

Resurrected Purpose Judges 16:28-31

I remember very clearly when God called me to be a pastor. I was sitting in English class in 9th grade. I was bored. My teacher's room was on the second floor and from where I sat I could see the modest belltower of the church we attended. As I stared out the window, I thought to myself, "I wonder what Pastor Steve is up to right now?" And the thought of doing whatever he was doing filled me with joy.

13 years later to the day, I sat in an apartment in Nashville, Tennessee without a purpose or a direction. I had just received a phone call that had blown my life apart and for the first time in years, I thought about that moment in English class 600 miles and a lifetime away and I wondered, "Was it all just something I made up?"

When we left Samson he was chained to a grist mill that likely weighed about 3300 pounds. Day after day, all day long, he used what little of was left of his great strength to walk in a perfect circle about 90 feet in diameter turning the millstone to grind the flour for the bread of his enemies using the sweat of his face. The Philistines had put out his eyes--blinding. Among the last things he saw was the face of the woman Delilah who had betrayed him for silver to make him captive to the Philistines.

The Bible tells us He loved her.

So down in the city of Gaza, a city whose gates he had ripped from their foundations, the champion, the conqueror, Samson the superhero was a beaten, broken, slave to the enemies of God. He was so weak and helpless that a young boy could now guard him.

Things couldn't have been worse. You may remember Samson's God-given purpose. God Himself, the Word of God, the pre-incarnate Christ showed up at Samson's parents' home before he was born. Samson's mother had been unable to conceive, and God told her personally that she was going to give birth to a son who was going to save God's people from their overlords, the Philistines.

And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

Judges 13:3-5

Samson was beaten, humiliated and the man who was going to set the people of God free from slavery now the biggest slave of all. John Milton's poem *Samson Agonistes* imagines Samson lamenting with these words:

**Designed for great exploits; if I must die, betrayed, captured, and both my eyes put out,
made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze; To grind in Brazen Fetters under task with
this heaven-gifted strength? O glorious strength! Put to the labor of a Beast, debased
lower then bonds slave! Promise was that I Should *Israel* from *Philistine* yoke deliver; Ask for**

this great Deliverer now, and find him eyeless in *Gaza* at the mill with slaves, himself in bonds under *Philistine* yoke.

Milton got it right. Samson could not have been lower.

What happened to Samson can rightly be called a ‘crucifixion.’

A crucifixion happens when our hopes and dreams are broken, our vision for the future blown apart and we find ourselves in a reality that we would never have envisioned, never saw coming and we have expended our own resources, gifts, abilities and what we can do has fallen miserably short.

Crucifixion is terrible. It is a painful, horrific, heart-rending experience. It is a death to self and our self-centered desires, patterns and habits.

When we are crucified we lose all hope of helping ourselves, finding the answers, working our way out of it.

But if we are blessed, we have been there.

Blessed? Why? Crucifixion is terrible.

Yet, I don’t know one person whose walk with Jesus makes a difference in their life, who lives differently than the world, whose daily existence looks anything like what Jesus says our life should look like who cannot point to at least one crucifixion experience and often more.

I can point to a couple of crucifixions in my life and I believe crucifixion is necessary a way-station for a follower of Jesus. If we are going to realize the God-given potential innate in all of us, we must experience a crucifixion of our sinful flesh. Dallas Willard put it like this:

The ‘death to self’ of which scripture and tradition speak is simply an acceptance that if we merely do what ‘normal people’ do we will die. It is the cross applied to our daily existence and a breaking of the grip of the sin that drives us.

And this is where Samson found himself. He had done things his way—the normal way, the sinful way. And now things were worse than even before. Not only was he a blinded, humiliated slave to the people whom he was supposed to defeat, from whom he was supposed to free his people, Samson became the centerpiece in a celebration to their vile god.

Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, “Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.” And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, “Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.” And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars.

Judges 16:23-25

The Philistines were a sea-faring people. They were not original to Canaan, the Promised Land, but had come in ships across the Mediterranean. The god they worshipped, Dagon, resembled a fish. He was a half-fish, half-man, a merman of sorts. The people of the near East, outside of Israel, were famous for religious rituals and rites and celebrations that strained the boundaries of what we might consider right and proper. Most of these rites involved orgies, drunkenness, and even human sacrifice. And worshipping Dagon was no exception.

You can see when a society, a nation, a culture is destroying itself—being eaten alive from within. First, how do they treat the most vulnerable, the weakest, and the marginalized? Are the powerless sacrificed so the powerful can live how they want? Are the powerless ignored and allowed to fend for themselves or purposefully made dependents and wards of the powerful to be used for their purposes?

Second, how does society regard sex? Is sex and sexuality a gift from God, a covenantal rather than a carnal act? Is sex separated from creation simply to become recreation? Are people merely sexual beings to be used and dismissed? Is sex beautiful or ugly? Sacred and set apart or pervasive and perverse?

When the vulnerable are violated and sexuality is vile, destruction is not far behind. It will come crashing down unless God's grace intervenes, and the people repent. No people, no culture, no nation can continually fracture the eternal law of God, do what is right in their own eyes and not expect to court devastation. We cannot defy the natural law no more than we can defy the law of gravity. God never destroys a nation that is not already doing it to themselves. He mercifully finishes the work they started.

And the text implies this was the case at Dagon's temple because the Word says "When their hearts were merry, they cried out, 'Call Samson, that he may entertain us.'" In other words, the Philistines got drunk worshipping Dagon and decided to mock of Samson. He became the night's entertainment.

The Philistines called Samson out of the prison and had placed him between the two giant support pillars that held the temple together. Archaeology supports this by the way. In ruins of the ancient city of Gath, the home of the giant Goliath and one of the five cities of the Philistines along with Gaza, there are the ruins of a temple to Dagon. It was excavated in 2010 and the archaeologists determined that it was supported by two massive pillars that stood six feet apart right in the center of the structure. **(insert picture of ruins)**

Between two pillars like those stood Samson—blinded, chained, the object of mockery and scorn his supernatural strength drained from his body. You can almost hear the jeers of the Philistines—not unlike the jeers Jesus heard as He hung on the cross.

"Where is his God now?"

"Look at the Judge of Israel!"

"King of the Jews!"

"He saved others but he cannot save himself!"

Samson stood appearing like a defeated man. But we are told something very important. Samson's strength was gone and the Philistines were able to capture, blind and bind him because as he laid his head on the knees of the woman she loved and slept, his head was shaved.

While Samson ground at the mill, his sapped strength turning a millstone day after crushing day, his hair began to grow.

God was still with him. Samson had been crucified but he was not cut off. Samson had been crushed but God's work was not complete.

So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who held him by the 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. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained. Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes."

Judges 16:25-29

Samson asked the child guarding him to put his hands on those two pillars that stood six feet apart—ostensibly so he could rest. The boy obliged and then Samson, with calloused palms resting flush against the rough stone of the pillars, prayed. It was only the second time we are told Samson prayed. His first prayer was more of a demand. Samson was thirsty and he asked God if he wanted him to die of thirst after the Lord had delivered him in battle.

It was more ultimatum than request. His first prayer was a man basking in victory demanding that God reward him.

This time was different. This was a man reaching out to God in defeat.

Samson was humbled, chastened, penitent, contrite:

"O Lord God, please remember me and strengthen me just one more time..."

It's not a perfect prayer. Samson is still seeking vengeance for himself rather than glory for God.

But God doesn't hear our prayers because they're perfect. God hears our prayers because He is patient and long suffering and filled with grace. God doesn't hear our prayers because of what we say. God hears our prayer because of who He is.

And the Holy Spirit, we are promised, intercedes with sighs too deep for words, so our Heavenly Father hears our prayers.

What matters is the Lord's faithfulness to us and Samson finally came to the point where he knew his reliance on the Lord's strength rather than His.

And there is a word for this too: resurrection.

If crucifixion is the realization we have no answers, that our strength is spent and we are dead in our trespasses and sins—resurrection is the acceptance of God’s strength instead of our own. Resurrection trusting God’s work in our life more than our own.

Even Jesus wasn’t raised by His own strength. Jesus is human. Jesus was dead. It was the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus.

When Samson called upon the Lord to strengthen him on more time, he called upon that same God and that same power. And that same God and that same power can resurrect you.

God breaks what He uses so that what He uses depends not upon its own strength but leans upon God’s strength for His purposes.

And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So, the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.

Judges 16:29–30

Samson stood between the two pillars his arms stretched out like he was hanging on a cross. And the Holy Spirit filled him with strength one more and Samson leaned on each the pillars of that temple. We are told that the temple to Dagon was filled with people and there were beyond that about 3,000 people on the roof.

And it was Samson’s greatest victory and the last time Scripture describes the Philistines ruling over the people of God. God used Samson to set His people free. Even though Samson wasn’t faithful to God, God was faithful to Samson. Even though Samson was imperfect, God’s purposes were perfect. Even though Samson had been crucified, the power of God resurrected him.

And Jesus can do the same for you.

Sometimes we are crucified by what we do. Sometimes we are crucified by what others do to us. Sometimes our crucifixion is bad health, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, a broken relationship, a rejection, a failure, an incalculable loss, a sudden realization. Crucifixions come from many places.

Resurrections come from one place—Jesus Christ. We look everywhere for a resurrection. We’ll spend everything we have seeking one—but in end they only come from Jesus.

And resurrection does not just restore what we have lost—in fact it rarely does. A resurrection raises us up and refines us, elevates us into someone we were not before, brings us closer to Jesus and the purpose He has for our life.

The resurrection of my call to ministry began when I was a graduate student in religion preparing to teach at a college, a year before I knew I would need a resurrection.

I was looking for a job to help pay the bills while I studied so I went to the placement office. I had applied to wait tables, work at Best Buy, a lobbyist at the state capitol.

I got nowhere and I had only worked in the Church and I had vowed never to do again so I thought "Maybe if I just worked for the church for a few more months, it could be a bridge to something else."