in our time and place may feel a bit like Samson: outnumbered. The western world, in the wake of forces unleashed by the Enlightenment, is not only Postmodern; it is now also “post-Christian.”

On June 6, 1944, Franklin Roosevelt, addressed the nation on D-Day with a prayer:

Almighty God, our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.

For the U.S. soldiers, he prayed:

Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith.

Regarding those who would give their lives in battle, he prayed:

Embrace these, Father, and receive them, thy heroic servants, into thy kingdom. Oh Lord, give us faith. Give us faith in thee; faith in our sons; faith in each other; faith in our united crusade.

It’s inconceivable that any president of the United States in our day, regardless of his or her beliefs, would pray such a prayer, especially for the preservation of “our religion.” Times have changed. A president’s audience has changed. There’s no use in complaining about it. We might even be thankful for some of the changes—the stripping away of superficial faith, for example, which makes decisions for or against Jesus more clear-cut. Not many people go to a Bible-teaching church anymore simply because it’s the thing to do.

In any event, to the naked eye, it looks as if God—or belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ, anyway—has been subjugated, especially in the Silicon Valley. And what is God, if he exists or if he cares or if he has any power, doing about it? Not much, it seems. Some in our world, crowding into their secular temples, so to speak, celebrate the demise of faith, at least until election time, when they fret over the voting tendencies of those pesky evangelicals in a handful of states.

As Samson’s faithlessness caused his downfall, the church’s demise, at least to some extent, is its own doing. The church as a whole has de-emphasized the Scriptures, acceded to moral relativism, and exalted the individual over against God. In the interest of being relevant, the church has watered down the gospel and blended in with the surrounding culture to the point of becoming irrelevant. Just like the surrounding culture, it has made gods of money, sex, and power. If it hasn’t capitulated to the ideas of the day, it has retreated from the public square to protect a private spirituality that poses no challenges and offers no blessings.

Some of the secularists say, in so many words, “Bring out the Christians that they may entertain us,” and they make sport of faith in Jesus, among the pillars, so to speak, where everyone can see: in films such as “Religulous” and “Easy A” and on television shows such as “The Simpsons” and “GCB,” which stands for Good Christian Belles or, alternatively, Good Christian, uh, something else. As in the Philistine temple, as in the Roman Coliseum, as on American screens, everyone is watching. Like Samson, we have a full house.

The apostle Paul had a full house in his day: “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings” (1 Corinthians 4:9). As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we play out our lives on a cosmic stage, not only before men and women but also before angels and demons: “His [God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 3:10).

As the Lord called Samson to begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, Jesus instructs us to pray, “Deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13). Perhaps, then, even the decline of faith in our land, as Samson’s decline, represents an occasion for the Lord. The imprisonment of the apostle Paul was an apparent setback for the gospel, but he observed, paradoxically, that his imprisonment actually served to advance the gospel,

at least in part by inspiring others who were hiding in the wings to take up the cause (Philippians 1:12-18). Could it be that our hair is beginning to grow again, so to speak?

What do we do before a full house? Let's see what Samson does.

Samson pushes against the pillars

Judges 16:28-31:

²⁸Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." ²⁹Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, ³⁰Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.

³¹Then his brothers and his father's whole family went down to get him. They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel twenty years.

For the second time, Samson, in extremis, calls out to the Lord (Judges 15:18). When he confessed to Delilah that he was a "Nazirite to God," he used a generic identification (Elohim) that equally could have been applied to a pagan deity (Judges 16:17). Now, however, he calls out specifically to the Lord (YHWH), the God of Israel. Surrounded by pagans who are worshiping their god, Samson calls out to his God.

On the one hand, he knows who to call out to, but on the other hand, he calls out only in behalf of himself and only for the sake of revenge. The Philistines at least called Dagon "our" god. True to form, Samson, though he was called to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, cares neither for his people nor the reputation of the Lord. By contrast, David, when hearing of Goliath, a Philistine giant, cared for both his people and the reputation of the Lord: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26). Furthermore, Samson has no vision, asking simply that the Lord would help him "just once more" for "one" blow against the Philistines.

Now, specifically, we are told that Samson was able to touch two pillars, just as he was able to touch—and dislodge—two posts (Judges 16:3). Thus positioned, he calls out to the Lord again. When he first called out, in Judges 15:18, he prayed for his life; now, he prays for his death—but death with the Philistines. He prays not that he or his people would be delivered from the Philistines; he prays that he would die with the Philistines. In the end, Samson identifies not with his people but with the enemies of his people.

In his prayer in verse 28, Samson started out well: he addressed it to the Lord. After that, he goes off the rails. So, what does the Lord do with such a prayer? He answers it! Does that mean that the Lord is pleased with Samson's prayer or with his life? No. The Lord has his own reasons for answering—or not answering—prayer. In this case, Samson's prayer is consistent with the Lord's call for him to begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, though Samson himself has shown no interest in his call, neither in his life nor in his prayers nor in his death. The Lord was looking for an occasion to confront the Philistines, and he found one when Samson called out to him. In so doing, the Lord vindicates his name over against the name of the Philistine god. Earlier, the Philistines praised their god for capturing the one who had killed many of them. Now, to their horror, Samson, despite his chains, kills many more of them. They made sport of him; now he makes sport of them. Dagon, hailed by the Philistines, goes down to defeat. The Lord, petitioned by Samson, triumphs.

The observation that Samson killed more in his death than during his life is especially poignant. We might wonder what might have happened during Samson's life if he had taken his calling and his vow seriously. Samson squandered his gifts, and he wasted his life.

Our hair is growing

Indeed, like Samson, our hair is beginning to grow again. Although the influence of the church has declined in North America, it is growing like never before in many parts of the world, especially Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many of us in this church have seen, and responded to, the movement of the Spirit in those parts of the world with our own eyes—and with our hands, feet, prayers, and words. Furthermore, in North America, in our decline, we're rediscovering the community of God, the unity of God, diversity of God, the mission of God, and the justice of God. It could be argued that our experience of God has deepened.

Like Samson, we are surrounded by adherents of different worldviews, but also like Samson, we call out

to the Lord. Like Samson, Paul could feel the pillars—in his case, the pillars of worldviews opposed to the gospel: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God . . .” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Paul pressed against the pillars through prayer and by preaching the gospel and embodying the gospel, suffering for Christ (dying with Christ) but enduring in Christ (rising with Christ) by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mostly, then, we take our cues not from Samson but from Paul—and from Jesus, of course. If Samson cared only for himself and not for his people or the reputation of the Lord, Paul could envision being separated from Christ if it meant the salvation of his kinsmen, the Jews, and he suffered unimaginable pain for the sake of people in his churches and for the reputation of the Lord (Romans 9:3; 2 Corinthians 4:7-11, 11:21-33). Samson cared nothing for his call, but Paul poured his life into it (Philippians 2:17). If Samson had no vision beyond one final blow against the Philistines, Paul lived and labored with eternity in view (2 Corinthians 4:13-18). Paul prayed and pushed not for the death of the pagans but for their salvation.

Likewise, with passion for both people and the reputation of the Lord, pouring our lives into the call of the gospel, with eternity in view, we pray, preach, suffer, and endure—not to bring down adherents of opposing worldviews but to bring down the worldviews that hold their adherents captive. Indeed, as Paul observes, our struggle is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus came to “proclaim freedom for the prisoners” and to “set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18-19). Some opponents of the gospel, to be sure, are celebrating the demise of faith and making sport of us, but we follow Jesus, who, unlike Samson, prayed not for the death of his enemies but for their forgiveness (Luke 23:34). Indeed, we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Finally, we believe, as we push against the pillars, joined by literally billions of others around the world and throughout history, that the house of arguments and pretensions set up against the knowledge of God will come crashing down one day as the Lord vindicates his name. We are, after all, stronger than Samson. Way stronger. We have the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us for the purposes of God (Ephesians 3:14-19, Philippians 4:13).

Can you feel the pillars of arguments and pretensions set up against the gospel? If so, then, like Paul, push against them: pray, share the gospel, and embody the

gospel. What, specifically, do you feel with your heart? What can you touch with your prayers, with your words, and with your life? God is not calling you to push against everything, but he may be calling you to push against something to help bring down the house of slavery and set the captives free.

Yes, we’re outnumbered. The odds are long and the cause is desperate. What an opportunity! What an opportunity to set the captives free. This (not a lost-cause basketball game) is what it’s all about!

Mr. B

As a teenager, I was becoming a captive of the arguments and pretensions set up against the knowledge of God. I remember musing about the purpose of life one day and concluding that it was not about the pursuit of happiness, as articulated by the Declaration of Independence, but about the pursuit of pleasure. Nothing around me discouraged me to believe otherwise. On the contrary, everything around me seemed to endorse my conclusion. I remember sitting in a high school class listening to a teacher say that humans invented religion to explain the inexplicable, and I thought to myself, “Yes, of course.” Then one day, at the beginning of my junior year in high school, a friend invited me to visit a church youth group that he had recently become involved with.

I learned a little more about that youth group a few months ago when I attended a memorial service for a former mentor of mine. His name was Keith Brentlinger, but we called him “Mr. B.” Mr. B was a carpet salesman who was a member of Los Altos Union Presbyterian Church. He loved Jesus, and as an expression of his love for Jesus, he was burdened for the youth of his church—indeed, for the youth of the entire Bay Area. So one spring day, long about 1970, the church contacted a nearby fellowship, Peninsula Bible Church, and asked, “Do you have anyone you can send us?” The Palo Alto church sent the Los Altos church a recent college graduate, Conrad Hopkins, who had a passion for the scriptures and penchant for fun that made him a perfect fit for youth work. A summer internship turned into a nine-year job as youth pastor of the Los Altos church. All the while, Mr. B served shoulder to shoulder with Conrad, hanging out with kids, opening his home for Bible studies along with his wife Jean (“Mrs. B”), and helping to organize Bay Area youth conferences.

Yes, I accepted my friend’s invitation to visit the youth group. I met Conrad—and Mr. B, of course. Three months later, I met Jesus, and I’ve been following him ever since. Many other teenagers met Jesus at that group also. Mr.

B, with his prayers, his words, and his life, pushed against the pillars and helped bring down the house of captivity for me and many of my friends.

Here I am, thirty-nine years later, serving as a pastor at the church where Mr. B and others found Conrad. Ah, the poetry!

Setting the captives free

It could be argued that the house of captivity is stronger here today than when I was a teenager. The percentage of believers has dwindled, and the challenges have multiplied. Families are more broken, the pressure to succeed is more intense, sexual experimentation is more acceptable, alcohol and drug use are more pervasive, self-destructive expressions are more plentiful, and suicide is a more common way out. If you want to push against the pillars and help set the captives free, there is no better way to do so than by becoming involved with young people, or simply with one young person. A few days ago I hung out with Santa Clara University students and took a stab at answering theological questions for two hours. I thought to myself, "I could do this every day!" You might want to consider volunteering to serve in some capacity in a youth ministry. To volunteer in a youth ministry at PBC, contact Rolana Smith, Junior High School Pastor, 650-494-3840, x 248, rolana_smith@pbc.org; Jordan Berry, High School Pastor, 650-494-3840, x 219, jordan_berry@pbc.org; or Molly Schatzel, College, 650-494-3840, x 220, molly_schatzel@pbc.org.