

### **“Losing Your Life for Your Lord”**

Could anything have been more tragic? Could anything have been more tragic than the account of Samson that we heard in our First Lesson? The once powerful, mighty leader of God’s people had been reduced to being blinded and chained, being mocked and ridiculed, and ultimately dying in a heap of rubble along with so many others. It sounds like a tragedy as serious as any. A life that held so much promise ended in such disaster. A man with so much promise of success became such a failure. Could anything have been more tragic than that?

The answer is a resounding, “Yes!” There are many things much more tragic than what happened to Samson and what Samson did with his life. There are many lives that end in tragic ways that are unknown to us or to the world, and are ignored and forgotten. The fact is that what seems so tragic in the life of Samson and so many other lives is not tragic at all. On the other hand, what is often seen as success and triumph is really and truly tragic.

We understand these things when we understand the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel (Matthew 16:21-26). He rebuked Peter for not keeping in mind the things of God and instead viewing events from a worldly and human perspective. Jesus then said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”** Based on these standards, the life and death of Samson give a powerful example for us of what is truly tragic, and what is truly triumph. True triumph is losing your life for your Lord!

So let’s take a closer look at what happened to Samson. We read just a brief account from the end of his life, but the Bible shares with us a great deal about the life of Samson. Samson was one of the judges, leaders whom God put in place over his people for specific times, in most cases when they were battling against specific enemies. The Israelites’ main enemies at the time of Samson were the Philistines. God picked out Samson to begin the work of freeing his people from the domination by the Philistines even before Samson was born. God announced to his parents that this child would be someone special and that he was to be treated as someone special. He would obey certain restrictions regarding what he would eat and what he could touch, and he would not cut his hair, but simply let it grow.

Samson did grow up special. He had incredible strength, strength that allowed him to do things like rip apart a lion that was attacking him, or to tear apart the gates of the city when they were trying to shut him in. But Samson at times seemed to trust not in God but in his own strength and cunning. He started ignoring more and more what God said. He didn’t keep all of the regulations that God had laid down for him. He made poor choices about with whom he would associate, or who would be his wife. And finally, after toying with his enemies, he revealed to them that his hair was special and that his strength would disappear if it were cut off. These enemies cut off Samson’s hair, and they were able to capture and imprison him.

From a worldly perspective, this was Samson’s undoing. He was going from an impressive position of strength and fame and popularity to . . . nothing. He became a slave. The Philistines put him to work grinding grain like an animal. They plucked out his eyes and kept him in chains. Things had suddenly gone horribly wrong!

But we don’t want to look at this account from a worldly perspective. We want to consider it from a spiritual perspective, from God’s perspective. Samson, even though he was God’s chosen leader for his people at that time, was for so much of his life falling away from God. He didn’t care what God said. He was interested only in enjoying his strength and in seeking the pleasures that his position could offer. He was gaining a world of pleasure and power and fame and whatever else, but he was losing his soul. If he had

continued down that road, it would have led him to hell. He would have perished in his sins and received the just punishment for them.

And that fact ought to be a warning to us as well. It is so easy for people to focus on the worldly matters and to lose sight of spiritual things. It happened to Peter and the other disciples when Jesus was right there in front of them teaching them about spiritual matters. It is so easy for our goals to be earthly goals like avoiding pain, finding fame and popularity, seeking pleasure, or anything else that appeals to us. And we run the risk of taking a path like that of Samson: one that leads us away from God and to other things, one that ultimately leads nowhere other than hell.

Samson's downfall if you will was a turning point for his life. Judges 16 gives us a clue about this when it says, "But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved." In his blindness, Samson began to see what he was missing. In his humbled state, he began to understand how proud he had become. His thoughts turned to God who had blessed him in the first place with his strength and his position. And that outward symbol of his devotion to God, his long hair, began to grow back. No, his strength was never in his hair, but his hair did represent his relationship with God. And the cross that Samson bore, the ridicule and the shame of being captured by his enemies, served God's purpose of bringing Samson back to God.

And then came the event around which our text centers. The people of the Philistines and their rulers had a great feast. They celebrated and sacrificed to their false god. And as they celebrated, they had Samson out to ridicule him and to celebrate again their victory over him. Samson was placed at his request where he could reach the supporting pillars of the temple. And he prayed. He had stopped relying on his own strength and instead turned to God. He had stopped serving his own purposes in his life and instead sought God's purpose for him. He asked that God would give him one last opportunity to do what he had been called to do, to help defeat the Philistines who were subjugating God's chosen people.

God answered Samson's prayer. He gave him once more the incredible strength that he had previously known, and Samson pushed the pillars of the temple until the whole structure came down on top of him and all the people. His death may have seemed tragic at a glance, but a careful look suggests two things. First, Samson died accomplishing more of the job that God had given to him than he had accomplished in his whole life up to that point. Secondly, Samson died trusting in the Lord. One day, you and I will get to meet Samson in heaven. His death was not tragic at all because it was his entrance into eternal life. He lost this life, but he lost it for his Lord. And in losing his life for his Lord, Samson gained eternal life.

That is the truth that puts all of our lives into perspective. It is that perspective that led Jesus to so strongly rebuke Peter in our Gospel. Peter did not keep that perspective. He thought that it would be tragic for Jesus to suffer and die, but the reality is that was the greatest triumph in the history of the world. Jesus' death paid the price for the sins of Samson, and of Peter, and of you and me. We could hardly think of a thing so tragic from an earthly perspective as the completely innocent death of someone who had never once sinned. We could hardly imagine something less fair than all our sins being laid on him, but that is exactly what happened! Jesus turned that tragedy into triumph, and in so doing turned all our tragedies into triumph. Because he lives again, we will live again. Samson will live again.

That is the truth that leads us to recommit ourselves day by day to carrying the cross that is set before us. Will people ridicule us because of our faith? Perhaps. Will we have to struggle against our sinful desires? Of course. Will we at times choose to do the difficult and the unpleasant things instead of the easy and fun things because we know what God wants for our lives? Yes, sometimes that is what it means to bear a cross. We will constantly try to live our lives with an eternal and a spiritual perspective. We will be willing to set aside everything for the sake of our Savior.

Could there be anything more tragic than the death of Samson? Certainly. Jesus tells us about the real tragedy when he says, **"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it...What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul?"** And true triumph will be when we lose our lives for our Lord. True triumph will be his gift to us of eternal life.

The Text: Judges 16:22–31 (NIV84)

<sup>22</sup> But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

<sup>23</sup> Now 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.”

<sup>24</sup> When 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.”

<sup>25</sup> While 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, <sup>26</sup> Samson 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.” <sup>27</sup> Now 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. <sup>28</sup> Then Samson prayed to the Lord, “O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.” <sup>29</sup> Then 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, <sup>30</sup> Samson 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.

<sup>31</sup> Then 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.