

But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. ²³ *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.”*

²⁴ *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.”*

²⁵ *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, ²⁶ *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.”* ²⁷ *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.* 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.*

³¹ *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. (Judges 16:22-31)*

God Always Wins in the End

What is the biggest threat to our churches today? One candidate has to be what’s going on in the world today, don’t you think? I mean, in a world where the Islamic State beheads people and posts the video online and tries to wipe out all Christians in the towns it takes, in a world where Nigerian Islamic radicals kidnap hundreds of Christian school girls and force them to convert to Islam and marry, in a world where courts strike down laws that forbid gay marriage, it may feel like our biggest threat is the world out there. But some people might make a different argument. They might say that we Christians are our own worst enemies. They could point to the lack of enthusiasm and commitment that so many Christians show – they fail to come to church and they fail to apply what God says to their lives. They could point to sex scandals and money scandals and the infighting that plagues churches. They could point to all the doctrinal problems that rage in our day. Which perspective is correct? The truth is, I don’t know. There are days when I feel like either one could win the prize. Whichever enemy is crowned king of the threats we Christians face, God has an important message for us today in the story of Samson: **God always wins in the end.**

I. God triumphs over our enemies.

II. God triumphs over our failures.

I.

The life of Samson illustrates both sides of that truth. Samson lived between the time when Moses and Joshua brought Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land and the time of the kings, like David and Solomon. During this era, Israel’s enemies attacked again and again. God raised up leaders to defend them. Traditionally, we’ve called these leaders “judges” but they were more military than judicial figures. Samson was one of the last of those judges. The enemy he faced was the Philistines. For twenty years, he fought a running battle with them. Our text for today tells us the end of his story. Samson had been captured because of his own pride and unfaithfulness. The Philistines had blinded and imprisoned him and then they scheduled a celebration. Thousands of people gathered at the temple of their god, Dagon, along with all the leaders of the Philistine nation.

The Philistines called Samson, “**The one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.**” He had been an effective champion of Israel. But by definition, unbelievers can’t accept that God is really working. These unbelievers – both the leaders and the people – were convinced that they had captured him because their god was better than Israel’s God. They just did not understand that what God was doing to Samson had nothing to do with them. He was disciplining his child for his unfaithfulness. He just happened to use them to do it.

They also showed the pride of the unbeliever: they thought that now they were safe. They called this big celebration together. They ate and drank and then they began to yell to bring out Samson to “perform” for them. Now, the Bible doesn’t tell us what they made him do. Whatever it was, they thought it was hilarious. But they don’t seem to have noticed that his hair had grown back. It took some time to organize a big feast like this and they didn’t keep his head shaved. Samson was a Nazirite. That means that he was dedicated to God. One of the signs of his dedication was that he didn’t cut his hair. Before Samson was born, God set him apart to deliver Israel. God gave him great strength to do that. But he tied that strength to his hair, as the sign of his vow. As long as he didn’t cut his hair he had the strength.

Samson was captured when his Philistine mistress cut his hair while he was sleeping. Once the enemies of God’s people had captured and blinded him, they never considered the possibility that he might become dangerous again. Of course, you all heard what happened. Samson asked the servant who was with him to put him by the main supporting pillars of the temple. Then he pushed them over and toppled that building and killed more people than he had in all his previous battles. The dead included the political and military leaders of the Philistines. So just when it looked like God’s people were down and out, God rescued them.

What does that tell us about today? Here in America, we don’t have an armed enemy attacking us. But Christianity is constantly being pushed back. Every victory in the courts or in the media seems like proof to unbelievers that God isn’t really there or that he can’t really do anything. Unbelievers like to ask the “where is your God” question – “where is your God when your houses burn down or you get cancer or you lose at life?” The Philistines of Samson’s day remind us that unbelievers don’t always know as much as they think that they do. In a sinful world, God allows his Church to suffer persecutions and setbacks because we live by faith and not by sight. If we always won, it wouldn’t be take much faith to trust God’s promises. Sometimes, God disciplines us, just like he did Samson. Sometimes our failures and our setbacks have more to do with our hearts not listening to his word than they have to do with what the unbelievers out there are up to. God in love chooses to let us struggle with defeat and failure to lead us back to him and his word. But that very act of God’s love and discipline looks to an unbeliever like proof that he isn’t there.

And no unbeliever will ever understand God’s promise that even those defeats and failures are really for our good. God works through every loss and disappointment to sustain our faith until we reach eternal life. But how can I prove that all the defeats and losses really work for our good? Not by analyzing what came next. Sometimes God in his grace sometimes lets us see what he’s doing, but most of the time, it just isn’t that clear. I prove that God is working in love by going back to the cross. Jesus died there because you and I needed him to rescue us from a lifetime of sin and rebellion. He laid down his life so that we will live. How can we doubt that he will run our lives so that we reach eternal life with him? I prove God’s power by going back to the empty tomb. There, Jesus conquered death itself. If he can break the power of death, he can do all that we need to make it through our messy lives here and reach heaven. So no matter how bad it seems here, no matter how many militants are wiping out Christians all over the world, no matter how many people argue that our religion is just evil, **God always wins in the end. He triumphs over our enemies.**

II.

But what about when we Christians are our own worst enemies? That was true about Samson. Most of us probably remember the story of Samson from Sunday school. We know he had a relationship with Delilah, an unbeliever who nagged him to tell her the secret of his strength until he did. Then she betrayed him to his enemies. That brought him to this grisly ending. What I don’t know is whether we realize just how disappointing Samson was as a leader of Israel. Again and again, he acted like a spoiled child. He was guilty of sexual sins. He was just not a good example of what a leader of God’s people should be.

His own unfaithfulness led him to disaster. But God used his greatest failure to lead him back to his Lord. On the last day of his life, we see a very different man, a repentant man who prays to God in darkness and distress. He prayed, “**O Sovereign LORD, remember me.**” In prison, tormented by his captors, he felt

alone. He must have thought about how he got into that position and what he had done. Then he remembered God's promises to forgive and help his people and he prayed that God would remember him.

He also prayed that God would give him one last chance to serve as the champion of Israel. Now, he phrased it as a request for revenge for his eyes. Like us, his faith was imperfect and even his prayers could've been clearer. But at the same time, he was the Lord's chosen defender of his people. He asked to strike one last blow for them. God granted that request. He allowed his strength to return and Samson did more damage than he had done in all the twenty years he had led Israel. Yes, Samson did ask God to let him die with the Philistines. Was that suicide? I think it's best to see his words as asking for this to be the end of his labors. He knew that pulling down the temple could only result in his death. He asked God to speed his passing and bring him home to heaven. God granted that request, too.

Samson could've been a much better servant of the Lord. In the moments before he pulled that pagan temple down, it looked like he had done more harm than good. The Philistines were in charge. Israel was going to suffer. But God did not let his church go down because of their leader's failures. God is still in charge. Whether you're a pastor or a teacher or a church leader or simply another Christian who comes to this church, you have a part to play here. God has called you Christian fathers to lead your family in hearing his word and living a Christian life. How do you do at that work? Are you more like Samson than you'd like to admit? Does sin and selfishness make you a disappointing servant of God? Certainly, we pastors and teachers and the leaders of our congregation have to ask that question in an even more pointed way. But all of us, no matter our gender or our age, men or women, children or adults, we all are a part of the people of God. We all have a part to play in the work that God does here.

All our sins and failures hurt the whole body of Christ that meets here. All our unfaithfulness slows down the work. Samson's sin was pride and that pride led him to fail to take living as a believer seriously. We American Christians have had it so good for so long that so many of us just don't take our faith seriously anymore. We don't think about the promise we made when we were confirmed that we would conform all our lives to the teachings of God's Word. We don't remember that he who listens to God does what God says – he comes to church, he studies the word, and he sets an example of life and love every day. For too many of us, Sunday morning is a chore that we have to do and then forget about.

Only God can calculate the damage that attitude does to his church. Only God knows how long we can continue in that attitude before our faith dies. But God is gracious. He sent his Son Jesus to be the one perfect church member, the one perfectly dedicated heart that ever lived. All his life long, Jesus lived for God the Father. That life he lived, he lived for us. God sees him when he looks at us. So God doesn't see us neglecting to take our faith seriously. God sees Jesus and he calls us perfect.

And Jesus laid down his life to pay for all the failures of us pastors and teachers, and of the leaders of our churches, and of Christian fathers to be the spiritual heads of their households. Jesus died for all the sin of every man, woman and child in every church on earth, and indeed, even of those who never come in. Jesus died and he paid for all of us. He wiped our sin away forever. Now, in God's sight, we are not the unfaithful, selfish, arrogant believers that Samson was for most of his life. We are the perfect believer Jesus was.

To make sure that work of Christ is ours personally, he makes us the repentant believers that Samson became. God hears our prayer for mercy when we repent. He forgives us. He works through the gospel we preach, through communion and baptism and confession and forgiveness of sins and he wins inside us. God reaches into our hearts and he changes us so that we can follow him ever more faithfully. God even protects our congregation from the spiritual damage that we can all do to each other. He works in spite of us, to extend his kingdom, to build up his people, to rescue and save them, even when church leaders and church members don't do their duty. No matter how weak we are, no matter how sinful we have been, **God always wins in the end. He triumphs over our failures.**

What is the greatest threat our churches face? Even if I could answer that question today, who's to say it wouldn't change tomorrow? When I was a child, no one ever dreamed of ISIS chopping off people's heads and posting the videos online. Nor did we ever think the day would come when gay marriage would be viewed as normal. Who knows how the devil will attack us next week or next year? We can't. Only God does. When the devil uses the powers of the world around us to torment us, we have God's promise that we will triumph over this world and live with him forever. When the devil appeals to the sin in our own hearts and the selfishness that lives there, we have God's promise that the gospel will work in us. We are forgiven. We are

loved. We will triumph over our own weakness through the power of the Holy Spirit working in the gospel.
And we will reach eternal life. Amen.