

DOWNTWARD SPIRAL, PART 13: "STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS"
JUDGES 16:1-31

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 13 of our sermon series called "Downward Spiral," where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: "Strength in Weakness."

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

I don't like to feel *weak*. I don't like to feel *dependent*.

I'd rather feel *strong*. I'd rather feel *self-reliant*.

And I don't think I'm alone in that.

Whenever we feel a wave of anxiety or shame, it's usually because we feel weak or inadequate in some way.

- We're not strong and capable enough to deal with something.
- We feel exposed and embarrassed about not measuring up.

And yet, when *God* is introduced into our paradigm, our whole disposition towards weakness begins to change.

J. I. Packer summarizes it well; he says:

"The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away."

When we understand this biblical dynamic at work, there's a part of us that now wants to *embrace* weakness... even as there's another part of us that still *fights* against it.

I know weakness is meant to make me rely not on *my* strength but on *God* who expresses his power in my weakness... and yet I continue to struggle with *really* embracing this.

And my guess is that *all* of us will struggle to *really* embrace our weakness throughout our lives.

For Samson, it was a lifelong lesson, and it didn't seem to quite click for him until the end.

Hopefully, as we examine his life in Scripture today, we'll learn it much sooner.

The One Thing

Rely not on your strength but on God who expresses his power in your weakness.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 16.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon. It will help you follow along more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

"Judges" here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were not kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

Last time we were in the book of Judges, we saw the surprising start of the *last* judge—Samson.

He was *supposed* to begin to save Israel from the forty-year oppression of the Philistines, but his narrative opens with him wanting to *marry* an unbelieving Philistine woman.

Even though Samson is a Nazirite from the womb, which means that he's to be *holy* to the LORD all his life and serve as a godly witness to all the people of Israel, he basically does whatever is right in his own eyes (14:3, 7).

The *only* bright spot in the past two chapters was, when after killing 1,000 Philistines and almost dying of thirst, Samson *finally* cries out the LORD. Though it was more as an accusatory complaint, the LORD *still* graciously provides water for him and revives him.

And that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

Scripture Reading

Let's read Judges 16.

¹ Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her. ² The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him." ³ But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.

⁴ After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. ⁵ And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver." ⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you."

⁷ Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." ⁸ Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. ⁹ Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he snapped the bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, "Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound." ¹¹ And he said to her, "If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." ¹² So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And the men lying in ambush were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

¹³ Then Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man."

¹⁴ So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web.

And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

¹⁵ And she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies.”

¹⁶ And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. ¹⁷ And he told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”

¹⁸ When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up again, for he has told me all his heart.” Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. ¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. ²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him. ²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. ²² But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

²³ 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.” ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.” ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in three parts—or three scenes.

[Three scenes in this passage:]

- I. Debauchery (vv. 1-3) [Debauchery means “extreme indulgence in bodily pleasures and especially sexual pleasures”]
- II. Delilah (vv. 4-22)
- III. Death (vv. 23-31)

I. Debauchery (vv. 1-3)

Look at verse 1.

[¹ Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her.]

The beginning of this chapter starts out in a very similar way as chapter 14—Samson “went” to a Philistine city, and he “saw” a Philistine woman. So it looks like it’s going to be a *repeat* of the havoc that Samson caused before... except it’s *worse*.

This time, Samson isn’t thinking about *marriage*, but he’s engaging with a *prostitute*.¹

Again, debauchery means “extreme indulgence in bodily pleasures and especially sexual pleasures,” and that’s exactly what Samson was doing.

This just shows the *extent* of Samson’s sexual addiction.

Nobody just wakes up one morning and just suddenly says, “I want to go see a prostitute.” Rather, it’s due to a series of small compromises over time—in what we watch or read, what we fantasize about, what we do with our bodies, what we say or do with others—to the point where these compromises seem increasingly “normal” and even “right” in our own eyes.

And those small compromises gradually become bigger compromises, until we find ourselves engaging in things we never thought we would ever do.

<pause>

This is the *only* judge in the entire book to engage in prostitution, which shows just how *low* the downward spiral has gone.

And in a sense, Samson here is a *mirror of all* of Israel.

Just as Samson was a *Nazirite* and called to be *holy* to the LORD, all the people of Israel had entered into a *covenant* with the LORD and were called to be holy—or set apart—for the LORD.

But like Samson, the Israelites at this point seem *indistinguishable* from the unbelieving Philistines. Rather than being *distinct* from them, the Israelites are “sleeping” with the Philistines and their false gods (so to speak).²

So Samson is a picture of the kind of *spiritual* adultery and *spiritual* prostitution that *all* of Israel was engaged in against the LORD.

Look now at verse 2.

[² The Gazites were told, “Samson has come here.” And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, “Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him.”]

Gaza was one of the five capital cities of the Philistines, so the “Gazites” were *Philistines*.

By this point, Samson has killed, conservatively, at least 1,100 Philistines. So he’s definitely one of the Philistines’ most wanted criminals.

And yet, Samson is *not* in hiding, but he just walks into one of their *capital* cities. And of course, everyone recognizes him and wants to kill him.

It seems like one of the most outrageously foolish things a fugitive could do.

¹ Hebrew has two words for prostitutes. One (*qadesh*) refers to ‘cultic prostitutes’ who served pagan gods (Gen. 38:21–22; Deut. 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24). The word here (*zonah*) signifies a second type, the common, ‘secular’ variety (cf. Gen. 38:15) (Study note on Judges 16:1, in *ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008]).

² Earlier in Judges, the people of Israel are said to have repeatedly “whored after other gods and bowed down to them” (2:17). And after the judge Gideon died, they’re said to have “turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god” (8:33).

Some may think that Samson just isn't very smart, but when you look at his riddle and how he used words in the previous two chapters, he's rather eloquent (14:14, 18; 15:16). He doesn't seem to be just a brainless brute.

Instead, I think Samson is extremely *arrogant*.

- He knows the Philistines want to kill him,
- he knows that he's walking into one of their capital cities,
- he knows it's foolish to spend the night with one of the Philistine prostitutes,
- he knows there's probably an ambush waiting for him when he leaves...
- and yet, he walks headfirst into such danger.

Why would he do that?

Because he thinks he's *untouchable*.

- He's already torn a lion to piece with his bare hands (14:6),
- he's already killed 30 Philistines and stripped them of their clothes (14:19),
- he's already struck down another group of Philistines (15:8),
- and he's already slaughtered 1,000 Philistines with a jawbone of a donkey (15:15).

So by this point, he doesn't think that *any* number of Philistines are a threat to him, so he just waltzes into enemy territory like it's just another day for him.

The sad irony of all this is that it was the Spirit of the *LORD* who empowered Samson with extraordinary strength and who *delivered* him from the Philistines time and time again, but each time the *LORD* gives him *success*, Samson seems to wrongfully interpret it as "*I did it*."

The more God *blesses* him, the more *arrogant* Samson seems to become.

<pause>

We may not be as *blatant* in our arrogance as Samson, but let's ask ourselves:

- When God delivers me from hardship, even if I thank him in the moment, am I prone to forget him and rely on myself the next time?
- When God causes me to succeed, even if I say, "praise God" or "it was all God," is there still a part of me that thinks, "It's also because I'm smart and capable"?
- When God gives me blessings, does it lead me to greater humility or greater arrogance?

This might even be a good question to ask your spouse or closest friends, and give them permission to be fully honest with you about what they might see in your life that concerns them.

<pause>

Sadly, for Samson, every divine deliverance leads him to rely on his own strength even more—and so he continues to push the boundaries of what he thinks he can get away with.

For the Philistines, upon recognizing Samson in their city, they set up an ambush for him, hoping to kill him the next morning after he's spent the night with the prostitute.

But look at verse 3.

[³ But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.]

Instead of leaving in the morning, Samson leaves in the middle of the night—perhaps catching the Philistines by surprise.

And the ambush is useless against him.

The gate would have been at least two stories high with the two posts set deep into the ground.³ They would have weighed *thousands* of pounds,⁴ and Samson just uproots and rips them out of the ground and carries them off on his shoulders.⁵

This would have been an incredible, supernatural feat of strength.⁶

<pause>

Through this scene, it becomes clear to the Philistines that they cannot stand toe-to-toe against Samson, so they change their strategy to try to discover the source of his supernatural strength, which brings us to the next scene.

So first, debauchery; and second...

II. Delilah (vv. 4-22)

Look at verses 4-5.

[⁴ After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. ⁵ And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, “Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver.”]

Samson has left Gaza, and after some unspecified amount of time, he's back in the Valley of Sorek, which was the same area where he met his former Philistine wife.⁷

And out of *all* the women who are connected to Samson throughout his narrative—Samson's mother, Samson's wife, the prostitute—*Delilah* is the only one who is *named*, and she's the only one whom the text explicitly says that Samson “*loved*.”

Like Samson's wife and the earlier prostitute, Delilah would most likely have been a *Philistine* woman.⁸

And somehow, the Philistine lords find out about Samson's love for her, so they try to exploit this weakness of Samson's by getting Delilah to seduce him into revealing the source of his great strength.

And if she can do it, they each offer to reward her with 1,100 pieces of silver.

³ Study note on Judges 16:2-3, in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁴ Miles V. Van Pelt, “Judges,” in *Deuteronomy-Ruth*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

⁵ Dale Ralph Davis (*Such a Great Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], 187) writes: “Some hold that verse 3 only requires Samson to have carried the gate apparatus to a hill ‘toward’ or ‘in the direction of’ Hebron. In that case, Samson may have deposited his load somewhere near Gaza rather than lugging it about forty miles to the east around Hebron itself. The Hebrew preposition (‘al-*penē*) can be used in the sense of ‘direction toward’ (see C. F. Keil, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament [1868; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 418, who cited Gen. 18:16; see also Gen. 19:28). If, however, Samson merely dumped his burden in the vicinity of Gaza why would the writer even mention Hebron? For this reason C. J. Goslinga (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student’s Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 440) holds that the ‘author included the name Hebron to show that he deposited them in the center of Judah so that Israel would have tangible proof of his victory.’ In that case, Samson’s journey would have taken several days.”

⁶ In the ancient world, gates were important because they protected the city (cf. Jer. 51:30; Lam. 2:9; Amos 1:5). So in one sense, by uprooting their gate and carrying it away, Samson was sending a message to the Philistines: “You’re *defenseless* against me.” But in another sense, this was also a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. For example, *Genesis 22:17*: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. *And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies*” (cf. Gen. 24:60). So here, Samson is *literally* carrying off and possessing the gate of his enemies. I don’t think Samson had this in mind as he did what he did, but surely God did. Again, as we saw last week, God is *sovereignly* accomplishing his redemptive purposes even through Samson’s sinful choices.

⁷ John Currid, “Judges,” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/judges>.

⁸ Barry G. Webb (*Judges and Ruth*, PTW [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015]) writes: “Her name, Delilah, sounds like *hallaylah*, the Hebrew word for ‘night.’ So it’s possible she was an Israelite. But where she lived and how she behaved make it far more likely that she was a Philistine, and ‘recent Philistine inscriptions demonstrate a strong tendency among them to adopt Semitic names.’ K. L. J. Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 316, n. 73.” Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) agrees: “The name of *Delilah*, which means ‘worshipper’ or ‘devotee’, has become a synonym for the seductive woman. Delilah lived *in the valley of Sorek*, just below Zorah. Her name is Semitic, but as the Philistines intermarried freely with the peoples they dominated this is not significant, and the details of the narrative suggest that she was, in fact, a Philistine.”

Just keep in mind that Jesus was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Matt. 26:15).

And if there were *five* Philistine lords—one for each capital city of the pentapolis—then this was a total of 5,500 pieces of silver.

The modern equivalent of that offer is about \$15 million.⁹

<pause>

Notice also look at *who* is approaching her. These are not vigilantes or a crowd of bandits, but these are the “*lords* of the Philistines.” These are the national leaders!

So, if Delilah *succeeds* in pulling this off, then not only will she be instantly rich, but she’ll also be a national heroine. She won’t just be known as another seductive woman or even Samson’s lover, but she’ll have wealth, fame, and influence.¹⁰

If she would only be heartless, two-faced, and cruel towards the man who *loves* her, then Delilah has *so much* to gain.¹¹

She agrees and the seduction and manipulation of Samson begin.

Look at verses 6-14.

⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you.”

⁷ Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.” ⁸ Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. ⁹ Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, “Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound.” ¹¹ And he said to her, “If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.” ¹² So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And the men lying in ambush were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

¹³ Then Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound.” And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man.”

¹⁴ So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web. And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.]

Delilah is not the most subtle about her intentions.

In verse 6, she just straight-up asks Samson, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you.”

And Samson seems to play along.

⁹ Matt Smethurst, “Hey There, Delilah,” November 25, 2024, River City Baptist Church, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/matt-smethurst-judges-16-hey-there-delilah/id1612902653?i=1000678105840&l=es-MX>.

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *Judges For You* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2013), 153.

¹¹ We know this is unlike the threat the Philistines issued against Samson’s wife earlier (14:15) because no threat is explicitly issued and, in 16:18, it seems like the Philistines left her alone when she was unsuccessful after three attempts. After an unspecified amount of time, Delilah needs to call them back. This wasn’t a threat for her; this was an opportunity.

In verses 7-14, we see *three* cycles of similar events where...

- Samson *lies* to Delilah about what will make him weak—whether using seven fresh bowstrings, new ropes, or weaving his hair into a loom¹²—and how he'll be like any other man,
- Delilah does to him *exactly* what he said,
- she has Philistines *waiting* to ambush him in another room,
- she *cries out* to Samson that the Philistines are upon him,
- Samson *breaks* free and presumably *beats up* the Philistines ambushing him (cf. 16:20).
- And the cycle repeats again with Delilah accusing Samson of mocking and lying to her, and she asks him again to tell him how he can be bound.

Look now at verses 15-20.

[¹⁵ And she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies.”

¹⁶ And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. ¹⁷ And he told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”

¹⁸ When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up again, for he has told me all his heart.” Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. ¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. ²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him.]

In verse 17, Samson finally cracks and reveals the secret of his Nazirite vow—that he has been set apart by God to be a Nazirite from the womb.

Samson has had a complete disregard for the Nazirite restrictions of no eating or drinking grapes (14:5; 10) and no contact with the dead (14:6, 9, 19; 15:8, 15-16; 16:7-9), but the *one* restriction that he *has* kept is no cutting of his hair.

And then, in verse 18, Delilah calls back the Philistines, and in verses 19-20, following the same pattern of the previous cycles...

- Delilah does to him *exactly* what he said,
- she has Philistines *waiting* to ambush him in another room,
- she *cries out* to Samson that the Philistines are upon him,
- except *this* time, Samson *doesn't* break free and beat up the Philistines ambushing him, for “he did not know that the LORD had left him.”

<pause>

Now, one question I'm sure all of us have is: *why* in the world did Samson finally reveal to Delilah the truth about his Nazirite vow?

We're all complex people and there are multiple layers to people, so let me offer three contributing factors.

¹² In the first cycle, Samson tells her to use seven fresh bowstrings that haven't been dried, which would have been made out of twisted animal guts, so again, Samson is breaking his Nazirite vow by having contact with the dead (Num. 6:6-7). In the second cycle, Samson tells her to use new ropes that have not been used, which is what the men of Judah unsuccessfully used in the previous chapter to bind him (15:13-14), so Samson is just continuing to mess with Delilah. In the third cycle, Samson tells her to weave the seven locks of his hair into the threads of the loom, which is getting *closer* to the restrictions of his Nazirite vow, where he's not supposed to cut his hair (Num. 6:5). Interestingly, in verse 14, where it says, “she made them tight with the pin,” it can be more literally translated as “she drove in the peg,” which is the *same* phrase used much earlier in chapter 4, where Jael “drove in the peg” into Sisera's head (4:21). Except rather than Israel's *enemy*, it's Israel's *judge* that is now having a peg driven through by a woman. Thankfully, it just went through his *hair* rather than his *head*, but the ominous overtones are beginning to loom over Samson. He's in greater danger than he realizes.

First, Samson *loved* Delilah.

The text explicitly says that in verse 4, and in verse 15, once Delilah starts questioning Samson of his love for her (cf. 14:16), he feels the need to prove it to her.

And even though she keeps betraying his trust, he still loves her. It's a destructive dynamic, but sadly, it's not uncommon to hear of similar dynamics in other unhealthy relationships.¹³

<pause>

Second, Samson is *worn down* by Delilah.

Notice the words used in verse 16—"pressed him hard" (cf. 14:17), "day after day," "urged," "vexed to death."

Basically, Samson is *tired* of resisting her constant *asking* and *accusing* and *pressing* and *urging*, day after day. Any notwithstanding stamina he had is all spent. He just wants it to stop, so he finally gives in.

<pause>

Third, Samson doesn't *really* think shaving his head will cause him to lose his strength.

In verse 20, his head is *already* shaved.

If you've *never* cut your hair before in your *entire* life, and you suddenly wake up *bald*, I *guarantee* you'll *feel* the difference.

As someone who shaves their head regularly, I can attest to how my freshly shaven head literally *feels* the air around it in a way that it doesn't with hair.¹⁴

So Samson obviously *knows* and noticeably *feels* that his head has been shaved, but then he *still* says in verse 20, "I will go out as at other times [which shows that he *knows* that his head is shaved *this* time] and shake myself free."

Each time Samson tells Delilah what to do—whether to tie him with fresh bowstrings or new ropes or to weave his hair into a loom—she does to him *exactly* what he tells her.

So in this case, I think Samson fully *expects* that she'll shave his head, just like he told her.

But when we look at verse 20, Samson just doesn't think it matters. He *still* thinks that he'll continue to have supernatural strength, regardless of keeping his Nazirite vow or not.

After all, he's already broken the other two restrictions and kept his strength, so what's one more?

<pause>

So those are three contributing factors that I think are kind of all mixed in there for why he ends up disclosing his Nazirite vow to Delilah.¹⁵

¹³ Tim Keller, *Judges For You* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2013), 154.

¹⁴ Also, if you've ever had long hair before and you cut most of it off, you literally *feel* the weight difference.

¹⁵ Here are two other potential contributing factors. Fourth, I think Samson is *tired* of being set apart as a Nazirite. Once his head is shaven, then Samson has broken all three restrictions of his Nazirite vow—he's consumed grapes, he's had contact with corpses, and now he's going to have his head shaven. And Samson *expects* that Delilah will shave his head, just like she's done *exactly* what he tells her the previous three times.

So I think Samson *wants* to be rid of his Nazirite vow and the call to be holy—or set apart—to the LORD. In a sense, he wants to "be like any other man" (16:7, 11, 13, 17). Of course, he still wants to be strong—and he assumes he will be regardless of his Nazirite vow—but he doesn't want the expectation to be holy anymore. And of course, he hasn't kept that very well, and perhaps that's begun to *weigh* on him a bit because, in verse 17, he *knows* that he's supposed to be "a Nazirite to God from [his] mother's womb." He'd rather not feel guilty for living selfishly; he'd rather not feel like he *has* to live his life for God, when he *really* just desires to do whatever he wants; he'd rather just be "any other man" who doesn't belong to God in a special way. Fifth, I think Samson *likes* "living on the edge" (so to speak). This corresponds a bit to the *arrogance* and *self-reliance* that we

I wonder if we can resonate with any of those.

- Has love for another person led you to do foolish, regrettable things?
- Have you ever grown weary by constant temptation that it seemed just easier to give in than to continue to resist?
- Have you ever thought that forsaking your vows to God in baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership *really* won't affect you living out the Christian life very much?

If so, then perhaps there's a little bit of Samson in all of us.

<pause>

Look now at verses 21-22.

[²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. ²² But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.]

In verse 21, things are coming full circle for Samson in a sad, ironic way.

In verses 1-3, Gaza was the scene of his great feat of strength, where Samson “took hold of” (or “grabbed”) the Philistines’ gate; but here, the Philistines “seized” (or “grabbed”) him—it’s the *same* word used in both verses—and now, Gaza is the scene of his great defeat as he’s bound with bronze shackles.

Earlier in chapter 15, Samson set *fire* to the Philistines’ grain during the wheat harvest (15:1-5); but here, Samson is *grinding* the Philistines’ grain in prison.

The one who once did whatever he wanted is now forced to do the work of slaves for the Philistines.¹⁶

Throughout the last three chapters, Samson has been doing whatever was right in his own eyes (14:3, 7; cf. 14:1; 16:1); but here, Samson’s eyes have been gouged out, so he can no longer be a slave to his eyes because he can’t see *anything* anymore.

Samson the *strong* has been reduced to Samson the *weak*.

<pause>

But even in this miserable state, verse 22 is like the end credits scene of a movie, where the person you thought was dead suddenly opens their eyes, or their hand shoots out from the ground.

It’s that moment when you realize that what you *thought* was all settled and done isn’t really the case—that there’s going to be a sequel.

Except in this case, it’s Samson’s *hair*—it’s beginning to *grow* again after being shaved.

Now, to be clear, the *source* of Samson’s supernatural strength was *never* his hair—it was the LORD.

In the previous two chapters, there’s no mention of Samson’s hair when he tears apart a lion or when he kills 1,000 Philistines with a jawbone—only that “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him” (14:6; 15:14).

saw earlier when he just waltzed into Gaza as the Philistines’ most wanted fugitive. As much as he has a sexual addiction, he seems to have an addiction to danger (Tim Keller, *Judges For You* [Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2013], 154). He wants to keep pushing the boundaries to experience new “highs,” always thinking that he’ll be able to get himself out of whatever dangerous scenario he puts himself in. Two other corresponding reflection questions are: Have you ever been tired of being holy, resenting the guilt you feel for sin and secretly wanting to just do whatever you want, to be like “any other person” who doesn’t know God? Have you ever sought to experience more exciting “highs” in life?

¹⁶ Dale Ralph Davis (*Such a Great Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], 188) writes: “Samson’s grinding was a calculated humiliation; the celebrated hero now does the work of slaves and women. See further, K. van der Toorn, ‘Judges xvi 21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources,’ *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 248-51.”

And in verse 20, the text tells us the reason that Samson no longer has his supernatural strength—"the LORD had left him."

But if the LORD is the source of Samson's strength, why mention his hair growing here?

Because even though the hair is not the *source* of his strength, it is the *symbol* (or *sign*) for his strength.¹⁷

So when we see his hair growing, we should be asking, "Is the LORD going to return and give him supernatural strength again?"

It's the cliffhanger that makes us anticipate the sequel.

And that leads us to our next scene.

<pause>

So first, debauchery; second, Deliliah; and third...

III. Death (vv. 23-31)

Look at verses 23-27.

[²³ 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." ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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.]

The scene has changed to a *massive* worship service of the Philistine god, Dagon.

And in verses 23-24, they're all gathered to "offer a great sacrifice to *Dagon* their god and to *rejoice*," and to "*praise their god*"... *because* (and they say this *twice*): "Our god has given Samson *our enemy* into *our hand*."

But that's not true.

Dagon is a false, impotent god; the LORD alone is God.

And the only reason the Philistines have Samson is because the LORD left him in verse 20, and the LORD *gave* him over to them.

In fact, that's the only reason the Philistines are ruling over the Israelites at all to begin with. Earlier in chapter 13, it says...

Judges 13:1: And the people of Israel *again* did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD *gave* them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.

But the *Philistines* wrongly attributed their success to *Dagon*.

<pause>

¹⁷ Dale Ralph Davis (*Such a Great Salvation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], 189) writes: "Not that there was any magic in Samson's hair. His strength came only from Yahweh (16:20). However, his hair was the sign of that strength and we must not sever the sign from the reality which it signifies."

[²³ 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.” ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.” ²⁷ 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.]

In verse 25, the Philistines then call the blind and weak Samson out to entertain them. And this is basically the *setup* for what will become the upcoming ironic downfall for the Philistines.

<pause>

Now, maybe you’re wondering: *why* didn’t the Philistines *keep* shaving Samson’s head (cf. v. 22)? Surely, they would have seen that his hair was growing back again.

It’s because they just *assumed* that *once* Samson’s Nazirite vow was broken, then the LORD would no longer help him... because *that’s* how pagan idols worked.

You did something for an idol, and then it did something for you. But if you didn’t do something for the idol, then it wouldn’t do something for you.

They *thought* the LORD was *transactional*, just like Dagon or any other pagan idol.

They didn’t realize that the LORD acts by his *grace*.

So even though Samson *breaks* his vow, God *still* acts by his grace.

The Philistines had no concept of that.

In fact, the *world* doesn’t have much concept of that, for all the idols of this world are essentially *transactional*.

- If you idolize money and possessions, you’ll never feel like you have enough and, even as you accumulate more, you’ll only feel emptier.
- If you idolize your beauty, you’ll never be pretty enough—and age will inevitably bring about weakness and crushing feelings of being ugly.
- If you idolize power and influence, you’ll keep trying to gain more of it to numb your fear of feeling weak and inconsequential.¹⁸

Idols make for cruel masters. They demand more and more from you with diminishing returns. And if you ever stop feeding them, not only will they *stop* giving you what you want, but they’ll *punish* you for it.

But the one true God is *not* like any idol in this world. He does not *transact* with us, but he *gives* to us *graciously*.

We make no claims on God; he is not in need of us and there is nothing we could ever offer him. Yet, he *graciously* gives to the undeserving—the weakest, the vilest, the poor.

<pause>

Even though Samson no longer has his physical eyes, as he’s placed between the load-bearing pillars of the pagan temple (vv. 25-26), he’s about to “see” the gracious nature of the LORD.

Look at verses 28-30.

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace, “This is Water,” 2005, <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water>.

[²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.]

Remember, the *last* time that Samson cried out to the LORD in chapter 15, it had a very *different* tone. It was more of an accusatory complaint with an entitled tone (15:18).

But here, in verse 28, he says, “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God.”

His whole tone has changed. Blinded and made weak by his sinful choices, Samson *knows* that he totally does not deserve anything from God.

And so, he comes to the LORD as a *repentant* sinner, asking for God to act *graciously* towards him—to “remember” him (because he knows he doesn’t deserve God’s attention) and to “strengthen” him “only this once” (because he knows that he’s weak in himself and completely reliant on God’s grace for strength).

It’s true that, in verse 28, Samson is still asking for *vengeance* for his two eyes, rather than *deliverance* for Israel from the Philistines.

I don’t think this means that Samson wasn’t *truly* repentant, I just think this means that his repentance wasn’t *perfect*... which is the case for all of us.

But we cannot ignore the fact that something is very different about Samson here.

In a word, he’s been *humbled*.

Back in verse 5, the “lords of the *Philistines*” intended to “humble” Samson.¹⁹

But *God* meant to *humble* Samson in a much more profound way—to enable him to recognize that he ought not to rely on his strength but on God who expresses his power in his weakness.

This is something that the Lord needed to teach the apostle Paul as well. Listen to what Paul says in...

2 Corinthians 12:7-10: So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Lord *humbled* Paul by exposing his *weakness*, but this was to show him that God’s *grace* is sufficient for him, for God’s *power* is made perfect in *weakness*—that Paul’s *true* strength is not in his *own* strength but in his *weakness* that makes him *depend* on the *Lord*.

¹⁹ Miles V. Van Pelt (“Judges,” in *Deuteronomy-Ruth*, ESVEC [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “If the secret of Samson’s strength is discovered, the Philistines plan to ‘humble’ him. This verb often carries stronger overtones, such as ‘humiliate,’ ‘oppress,’ or ‘do violence,’ including acts as severe as rape (cf. Gen. 34:2; 2 Samuel 13:1–22; Judg. 19:24–25; Lam. 5:11).” The ESV translates same word as “humble” in verse 5, “subdue” in verse 6, and “torment” in verse 19. The LSB translates the same word as “afflict” in all cases. The NET translates the same word as “humiliate” in the first two cases and “made him vulnerable” in verse 19.

And so, Samson's prayer was an expression of his *genuine* repentance and faith in the LORD.

I say that not only because of the drastic change in the tone of his prayer and the evident humility that's present now, but also because Samson is in the "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:32-34: And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, *were made strong out of weakness*, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Samson is held out as an example of faith to us—and this is the only instance in his entire narrative where he resembles a faith that we should imitate.

And notice that one line near the end—they "were made *strong out of weakness*."

That could be applied to *all* of those men mentioned, but especially *Samson*.

Samson was *not* strongest when he was tearing apart lions or ripping gates out of the ground, but he was strongest when he *knew* he was weak, for that's when he began to rely on the LORD.

[²⁸ 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." ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.]

And in verses 29-30, we see that the LORD answered his prayer; Samson was given supernatural strength one last time, and he pushed apart the load-bearing pillars, so that the entire temple structure collapsed on him and all the Philistines.

And so, we see the ironic downfall of the Philistines come to pass.

The Philistines were there to rejoice in the *power* of Dagon, but even in his *own* temple, Dagon is *powerless* to save them. Dagon cannot stop the place of his *celebration* from becoming a massive *cemetery*.²⁰

And in one final stroke of irony, "the dead whom [Samson] killed at his *death* were *more* than those whom he had killed during his *life*." And from verse 27, we know that was about 3,000 on the *roof* and even more inside²¹—and among the dead were "all the lords of the Philistines," meaning that they had lost all their national leaders.

And thus, just like the angel of the LORD had said at the announcement of his birth, Samson *began* to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines (13:5).²²

²⁰ The Philistines had brought out Samson to *entertain* them, not realizing that they were setting him up to *literally* "bring the house down" on them.

²¹ Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "A number of sites of ancient heathen temples have been recently discovered, and since they show certain common characteristics it is likely that the temple of Gaza was of a similar pattern. In all probability the officials and dignitaries were in a covered portion looking out upon a courtyard where Samson was made a spectacle, but separated from it by a series of wooden pillars set on stone bases, supporting the roof, on which the crowd gathered. It may be conjectured that the spectators on the roof, pressing forward to gain a good vantage-point, had made the whole structure unstable. Samson must have been aware of the form of construction and of the possibilities in such a situation. The performance over, or temporarily halted, Samson was brought *between the pillars* (25b), just under the shelter of the roof, so that the dignitaries within the portico could have a closer look at him." Miles V. Van Pelt ("Judges," in *Deuteronomy-Ruth*, ESVEC [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: "The narrator pauses in Judges 16:27 in order to describe the number and location of the celebrants. The house is full of men and women, including the lords of the Philistines who bribed Delilah. Furthermore, some three thousand men and women are on the roof, looking down on Samson. Thus perhaps as many as five to seven thousand people are present in the temple at its destruction."

²² If you flip back to chapter 13 in the announcement of his birth, notice that, in verse 7, Samson is said to be "a Nazirite to God from the womb to the *day of his death*." But Samson actually completely broke his Nazirite vow *prior* to his death when his head was shaved. So what's going on? Again, this just highlights the Lord's sovereign grace. Even though Samson has broken his

The Israelites and the Philistines were no longer *indistinguishable*, but Samson had caused *conflict* and *contrast* between them, and he had effectively *crippled* the rule of the Philistines over the Israelites.

<pause>

No matter who you are, all this is meant to be an incredible comfort and encouragement to you.

If you've done everything wrong, and even if you're reaping the natural consequences of your sinful choices, you can still cry out to the LORD and he hears.

How is that so? Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel—or the good news—is that even though all of us have sinned against God and rightfully deserve his eternal punishment, God in his love and grace has provided himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ to be our substitute.

Jesus lived the sinless life we were supposed to live, he died on the cross to take the punishment we deserved, and he was raised three days later to confirm who he is and what he's done.

So now, whoever repents of their sins and believes in Christ alone as Lord and Savior is forgiven their sins and accepted by God.

That means that, if your faith is in Christ, the reason the Father answers you when you cry out to him is because he did not answer Christ when he cried out to him on the cross; *he* was abandoned, so that we can be accepted.²³

<pause>

If you're not a believer in Jesus Christ yet, we're glad that you're here. Your life may not seem as out of control as Samson's but who do you rely on?

As long as you think you can save yourself, you're just as lost as Samson.

The Christian message is not "be a good person," but it's to recognize that *none* of us are good people but we're all weak sinners who cannot save ourselves. We know that if we were to try to relate with God in a transactional way, all our good works would still amount us to hell because of our mountain of sins against him.

No, God must be *gracious* to us—and in Christ, he *has* been, if we would only receive him in repentance and faith.

So I urge you to respond to him. It's never too late to cry out to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith, but don't wait like Samson til the day when you're blind, bald, and dying. Turn to him today and receive the salvation and relationship with him that is only by grace through faith in Christ alone.

<pause>

Look now at verse 31.

[³¹ Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.]

Nazirite vow, the LORD still viewed him as a Nazirite to him—holy and set apart in his sight. Even though the LORD left Samson in chapter 16 verse 20, he had never *really* left him—not in the more fundamental sense. Yes, Samson's strength was gone but not God's special love for him. In God's eyes, no matter how sinful Samson had been, he was holy in God's sight from the *womb* to his *death*.

²³ That also means that, if your faith is in Christ, then just as the LORD chose Samson to be a Nazirite (or to be holy) "from the womb to the day of his death," God has *elected* (or *chosen*) you from before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:4). And he will keep you to the end.

After Samson died, his family members come to give him a proper burial.²⁴ And having judged Israel for 20 years, Samson concludes the accounts of the 12 judges in this book (cf. 15:20).

But this is still not the end of the book. We still have *five* more chapters to go, which provide a two-part conclusion that match the two-part introduction to the book.

And unfortunately, we'll see that the downward spiral in the book ends with an all-time low for the Israelites, where they look more like the pagan inhabitants than the people of God.

But we'll get there next time.

Conclusion

As we close, I want us to see how Samson ultimately *points* to Christ—how he *foreshadows* and *prepares* us to recognize the person and work of Christ.

- Both Samson and Jesus had angelic announcements of their births.
- Both Samson and Jesus were betrayed, handed over, tortured, and mocked.
- Both Samson and Jesus conquered their enemies and delivered their people in weakness and death.

But then, Samson also points us to how the person and work of Christ was so much *greater*.

- Samson conquered the Philistines, but Jesus conquered our greatest enemies of sin, death, and Satan.
- Samson only *began* to save Israel, but Jesus said his work of salvation is *finished* (John 19:30).
- Samson was clearly a sinner who needed his own sins forgiven, but Jesus was the only sinless one who could wash away the sins of all who trust him.
- Samson was buried and stayed in his tomb, but Jesus walked out of his tomb three days later, never to die again.

Jesus is the true and better Samson. He is the only one whose weakness is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:25), *not* because he *relies* on the strength of God like Samson did but because Jesus *is* God himself.

So look *past* Samson and see the true LORD whom he trusted, for the message of *Samson* is the message of the *gospel*: rely not on your strength but on *God*—that is, *Christ*—who expresses his power in your weakness.

Let's pray.

²⁴ Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008] writes: "The treatment of a body after death was a matter of importance in the ancient world (cf. Amos 2:1; Jer. 8:1, 2). It is apparent that Manoah was dead at this time, and since Samson appears to have been an only child, the references to his *brethren* and his father's *house* must be understood generally as his fellow-countrymen and tribal group." However, Miles V. Van Pelt ("Judges," in *Deuteronomy-Ruth*, ESVEC [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: "Samson's burial is honorable. We discover here that his mother's barrenness did not persist after his own miraculous conception and birth, for Samson had younger brothers. Together with the household of their father, these brothers retrieve and bury Samson in the tomb of their father, Manoah, between Zorah and Eshtaol, the very place where the Spirit of the Lord had first stirred Samson to fulfill his calling as judge (Judg. 13:25)."