

THE LAST PRAYER OF SAMSON

Judges 16:1-31

"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." (16:28)

Robert Mugabe died in a few weeks ago at the age of 95. One of newspapers addressed his death and his 37-year reign in Zimbabwe with this title, "Robert Mugabe's life: from liberation hero to brutal dictator". He achieved Zimbabwe's independence, but his lonely death didn't make anyone to grieve. This is an anticipated life ending for the man who brought the downfall of the country and constant suffering of his own people.

Apparently Samson's life had no difference. God chose him a Nazirite, set apart to God from his birth, and a judge who would begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines (13:5). Samson, however, didn't live up to this privilege. He did whatever he felt good. His life was like a car crashed down the hill with broken brakes. Samson's downfall was anticipated, and his tragic life ending was too. Yet one thing he did at the end changed the whole story. At the end of his life, blinded and humiliated, and hopeless and helpless, Samson prayed to the LORD.

^{28a} O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more ...

"The last prayer of Samson", this is what we are going to learn. The passage today is not about Samson. It's about our merciful God, whom, I pray, you may meet today!

In the earlier chapters, when Samson traveled, he brought troubles. His life as a trouble maker continues in chapter 16. In fact, it became worse than before. Look at verses 1-3.

¹ One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. ² The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." ³ But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

One day Samson went to Gaza, deep into Philistine territory. Expectedly he didn't go there to fight against the Philistines. With no sign of shame or hesitation, he spent the night with a prostitute there. He freely indulged in his fleshly desires. His appearance with very long hair couldn't be concealed in public. The people in the city wanted to kill their enemy at dawn while he would fall asleep at a prostitute's house. Surprisingly, Samson got out there at midnight. The securely locked heavy gate couldn't hold him inside the city. He enjoyed the night and left the city as if nothing happened.

What was Samson thinking? All these were just fun for him? Was he too proud of his strength? He believed his was invincible? Samson was the most wanted man in the land. He could have been killed. In reality, no Philistines could do him any harm. It's because of the spirit of God who was with him, but Samson had an illusion that he was invincible because he was too strong. What he didn't know is this illusion or his pride was about to get him into deep trouble, and the trouble comes with the famous Delilah. Let's look at verses 4-6.

⁴ Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. ⁵ The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver." ⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

Samson fell in love? So far as the Bible informs us, he was in a relationship. Again word went out to the Philistines. But this time they were not in a hurry. They had learned their lesson. They were not about to engage Samson in battle with his full strength. They felt

the need to neutralize Samson's strength, and they had to find out the source of his strength. When they heard Samson was in love with Delilah, the Philistine rulers approached her, and offered her a deal that no one could reject - 1100 pieces of silver from each of the rulers. The rulers didn't need to threaten Delilah. As soon as she got an offer, she was a woman on a mission and that mission was to loosen the lips of Samson so that she could learn the secret of his power.

Samson had many reasons not to tell her about the source of his strength. Besides other reasons, he shouldn't disclose the secret to secure his very life. If he lost his power, obviously he could be killed by the Philistines whose only revenge was to kill Samson. But Delilah was very determined to loosen his lips. She made persistent efforts. Samson gave her incorrect answers three times - seven fresh thongs, new ropes and fabric on the loom (7-14). Each time Samson gave her a secret, she tried to bind him exactly the way Samson told her, let the Philistines hidden in the room. It obviously made Samson to realize what Delilah was trying to achieve.

It's not a game. It's not like he was fooling the Philistines with a riddle. It's a matter of life and death to Samson, yet he didn't cut off Delilah right away. Was he just toying with Delilah and loved to see her beg and cry? Did he believe that nothing would happen to him just as he avoided all dangers in the past? One thing is clear: Samson wasn't serious about this matter as much as Delilah really was. She continued to nag day after day until Samson was tired to death (16). She kept insisting until Samson finally reveal the secret of his power. Let's look at verse 17.

17 So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

Samson's revealing the secret of his power is not a small matter. That's why the conversation between Samson and Delilah is a major part of chapter 16. It's more than a conversation between lovers. As a Nazirite, God's chosen servant, he didn't live up to God's calling. He broke all vows as a Nazirite, only except he never used razor on his head. I don't know why he kept only this vow. He did keep it anyway. It means Samson recognized himself as a Nazirite at least, just as he said to Delilah in verse 17, "because I have been a Nazirite ..." even if his level of understanding was probably very shallow.

It looks a small matter, but to God, this is very important. It's the answer to the question why God never left Samson regardless of his ungodly life. God accepted Samson's awareness of his identity as his faith. You may not agree that Samson had faith or he had deep understanding of his identity. I agree. Samson is responsible for this criticism. Important thing is not Samson, but God who accepted this, and used it as a door knob to intervene in his life.

This is an important truth. God never left Samson when he recognized him as a Nazirite. It's important to us too. We are called to serve God in our daily lives. In reality, we are so caught up in things we cannot ignore. We have works to do at school or at work. We have people to take care of, our parents or children. We claim ourselves as Jesus' disciples or God's servants, but we couldn't or didn't do much for Him. In terms of hours we contribute to the LORD daily, "Are we better than Samson? Are we a good employee in God's business?" If it's a real job, we will definitely face retrenchment soon.

Thank God who is so merciful! God treats us with love and respect more than we deserve despite a very little contribution we make. Our merciful God doesn't see our performance results. Thankfully God sees how we are trying to serve God, remembering our divine identity. God sees how much we value our identity in this sinful world. God's servants appeared in the Bible were not perfect men. They had their own faults and flaws. One thing in common is they all remembered who they were and what God asked them to do in the world, even if the world was not favourable to their services.

Last Sunday we learned God's wonderful work in South Sudan. We know two men of God there. Sh. Oyor Moses and Padiet Deng. Sh. Oyor once he attended an international conference in America. His friends and even immigrant officers advised him to apply asylum, and not to come back to South Sudan for a better life. But he came back. All he knew mocked him for his foolish decision. But he chose to stay with brothers. He knew his identity as a servant of God in South Sudan. Sh. Padiet Deng has a chance to work and stay in Khartoum, living in a better environment for his family. But he too chose to stay in South Sudan to be with brothers there. They look foolish to this world. They had chances, but they refused to take it for the sake of God and brothers there. They don't need to claim that they have faith or they are God's servant, they show their faith and their identity in action. They have a clear calling from God to serve Him and His mission there. Yes they are busy also, struggle to survive, serving brothers in the worst environment on earth, but God has been working mightily in South Sudan and Egypt, using them as God's servant.

Unfortunately Samson revealed the secret. It means he gave up his identity. Then finally what's happened has happened. Look at verses 18-21.

18 When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. 19 Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. 20 Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. 21 Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

His hair was cut, and he was now deprived of his strength. The philistines captured him, gouged out his eyes, and bound him with chains. They set him to grinding grain in prison. In verse 20b, Samson did not know that the LORD had left him. God never left him when he did all kind of sinful deeds. But God left him when he gave up his identity.

Samson's misery didn't content the Philistines. They wanted to celebrate their victory in a way to humiliate Samson to an intolerable degree. In verses 23-25, the Philistines were assembled at the temple, giving praise to Dagon their god. The crowd had gathered exceeded limits of what that building could support, besides the people inside the temple, three thousand men and women were on the roof (27). They were in high spirits, obviously sumptuous foods being served, liquor being consumed, loud music and nasty dancers. It was time to bring Samson out of prison and have some fun with him. They were enjoying the sight of Samson, naked or only partly clothed, with still fresh wounds, lifeless eyes, so damaged physically and mentally.

Samson's humiliation was cruel, but fitting. It was Samson's eyes that got him into so much trouble. Now Samson's eyes were gouged out. Samson's strength was prostituted for his own purposes and glory, being so proud of his strength, now he was in chains, grinding grain, completely powerless. Samson was finally paying a high price for his sin.

In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, it would seem that Samson now saw things more clearly than he had ever seen them before. When Samson hit rock bottom, he began to think who God is seriously. Let's read verses 28-30.

28 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." 29 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, 30 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.

Samson prayed. Did he ever pray before? For the first time in his life, Samson prayed to the LORD. Samson had forgotten God for a long time, including the 20 years he had been a judge. Now he remembered God as Sovereign LORD. He asked God, "strengthen me just once more." Samson thought his strength came from his long hair. He believed he could use his strength as if it's his own. He didn't know that God was the true source of his strength. That's why he didn't need to pray. When his eyes were opened, seeing things clearly, he finally recognized God who existed and could give him the strength back even if his hair was cut. In the past, he relied on his own strength, and his own pride. Now he relied on God and His mercy.

I hope you may not misunderstand, that I'm not trying to make Samson a hero, a man who served as a model for Christian. I'm not encouraging you to live your own life, ignoring God, because God will accept you anyway. Absolutely not! Samson lived his life in the pursuit of fleshly pleasures, a man who cared too little about God, about Israel or about his divinely-given gifts and calling. In his prayer, he sought a personal revenge. Samson, in every aspect of life, fell short of the ideal. Samson's life would be ended predictably in a real tragedy, if Samson's story were just about him.

Fortunately, Samson's story is ultimately God's story. It's our merciful God who didn't let Samson suffered and humiliated in prison. When Samson prayed, God, who had many reasons to ignore him, answered his prayer. Why? God needed Samson to kill the Philistines because God was not that strong? God is so loving and merciful. Only because of God's mercy and grace, Samson regained his strength and could kill many Philistines at the end. It changed Samson's life completely. Samson's end changed "from lonely death in prison with shame and guilt to honorable death with God's enemies with forgiveness and hope". This made Samson's name is listed in Hebrews 11:32 as a man of faith, not because of his life, but because of his last prayer, and our merciful God who accepted it.

Samson brought great shame on God's name. He totally ignored God's existence and His sovereignty. God in His rightful sovereignty could have killed him before the Philistines. God, however, bore with Samson's pride and ignorance. God covered his eccentric character and wicked lifestyle with His spirit. It's our merciful God who indeed led Israel and delivered them during the dark times. And it's our merciful God who allowed Samson to participate in His works even if he didn't do much.

God is merciful to us too. How do we respond to His mercy? We may use no razor on our head, but do we recognize our divine identity in our daily lives? We, God's creatures, are called to serve God, the Creator, from our birth. Do we serve God in our daily lives? Are we not saying to ourselves, "I will sincerely serve God, only after I submit this important assignment, or only after I finish this semester, or only after graduation, or after getting a job at least, or after when my salary increase enough to support my family, or after I get married, or only after my kids no longer use nappies" If so, then we will gradually lose our identity, having an illusion that we are God's children, but we find ourselves later in the prison of this world, and the prison of ourselves which is selfish and corrupt. We may realize a bit that we are far away from God, but no strength to get back to senses and go back to God. Then we are completely disconnected from God, living like Samson today.

But if we respond to our merciful God with repentance, recognizing our identity in our sovereign LORD, like Samson did pray at the end, we will be found in God again. The God of Samson is still here today with us. You haven't done much for God this year? It's ok. You regretted the years you wasted without serving God? It's ok, it's not late. You are thinking of leaving God for a while until you finish something urgent and important in your life? It's never too late to pray to the God of Samson, our merciful God. In fact, God has been bearing our pride and ignorance since the beginning of our days in this world. He has been waiting for us to come to Him and accept our identity as God's children, and truly live a life worthy of our calling. The God of Samson is with us. The God of mercy and grace never leave us as long as we remember who we are and who God truly is. May you be greatly encouraged and comforted by the God of Samson! May you all be blessed to meet with God, loving and merciful, at the upcoming Bible conference!