



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Judges 16

Dan Claire

The Feast of Christ the King (November 26), 2017

The Feast of Christ the King occurs on the last Sunday of the annual Christian liturgical cycle. On this day, we celebrate Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the world. Not only did Jesus conquer sin by dying on the cross for us, not only did Jesus conquer death by rising from the grave on the third day, but Father God also enthroned Jesus his Son as king over all the world. Jesus shall reign forever and ever. On this day, Christians all over the world celebrate Jesus as our true and rightful King.

I love how Christ the King Sunday often follows Thanksgiving, when many of us have feasted like kings and queens, and now we have to go back to normal life, whatever that may be. On Monday when we're back at it, we probably won't feel like kings and queens. Yet that is what we are made for, and Christ the King Sunday is a wonderful reminder of why we ought to go back at it, and how we ought to go about it.

God made us for glory as rulers, to be kings and queens over parts of his kingdom. All the Abrahamic faiths have this belief in common; Jews, Muslims and Christians all believe that God made us, and he delegated to us his authority over the world that he made. When we step back into the mundane on Monday, we have a royal calling to rule as God's agents in the world. So, for example, if you go back to school on Monday, then it is God who sends you there, to rule over grammar and mathematics and science and history and so on. The same could be said for responsibilities at home, at work, in the community, and so on. God made us to be his kings and queens in the world. He genuinely cares about what we do Monday through Saturday. He delights in seeing us extend his godly rule over everything.

We have a fundamental problem, however: we chafe under God's authority. We love being kings and queens, so long as it means the freedom to do as we please, but we don't like having to answer to God. We're happy feasting like kings and queens on holidays; we're not eager to return to our duty posts on Monday. We would much rather do as we please. So we squander our glory rebelling against God's royal calling. We seize control over matters that God hasn't entrusted to us, doing what we ought not to have done. We also refuse to rule over concerns that God definitely has entrusted to us, leaving undone what we ought to have done. All of this is what the Bible calls *sin*.

On the Feast of Christ the King we look to Jesus as the one who never rebelled against his Father's authority, even when it cost him his life. After Jesus rose from the dead, when no one would have been jealous of him taking a rest, he then went back to work as king. As king, Jesus commissioned his followers to spread his kingdom, and he promised that he would go with his followers everywhere, even to the ends of the earth. So it is that when we go back at it on Monday, King Jesus goes with us, empowering and guiding us to rule as he would rule wherever we go.

Don't forget about King Jesus on Monday. You won't be alone, no matter what happens or where the day takes you. Jesus will be with you. And the glory of the Lord will shine through you as you rule in Jesus' name.

WHEN THERE WAS NO KING IN ISRAEL

Life in ancient Palestine was very different from ours, yet the existential challenges feel very familiar. In the final chapters of the book of Judges, there's a repeated refrain: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." One can take this in two ways:

1. **National.** On the face of it, the lack of a king describes a national political problem: they had no king, so there was anarchy throughout the land.
2. **Individual.** For the ancient Israelites, just as it is for us as well, national political problems reveal the deeper disease affecting everyone as individuals. "There was no king" ruling Israel because there were few kings and queens ruling in the mundane.

Under Moses, Israel had been set apart by God to be a royal priesthood, to reveal the glory of the Lord to the nations. Yet over and over again, Judges tells us, the Israelites did what was evil in God's eyes. They prostituted themselves before the gods of the surrounding nations. Then after they fell into slavery under foreign marauders, they would cry out to God for help, and he would raise up a judge—a precursor king—to deliver them. For a season there would be order and relief, but then the judge would die and they would repeat the whole cycle.

We read at the end of Judges 15 that Samson "judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years." At the beginning of Judges 16, we expect to read that after Samson died, the Israelites prostituted themselves before the gods of the surrounding nations. However, in Judges 16, Samson hasn't died. He remains Israel's judge, and this time it is the judge who goes looking for a prostitute: "Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her" (Judges 16:1).

The sexual misadventures of politicians are in the news all the time. We're often told not to concern ourselves with what our leaders do in private, since that's their own business and not ours. Yet we know that there's a deep connection between what people do with their bodies

and the attitudes of their hearts. The way our politicians act in private has everything to do with the way they will lead in public. If behind closed doors they use their power to abuse others, why should we expect them to behave any differently in the context of government?

THE LAST STRAW

Samson's visit to the prostitute in Judges 16 is a relatively small matter in the grand scheme of Israelite history. One might be inclined to overlook it as the private dalliance of a public leader. Yet it is this particular moment that represents the last straw in the book of Judges. From this point forward, all hell breaks loose, because *Samson violated his office at every level*: the personal, the national, and the religious.

1. ***Samson the Man-King***. At the personal level, Samson violated his office as God's image-bearer and ruler. As we have seen, God delegated his authority to humanity, to rule over creation as deputized kings and queens. Samson's duty was to marry one Israelite woman and to build a family with her. But Samson had a thing for Philistine women. Back in Judges 14 when we met the adult Samson, the first word Samson uttered was emblematic of his burning passion: "woman." Translating from the Hebrew, Samson said to his parents, "*Woman* I saw in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now get her for me" (Judges 14:2). Having seen her, he just had to have her. Yet sleeping with Philistine women was not within the stewardship of Samson's office as God's image-bearer and ruler. Samson chafed under God's authority, preferring to do his own thing. When he visited the prostitute, he seized control over someone who was not his responsibility, and then he abused and dishonored her rather than treating her with the dignity she deserved.
2. ***Samson the Judge***. At the national level, Samson violated his office as a judge over Israel. Israelite Judges were precursor kings, and as such they were forbidden from amassing wealth, or weapons, or women (Deuteronomy 18). Instead they were to meditate on God's law day and night. Samson, however, spent his days and nights meditating on pleasure. In his sexual conquests, Samson abused his privileges as Israel's judge. Back in Judges 14, when Samson told his parents about the woman he wanted, he said, "Get her for me, *for she is right in my eyes*" (14:3). Where have we heard that before? It's the recurring refrain in the final chapters of Judges: "There was no king in Israel, and *everyone did what was right in his own eyes*." In past episodes, when Israel's judges died, the people would whore after other gods. Now, by sleeping with a prostitute, Israel's leader did the whoring for them. Samson became a living emblem of the nation's corruption. How tragic! The biblical vision for a king is that he ought to be a model for his people, exhibiting faith and wisdom and morality that the rest of the nation can emulate. When a nation's judge or king or president instead becomes the embodiment of the people's debauchery, it represents a tragic violation of his national office.
3. ***Samson the Holy Warrior***. Finally, at the religious level, Samson violated his office as a holy warrior. The Nazirite vow (described in Numbers 6) was a spiritual discipline for Israelite

warriors, so that they might remain single-minded in seeking God's victory over their oppressors. God called Samson to the Nazirite vow and practices, so that he might keep a singular focus on driving the Philistines out of Israel. Getting entangled with a prostitute was way outside of Samson's holy mission. It signifies that Samson had taken his eyes off the Lord, or perhaps he never had his eyes on the Lord to begin with. The entire Samson story emphasizes that his eyes were on other things:

- Samson went down to Timnah and he **saw** a Philistine woman... Judges 14:1.
- Samson said to his parents, "Get her for me, for she is right in my **eyes**." Judges 14:3.
- He talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's **eyes**. Judges 14:7.
- Samson went to Gaza, and there he **saw** a woman, a prostitute... Judges 16:1.

As a holy warrior, Samson had a singular mission to keep his eyes on the Lord. Instead, throughout Samson's story, the only thing he ever looked for was pleasure. In so doing, he consistently violated his office as a holy warrior, set apart for God.

In short, Samson was out of line as a man, and as a national leader, and as a disciple. Instead of glorifying the Lord by fulfilling these roles honorably, Samson parodied every role God gave him. His visit to the prostitute in Gaza may seem like a relatively small thing, yet it was the last straw for Samson and for the judges of Israel. Samson would have no more conquests with Philistine women. His next would conquer him instead.

AN UNEXPECTED CONQUEROR

We meet Delilah in Judges 16:4. In this case, we aren't told that Samson saw her, nor that *she was right in his eyes*. Instead, Samson "*loved* a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." He was fully gone, completely consumed by the desires he had nurtured and fed throughout his entire life. Like the nation he led, Samson loved his idol rather than the Lord.

Delilah, on the other hand, most certainly did not love Samson. She was a prostitute of another sort, hired by the kings of the five Philistine city-states to seduce Samson. Now it was the prostitute, rather than Samson, whose eyes searched for the object of her desire. In this case, Delilah wanted to see (v. 5) what made Samson so strong.

What was the secret of Samson's supernatural strength? The story presents two alternatives. From the narrator's perspective, Samson was strong because God continued in relationship with him despite Samson's sin. Simply put, Samson's strength was a gift of God's grace. Samson, however, believed that God made him strong in exchange for good behavior. As long as Samson kept at least part of his Nazirite vows, God made Samson strong. Even though Samson defiled himself in many ways, he never cut his hair but kept it braided in seven braids. To Samson, it was ultimately his own strength in avoiding the barber that kept him strong.

As Samson's "soul-mate" Delilah began nagging him to tell her his secret, Samson foolishly toyed with her. She was his greatest threat, yet he didn't even consider her dangerous. It was like playing on the edge of a cliff without any guardrails. Three times Delilah asked Samson his secret, and each time he gave her a big hint regarding what he believed it to be:

1. First he told her to bind him with seven bowstrings (16:7). Hint: what else about Samson has seven cords? But Delilah didn't get it, so she complained and pleaded with him to tell her the truth. (16:10)
2. Samson became a little more cavalier and told her he could be bound "if they bind me with new ropes" (16:11). The Hebrew word translated ropes here is the word for braided or woven fibers. Hint: what else about Samson is braided? Yet once again Delilah didn't get it, so she complained of his mockery and lies (v 13), and begged him to tell her.
3. Then Samson became even more foolhardy and told her, "Weave my seven locks into the loom and fasten them with a peg"¹ (16:13). But even then Delilah didn't guess Samson's secret, so her efforts failed.

Delilah was tired of playing games, so she laid it on thick, saying, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, but you haven't told me your secret" (16:15). Day after day she wore him down, until, poignantly, "his soul was vexed to death" (16:16), which is precisely where all of her nagging would lead. So Samson told her "all his heart," i.e. what Samson believed to be the source of his strength. He could not keep secrets from the one who had captured his heart.

"When Delilah **saw** that he had told her all his heart" (16:18), then the battle was won. The Lord gave Samson fully over to her, taking away Samson's strength. After Samson was shaved, his enemies bound him as they would any other man. The mighty Samson had fallen, and in the end it wasn't a Philistine army that brought him down. Rather, it was that which he had always wanted with his eyes, and had become the desire of his heart. Samson's idol, the Philistine woman, was the one who finally conquered him, though he was blind to the battle until it was all over. He was easily defeated, with the result being that his enemies gouged out his eyes and bound him in shackles (16:21). It was a fitting outcome, because finally there was parity between his physical condition and his spiritual condition. Samson was now blind on the outside, just as he had always been in his heart as well. Like the nation he was supposed to rule, Samson had done what was right in his own eyes, and he ended up enslaved.

RADIANT WITH THE GLORY OF THE LORD

In the last eight verses of Judges 16, Samson the Nazirite dies to save his people in a way that hints at the coming deliverance of Jesus the Nazarene. The Philistines gathered to celebrate

¹ The wording here is reminiscent of the peg that Jael drove into Sisera's skull in Judges 4.

the defeat and capture of Samson, their nemesis. Samson had toyed with them for twenty years, and now they were going to have some fun at his expense.

Sight/vision remains an important theme to the very end of Samson's story. In v 24, when the people **saw** him, they praised their god, Dagon. And then again in v 27, about 3,000 of them gathered in their temple/coliseum, and **looked on** (same verb) while Samson played his last concert, in a show that would "bring the house down." In v 28 Samson prayed what is one of the most selfish prayers in all the Bible: "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I might be avenged on the Philistines for **my two eyes**." He had become such a hardened coveter that he offered no repentance, only a desire for revenge after the loss of his eyes. So, v 29, Samson pushed on the two central pillars, the temple fell upon Samson and all the Philistine rulers, and that's how his story came to an end.

In spite of Samson's selfishness and nonstop rebellion, God accomplished his purposes through Samson. Even though Israel hadn't asked for help, God demonstrated his glory by delivering Israel once again, this time through Samson's sacrificial death.

Yet what a pathetic and tragic end for Samson and the judges of Israel. Samson should have brought glory to the Lord as a man, a judge, and a Nazirite. Instead, Samson squandered God's glory at every turn. The narrator's final assessment (v 30) is telling: that "the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed during his life." In other words, Samson was a greater blessing to his people dead than alive. He delivered Israel, yet for the rest of history Samson will always be remembered not for his faithfulness but rather for his insatiable appetite for Philistine women. The most famous story from the book of Judges isn't "Samson the Deliverer" but rather "Samson and Delilah." That's not the way it was supposed to be.

We were all made to shine as God's ambassadors in this world. As junior kings and queens, exercising God's delegated authority, we were meant to radiate the glory of the Lord. But we invariably squander God's glory doing what is right in our own eyes, so that often what we're most remembered for is not our faithfulness but our appetites.

Consider Harvey Weinstein. Up until October 2017, Weinstein was known for his 25 year reign as one of the film industry's greatest producers. Weinstein had ascended to the throne over Hollywood with films like Pulp Fiction, The English Patient, Good Will Hunting and Shakespeare in Love. During his reign, he sometimes used his wealth and power to change the world in kingly sort of ways, e.g. by promoting humanitarian concerns, and by raising money for important areas of medical research, and by backing various political candidates. But now some eighty women have charged Weinstein with sexual harassment, assault and rape. So King Harvey will be remembered primarily not for all the deliberate work that he did during his reign, but instead for the ways that he did what was right in his own eyes, abusing the power of his office.

Woody Allen, Bill O'Reilly, Bill Cosby, Roy Moore, Louis CK, Al Franken, Joe Barton, Charlie Rose. The list of American kings charged with abusing their power to exploit women grows day by day. So many men stand accused, yet it's only the tip of the iceberg. Politicians and athletes and movie stars aren't the only kings in America. Every man is a king in one way or another, and every man can abuse the power of his office to take advantage of women. It's right that our nation is focused on this issue. We ought to condemn every abuse of power. May we see widespread and lasting change in our society in the ways that men treat women.

At the same time, we love to scapegoat, as it takes all the pressure off of us. In the midst of so many famous people's secret sins coming to light, there's a whole lot of pressure on us—or at least there ought to be. It's time we all took a look in the mirror to see the King Harvey within. Maybe you're not guilty of sexual abuse, but every one of us, men and women alike, have squandered our royal vocations and used our wealth and power to do what is right in our own eyes. We all have used our privileged positions to get what we want, often at the expense of others. If we don't feel the same indignation towards our own sin, then we're no different from Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees. Jesus offered grace and mercy to all those who humbled themselves before him, asking for his forgiveness and help. But Jesus condemned the Pharisees, because they insisted in their own self-righteousness, and they squandered high positions to abuse others rather than follow the Lord.

We think ourselves kings and queens², yet we do not live up to our high calling. In the history of the world, Jesus is the only one who did not rebel against God's authority in order to do what he pleased. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus was vexed to the point of death by the fate that awaited him. In prayer, he cried out to Father God, saying, "Take this cup away from me. Yet not my will but your will be done." He could have chosen to continue enjoying the holiday that Friday, feasting with the others at Passover. Instead he went back to work as the king God had called him to be. Jesus did the work God had sent him to do, submitting to betrayal, humiliation, torture, and death on a cross. In so doing, he gained victory over sin. On that Sunday, our Father raised Jesus to new life, securing for him victory over death. Then our Father enthroned Jesus as king over all the world.

If you will have him as your king, he will forgive you every misuse of power, every sexual indiscretion, every selfish word or thought or action. He will assure you of the very same resurrection and eternal life. And, Jesus will lead you back at it tomorrow, to be the king or queen that he made you to be. He really does care about what you do Monday-Saturday. Wherever you go, whatever you do, King Jesus will be there with you, to help you rule as God intended. And someday you will be remembered not for doing what was right in your own eyes, but as one who radiates the glory of the Lord.

² See Georges Rouault's Miserere series, and compare his paintings of kings to his paintings of Jesus during his passion. Our garish kingship is of no comparison to the beauty of Jesus in his sacrificial death.