

Judges 16

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Date: 15 February 2015

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[0 : 00] Are you sitting comfortably? I want to tell you a story. In fact, three stories. And not just any stories, but three love stories. I hope you haven't become so cynical that that doesn't capture your attention. Three love stories I want to share with you this morning. Three love stories.

Four St. Valentine's Day. A day late, but hey, what's a day between friends? And who would have thought that we could find three love stories in the book of Judges, and very particularly in the chapter that we've read this morning? The three stories that I want to tell you are as follows. First of all, a love story of twisted love. It's a love story, but a sad love story, for it is a story of twisted love. But then also, I'm going to tell you a story of surprising love. And then, finally, we'll end with a story of epic love. A story of twisted love, a story of surprising love, and a story of epic love.

The first, then, is a story of twisted love, and it concerns the famous couple we read of in Judges chapter 16, Samson and Delilah. And this story, this story of twisted love, it has a passionate beginning.

It has also, sadly, a flawed foundation, and it has a sorry but inevitable end. And we'll think of the story along those lines. So, let's start with the passionate beginning to this love story. What are we told in verse 4 of chapter 16? Some time later, he, Samson, fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. Samson fell in love with Delilah. Delilah, it would seem, was different.

[2 : 28] Different to all the others. Samson was sure that she was the one. Now, Samson had known his fair share of one-night stands. Indeed, in this very chapter, it begins with a record of one of those. But Delilah Delilah was different. Delilah was about more than just sex. Samson, we're told, fell in love with Delilah.

This aging alpha male had finally fallen in love big time. I wonder if Delilah was the first woman he had truly loved. We don't know. We know that there had been an aborted attempt at marriage many years before, and who knows what had happened in the intervening years that perhaps we're not told off.

But I wonder if Delilah was the first woman to whom he had said, I love you. And Samson did pronounce those words. He did say those words to Delilah, those words that many men find so difficult to pronounce.

I love you. And we have that on the testimony of Delilah herself. That in verse 15, as she seeks to secure the information that she is so desperate to secure, what does she say?

Then she said to him, Delilah said to Samson, how can you say, I love you, when you won't confide in me? These were words that Samson directed to Delilah, I love you. I don't know about you, but I've never thought of Samson as the touchy-feely type. But in the presence of his goddess, and I use that word advisedly, and we'll come back to that in a moment, in the presence of his goddess, the words, I love you, just seem so right. This was a passionate beginning to this affair between Samson and Delilah. But what about Delilah? Was it all on the one side? Was it all about Samson and his infatuation? What about Delilah?

[4 : 55] Did she ever love Samson? We're so familiar with the heartless treachery that she succumbed to that it's difficult for us to imagine that she ever loved Samson at all. But I ask the question, and we can do no more than that. What about at the very beginning? What about before the rulers of the Philistines seduced her with the prospect of wealth and adulation? At the very beginning, did she also love Samson? Samson and Delilah were clearly an item before Delilah chose to betray him. She wouldn't have been able to betray him had they not been an item. And what about the very beginning of that relationship?

Why was it that Delilah ever agreed to be part of this romance with Samson? Why did Delilah, let me just think about it a little, why did Delilah risk the displeasure and rejection of her own people by succumbing to the advances of the hated and despised Israelite strongman? Now it's true that the rulers of the Philistines then saw that this was an opportunity to bring Samson down. But when Delilah began this relationship, she wasn't to know that they would see it in those terms. She risked, did she not, the rejection of her people for even contemplating such a relationship with the hated Samson? And so I wonder, and I can do no more than that, I wonder if she did not also fall in love. Just as we're told Samson fell in love with a woman whose name was Delilah. I wonder if Delilah did not fall in love with a man whose name was Samson. It was, it seems to me, a passionate and a romantic beginning. But it was also a beginning blighted with a flawed foundation. You know, it's not enough to fall in love to fall in love to fall in love or even to be in love. Contrary to popular wisdom. How many fatal decisions have been grounded in the words, but I love him, but I love her. It's got to be okay. We love each other. And I'm sure many of you here can resonate with that and know where I'm coming from, can imagine and visualize and picture flawed relationships grounded on that very weak foundation. Ah, but I love him. I love her so much. I say this is a flawed foundation because Samson and Delilah, notwithstanding the love that they shared, were fundamentally incompatible. Samson was a man dedicated to the service of the Lord. He had been separated by God and for God from his birth, while Delilah belonged to a people who worshipped the false god, Dagon. Now you can maybe excuse Delilah, but Samson should have known better. And the flawed foundation is to be seen not only in the flawed choice of partner, but in the casual nature of their relationship. This was not a relationship grounded in a commitment that was lifelong and exclusive, but rather this was a romantic and passionate affair. It was flawed, fatally flawed. And again, I would draw out of this a lesson that is a valuable lesson, one that we find difficult sometimes to accept when we are in love, but be very careful with the oft-repeated mantra, but I love him. It's not just about feelings, romantic feelings, genuine feelings that we might have. It's about more than that. A passionate beginning coupled with a flawed foundation, but also a sorry and inevitable end to this love story. It all ends in tears. Why so? Well, leaving to one side the aspect of the unequal yoke, what fatal flaws can we detect in the relationship itself?

You see, despite all the protestations of undying love that perhaps there would have been had Samson and Delilah been challenged, the principle that both Samson and Delilah were operating on in their relationship was to be summed up in a question. What's in it for me? What's in it for me? Let's think of Samson. What was in it for Samson? Well, for Samson, this relationship provided excitement. It provided thrill. It provided pleasure. All commodities that the lovely Delilah was more than able to deliver.

[10:19] I wonder also, and again, there's a sense in which we can do no more than wonder, but I wonder if Samson was also hooked on danger. Delilah was not only delicious, she was dangerous. And for Samson, perhaps that was part of the attraction. He was addicted to Delilah. He was addicted to her beauty.

He was addicted to her sexual favors. He was addicted to the dangerous delight of playing with fire. This suggestion that Samson was addicted to Delilah would perhaps help explain his irrational refusal to walk away. I wonder, have you ever been struck by that? As you've heard this story read or you've read the story, why didn't he walk away? It was so obvious what was going on. Delilah was not subtle when she spoke about her intentions, about her desire to have him captured, that he would lose his strength, and time and time again, the same thing. Why didn't he walk away? Well, I wonder if here we don't have an example of an example of the power of addiction. He was addicted to this woman, and it blinded him to the folly and the foolishness of what he was doing. Isn't that true of so many addictions?

Samson addicted to this woman. What about Delilah? What was in it for Delilah? Well, the storyline is clear on this front. Samson became, I'm suggesting not from the very beginning, but became her opportunity for serious money. The rulers of the Philistines approach her, knowing that she's in this relationship, and they make this proposal to her. If you discover the secret of his strength, we will each give you 1,100 shekels of silver. Now, we won't try and convert that into modern money, but I don't think it takes a genius to work out that we're talking some serious money here. And it wasn't just 1,100 shekels. They were each going to give her that. Previously in the book, we're told of there being five rulers of the Philistines. And it's quite possible that here, though the number isn't given, that it is these five rulers of the Philistines who are being referred to. So we're talking about a

serious windfall for Delilah if she would but succeed in the task and the challenge given to her, and abandon and betray her lover. This is what was in it for Delilah. And not only money, but also adulation and fame, delivering Samson into the hands of the Philistine rulers would convert Delilah overnight into a national treasure, into a heroine. This is the man who had caused so much grief for the Philistines, who they had been unable to defeat. And yet here was an opportunity for one of their own to achieve what armies hadn't achieved. The prize for Delilah was not only wealth, it was status and fame and popularity. And so that's what was in it for Delilah. This is what she could get from this relationship. Samson and Delilah are an extreme case of twisted and self-serving love. Two lovers using one another rather than serving one another. What's in it for me rather than how can I serve you? Why do so many relationships and romances and marriages end in tears and worse?

Well, often because they operate on that same principle, what's in it for me? And while there's something in it for me, I remain. But when there's no longer anything in it for me, I'm off.

This was a twisted love affair. Listen, learn, and beware. The second love story is a story of surprising love. And the characters in this love story are Samson and the Lord. And this story has a promising beginning. It has a painful separation and a surprising reconciliation. The promising beginning of this story can be traced to before Samson is even born. The Lord, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, assures Samson's mother of his loyal love and commitment to Samson. In chapter 13, we are given the message that God sends through the angel. The boy will be a Nazarite of God from birth. Here was Samson, separated by God, separated for God. The boy Samson was from birth in a committed relationship of loyal, love with the Lord. The Lord loved Samson. And Samson, as he grew and understood how favored and loved he was, would surely love the Lord back. Is that not what it was meant to be about? But things didn't work out that way. The promising beginning led in due course to a painful separation. Now, some might say that they drifted apart. But that would be to suggest a shared responsibility that does violence to the truth.

[16:20] The reality is that Samson drifted away from the Lord. He knew the Lord, and I'm sure he professed commitment to and love for the Lord. But actions speak louder than words or even than unexpressed sentiments.

Samson was unfaithful to the one who chose him and loved him. He was more captivated by Philistine women than committed to the one who had loved him from the womb and indeed from before the womb. He found the company of Delilah more delightful than devotion to the one whose love for him was faithful and true.

Samson drifted from the Lord, but the drifting did culminate in a moment of deliberate and somber separation. I'm talking about when Samson finally succumbs to the pleading and manipulation of Delilah and reveals to her the secret of his strength. He tells her everything, as Delilah so eloquently puts it, indeed Samson himself. At that point, there is a definite break. There is a definite separation on the part of Samson from the one who so loved him. This is a critical point for many though his sins had been. In this matter, Samson had remained faithful. He had kept the obligation of his vow that no razor be used on his head. He himself is very clear that this was an obligation placed upon him, an obligation that he had been faithful to through all his wild years, through all his rebellious days.

In this, at least in this, Samson had been faithful, but no longer. Now even this last vestige of loyal love to his Lord was discarded. And with this act of unfaithfulness, Samson was separating himself from the one who loved him with an eternal love. But what of the one spurned? How does the Lord respond to Samson's unfaithfulness? Well, the answer to this question is to be found in words that are among the most somber in the most somber in the whole of the Bible. When Samson awoke, shorn of his hair, we're told in verse 20, he did not know that the Lord had left him. A painful separation instigated by Samson, but reciprocated by the Lord. Is this the end? Is this the sad, tragic end to this love story?

Another tragic love story that ends in tears. Well, thank God that this is not the end, for there is in this story a surprising reconciliation. We know the story. Samson is the victim of torture and torment, and then in an ordeal of merciless humiliation, he is called to the temple of Dagon to prance like a performing bear for his captors. He can see nothing, but he can hear. He can hear the taunts and the songs of praise to Dagon. Samson, the one called to begin the deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines. In the very words of God, describing his calling, this Samson is now the one giving the Philistines cause to rejoice in their victory over the Israelites and

the God of the Israelites.

[20 : 23] And Samson begins to reflect on the one he has spurned. Samson dares to imagine that the Lord might yet love him and use him. Samson, in these terrible circumstances, remembers the Lord. He remembers that his God is able. He remembers that his God is the sovereign Lord. And as he remembers, he dares to believe that the Lord might remember him. And so he prays, O sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more. And let me with one blow get revenge in the Philistines for my two eyes.

He cries out to the God he had spurned. But we wonder, we ask the question, if we didn't know the end of the story, we might reasonably ask the question, why does he bother?

Why does he bother calling out to God? Remember me. Have we not been told that the Lord had left him? Yes, the Lord had left him, but the Lord had not abandoned him. Samson was cast down, but he was not cast off. The leaving of Samson was for a season to bring Samson to his senses. The Lord was not done with Samson. The Lord had never stopped loving Samson. The Lord had promised that Samson would be a Nazarite from birth until the day of his death. This was the promise that God made. This boy will be a Nazarite from the day of his birth to the day of his death, and the Lord is not in the business of breaking his promises. Samson's ultimate perseverance, and indeed our ultimate perseverance as believers, is secured not by our faithfulness to God, but by God's commitment to us, and indeed to himself and to his own word. He will drag us over the line if that is what it takes.

And so when Samson cries out, the Lord hears and answers. The Lord hears and answers the unfaithful, foolish, and fallen Samson. This is grace, grace abounding to the chief of sinners. If we are faithless, he remains faithful. Samson is granted strength one last time to secure both his own and the Lord's vindication. And beyond mere vindication, Samson is enabled in death to a degree that he had never achieved in life to begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines, that which was his great calling.

And I say to you, there is a message of hope and encouragement for you. Whatever you are, however far you may have fallen, here is Samson, his eyes gouged out, humiliated, humble, in the temple of Dagon. You couldn't imagine a worse place to be. You couldn't imagine a less promising place to be.

[23 : 56] Cry out to God, hear, pray here, he'll never hear me. But God heard and God answered, whatever you are, if you cry out to God. If you cry out to God, he is the God who hears and he is the God who delights to answer.

You may be cast down, but you're not cast off. He may have left you for a season, but it's with a view to bringing you back to himself.

Cry out with Samson. Whatever you are, however dark, however diabolic the pit you may be in, and praise the God whose love is so surprising, even shocking in its unshakableness, God just won't stop loving his own.

But let's close with a final story, the third story, a story of epic love. And the characters in this love story are the Lord and his people. You are part of this story. You see, Samson, and the book of Judges, and every weird and wonderful, and yes, every dark and disturbing story in the Bible are part of a bigger story, the greatest and most epic love story of all, the story of God's love for his own. It is a love story with a promising beginning, back in the Garden of Eden, where all was sweetness and light.

It is a love story with a painful separation, as Adam and Eve spurn the one who loved them, and so are cast from God's near and tender presence. It is a love story of God lovingly bringing back to the garden of his love and friendship those who are afar off. It is a love story that tells of God's faithful and stubborn love that endures the pain and indignity of serial unfaithfulness on the part of his people, and yet that will not let them go. It is a story of love that saves the unwilling and delivers the reluctant. It is a story of saving love that is seen in a measure as God raises up deliverance of deliverance. It is a love story of God's love that saves the utmost. It is a love love story that saves the utmost of the utmost. It is a love story that saves the utmost of the deliverance of Israel, but point forward to another who will save to the uttermost. The whole epic love story centers on the greatest act of self-giving love the world has ever witnessed. For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

[27 : 04] Samson dimly and darkly points forward to the one the Father has sent to save. The one who, like Samson, was betrayed for a few filthy coins. The one who, like Samson, was subjected to

torture and mockery.

The one who, like Samson, achieved far more in death than he ever achieved in life. Samson, we're told tellingly, killed many more when he died than while he lived. Jesus saved many more when he died than while he lived. Jesus completed what Samson could only begin. Samson, and all like Samson, could begin. But they couldn't conclude only Jesus. Only Jesus could be the one, was the one, and is the one, who has completed God's perfect work of redemption for his people. This is the epic love story that Samson and Delilah surprisingly and shockingly form a part of. But you know the thing about love, even epic love is this. It demands a response. God has demonstrated his love, his epic love, in the giving of his own son, Jesus, to be our Savior. And God continues to show his love as he graciously invites you into his saving embrace. How will you respond? How do you respond to God's loving advances?

How do you respond to God's love demonstrated in such epic proportions in the giving of his son, to die in your place on Calvary's tree? How do you respond? Do you put your trust in Jesus? Do you receive the gift of love that is laid out before you? Or will you spurn the one who so loves you? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for what it tells of your loving and gracious dealings with your people throughout history. We thank you that you are indeed a God who is love. You're a God who gives ample evidence of the reality and truth of that statement. We thank you for the evidence of your love displayed so wonderfully in the person of your son and in the giving of your son to be our Savior. We pray that we would indeed be enabled by you to respond to your loving advances, to put our trust in Jesus, and to continue to trust in him as our Lord and sufficient Savior. And these things we pray in his name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.