

Dear People Who Serve the Lord,

Many of you have heard of Samson of the book of Judges. It may have been a while since you have read that portion of Old Testament history. Let me review.

God's people, the Israelites came out of slavery in Egypt. Moses and Joshua and all that generation had passed away. The Israelites were not ruled by a king, but were ruled by God through various Judges. The first was Judge was Othniel and the last was the prophet Samuel. These judges most often did not work in a courtroom setting, but they rescued and led the people in difficult times. One of the last Judges was Samson. Samson was a Nazerite. He was not to cut his hair and he was not to drink wine. The Lord gave him super strength to fight the Philistines, the enemies of God's people. Samson did serve the Lord, but he became conceited and worldly. He falls in love with a woman named Delilah. She finds out the secret of his strength, his hair. She betrays him and he becomes a prisoner of the Philistines.

The Bible is filled with stories of redemption. God in his grace rescues people. This happened with Samson. The Lord redeems Samson and helps him complete his mission. What we learn from this real history preserved for us in the Bible is that the Lord provides you with **Grace to Carry Your Cross to the End**. We too by grace complete our service to the Lord.

1. Carrying our cross in a world darkened by sin is daunting.

If carrying our cross for Jesus was easy, we wouldn't have to talk about it. However, it isn't. Carrying our cross in world darkened by sin is daunting. These events from Samson's life show us this.

A. When we meet Samson in verse 22, chapter 16, he is in darkness because he is blind. He is also in darkness spiritually. He is despairing. God's enemies are laughing at him and his God.

1. How is it that the Philistines, the enemies of the Israelites were laughing? Samson had been blessed with super strength and he had used against the Philistines at God's command. He had rescued God's people from their cruel oppression. It was a big day for them when they captured Samson.

2. They also laughed and rejoiced because they thought this victory meant that their god, Dagon, was superior to the Lord God of Israel. They had

heard of how he had brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt with mighty miracles. They had seen his power through Samson first hand. In their minds, Samson's defeat was a defeat for the God of Israel. They gathered to celebrate this double victory at the temple of Dagon.

3. This should not surprise us. We know the Egyptians scorned the God of Moses until they paid the price. We know that the Jews gathered at the cross of Jesus and mocked, **“Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”** (Mt. 27:40) St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, **“The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God.”** (8:7) We should not be surprised at this or surprised at the ending for those who oppose the living God.

B. We see the darkness of unbelief in the Philistines, but let's not overlook the darkness that entered Samson and that fact that we find him praying.

1. Samson had been called by the Lord to be a judge, but Samson had eventually turned from the Lord and used his gift to pursue his own agenda. By the time he is in a relationship with Delilah, he arrogantly thinks he is invincible. This why he tells her the secret of his strength. He is strong as long as his hair is not cut. She betrays him for money and he loses his strength, his eyesight and his freedom.

2. When Samson prays to the Lord in verse 28, he is a changed man. The loss of his strength and his eyes bothers him, but also the fact that he may not get the chance to finish his work for the Lord is bothering him. He is sorry for his sins. He is reaching out in faith. He wants forgiveness and help.

3. There is a time when you and I feel that we have ruined everything. It may be church related, family related, or work related. It could be sinful actions. It could be sinful neglect. We are in a dark place in our minds. How can God forgive me? We feel like giving up.

We learn in the Bible, from Samson today, that nothing is ever so bad that we can't reach out to the Lord in prayer. When we are weighed down by our arrogance, our stubbornness, etc., we need to turn to the Lord. We need to confess our sins to him and to look to him for forgiveness. He is eager to receive our prayers. The Lord has solutions. We shall see this with Samson.

2. Carrying our cross in the light of God's grace is doable.

When we are repentant and looking to the Lord for help, things may get worse for us before they get better. Samson was brought out of prison to be made fun of by his enemies in their idol temple. The situation seems bleak, but the Lord intervenes. What we see is that carrying our cross in the light of

God's grace is doable.

A. The Lord helps by giving strength to Samson.

1. It is only with spiritual strength that Samson thinks to put his hands on the pillars in verse 25. How did Samson get spiritual strength? We can't imagine that he had access to friends or fellow believers. Samson had in his youth learned of the miracles that the Lord God performed to bring his people out of slavery to the promised land. He also would have heard of the Lord's promise to send a Savior to take away their sins and to bring his people to the promised land of heaven.

2. Remembering God's word in this dark hour would have moved Samson to repent, to trust and even to have peace in the forgiveness of sins. God's word moved him to not give up, but to seek a way to finish his mission. He put his hands on the pillars, because with God's help he had found a way.

3. In the dark moments of our lives, the promises in God's word and the body and blood in Communion, the washing in Baptism, serve to help us. God's word calls us to repent, but it also promises forgiveness for all sins in the death of Jesus on the cross. The Sacraments assure us that forgiveness and salvation are our personal possession.

That assurance also strengthens our faith to carry out the work that God has given us to do. He gives us strength so that we don't fail, but succeed. This was the case with Samson.

B. The Lord gave Samson physical strength to finish his work.

1. We are told in verse 22 that Samson's hair was growing back. The hair is not what makes him strong, it is the Lord. But the hair growing is a sign that the Lord is with him. He has enough of his super strength again to push apart the two main pillars bearing the weight of the temple roof. In his death, Samson killed more of God's enemies than in his lifetime.

2. So God's people had peace to carry out their service to the Lord without interference from their enemies. One example, Samson's family goes to the Philistine territory and rescues Samson's body for burial. No one dared get in their way.

3. Some people might be unsettled that God is behind the deaths of these people. We have to remember that God is the author of life and he has the right to take it away. He does not owe us life or anything else.

Why did the Lord have to do this? When these people sang about their god they were putting down the Lord God of Israel. They were discrediting everything he said and did. This includes his promises and plans to save the

world. If the Lord God does not respond, then there is no salvation. The deaths of these people silence the critics.

Some people question Samson's causing his own death. But he did not commit suicide in unbelief and selfishness. He sacrificed himself willingly to make sure that God's plan of salvation would safely go forward. In the Hall of Biblical Heroes of Faith in Hebrews, chapter 11, Samson is included. This settles the matter for us.

Conclusion: The Samson story stands out in the Bible. People remember Samson for his strength. However, it would be better to remember Samson for his fall and redemption. The Lord was strong. He brings Samson to repentance and faith. He moves Samson to courageous sacrifice. The Lord always watches over his people and his plan of salvation.

Do you feel weak under the weight of your sins and various crosses in your life? Are you praying for strength, but not seeing it? Rejoice in that the Lord is always strong. He carried a cross for you to Calvary. He willingly sacrificed himself to save you. He will bless your service to him here on earth. He is never weak! God has plenty of grace to enable you to carry your cross for him. Amen.

Context: The book of Judges covers the history of God's people when they had no king. The people slowly slipped into apathy, immorality and idolatry. The Lord would send affliction and the people would cry out. The Lord would send a judge to liberate them and give them a time of peace. As time went along things got worse. The judges themselves were not always faithful. Samson, a Nazarite, is one of the last judges.

Malady: We should not give up trusting and serving the Lord even in the midst of trials.

Proposition: The Cross of Christ leads us to carry our cross even in difficult times.

FIRST LESSON - Jeremiah 15:15-21 (NIV 2011)

15 Lord, you understand;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors.
You are long-suffering—do not take me away;
think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.
16 When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
Lord God Almighty.
17 I never sat in the company of revelers,
never made merry with them;
I sat alone because your hand was on me
and you had filled me with indignation.
18 Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
You are to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails.
19 Therefore this is what the Lord says:
“If you repent, I will restore you
that you may serve me;
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,
you will be my spokesman.
Let this people turn to you,
but you must not turn to them.
20 I will make you a wall to this people,
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you
but will not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue and save you,”
declares the Lord.
21 “I will save you from the hands of the wicked
and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel.”

Judges 16:22-31 - The death of Samson (NIV 2011)

22 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, “Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please, God, 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 Zerah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led]a[Israel twenty years.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - Romans 12:1-8 (NIV 2011)

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your [a] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, [b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Galatians 6:12-16

12 Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which [a] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. 16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to [b] the Israel of God.

GOSPEL READING - Matthew 16:21-26 (NIV 2011)

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life [a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”