

Has God Left You?

The Samson Story

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History repeats itself

“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.”

- Judges 13:1

At some point in the story of Samson the question has to be asked... why did God leave Samson? Why do great things and then leave this poor man to be captured, tortured, and killed? Isn't this a story of abandonment?

It all starts with verse 1. Before we ever hear the name of Samson, we are told first why the Israelites needed saving. This is pretty much the pattern of the Old Testament. “The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”.

The Israelites ignored God and got into trouble and then cried out to God for rescue. God answered and then the people started to ignore God again. Over and over and over and over again. And over again.

Samson was a judge sent by God to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines whom they were effectively slaves to. God sent judges to help the people during the periods when they were willing to serve God and obey His commands.

When they grew comfortable with the peace God had provided and decided they no longer needed God, He honored their wishes and left them alone. Which inevitably sent them running back to God pleading for His help.

This happened at a corporate level and at an individual level. Samson, as an individual, enjoyed God's gifts. But he also had problems with women. It seems he could not say no to them. So when they clearly sought things contradictory to his calling, he gave in.

It was only after Samson broke his nazirite vow that God left. If you are quick to blame Delilah, I'd like to remind you of the whole story, which briefly starts with the continuous on again, off again relationship between God and the Israelites.

From barren to birth. Who gets the credit?

It's worth noting that Samson's mom was barren. Not only did God gift her with a child that she could have otherwise never had, but He sent messengers to explain the coming gift and how to raise him. Unborn Samson's parents had further concerns and they prayed to God that He would send the angel back to help and God answered that prayer as well.

Samson's parents were grateful to the assistance received and wanted to honor the man. At this time they did not know he was an angel. The angel responded that he would not eat of the food they wanted to give him, but instead, they should honor God with a sacrifice.

I love how candid the angel was and how appropriate this is today. We often fail on both sides in attributing things properly to God. When good things happen, we are too happy to give proper thanks. This is why the Israelites kept falling away from God.

Time after time when things got good they lacked reason to worship and trust in God. They had food, clothing, shelter, loved ones... why bother serving a God... what else could He give them? They didn't think through that He provided all of those things. So when they said, 'take a hike', He did. And oh did they ever remember how desperately they needed a just and righteous God then! ... at least until they got comfortable again.

The other side of the coin is when bad things happen. And isn't it just so interesting that when bad things happen we can remember God just fine. "Why do bad things happen to good people?". "Why did God let this happen?". "If God loved me..."

The angel basically says that God is the one to be thanked... not him. He was not willing to accept praise that belonged to God. He was just the messenger. I feel like this thought is worth pondering in many areas of our lives. The doctor may have had a hand in healing us, but he didn't invent the entire history of medicine. He may have studied and learned how bones work together, but he didn't set birth in order. He didn't create breath.

I have fixed a computer or two in my lifetime. Do I deserve credit? What we do today is trivial in the grand scheme of where we are at and who all came before us. I may help uninstall a virus, but before I could do that someone else had to invent computers.

Someone had to create and discern machine code. Someone had to conceive digital thought. It's not just an evolution of more advanced parts emerging over time, its massive leaps in technology between one iteration and the next.

When I click a button on a computer screen I have engineers, developers, scientists, programmers, and a slew of other professionals that have worked off of other's ideas for decades. And this is just since the computer became known. Before that it was calculators, radios, telephones, telegraphs, etc. Do we really need to be thanked for work we do? Can we really claim 100% autonomy in our endeavors?

In photography there is debate about who gets credit for taking a picture. There are actually laws in place to help protect copyright issues. In many areas, the person credited for taking the picture is the one who pushed the button.

Let's forget, for a moment, about the long history of camera development (similar to that of the computer). And let's just talk about what makes up a picture.

First you have to focus (make sure it's clear and not blurry). Then you have to compose the shot. (what is in frame? How much of the frame do you fill? What are the angles?). Now you have to figure out lighting. (over or under exposed). Then there are some settings on the camera that need to be understood. How do you reduce camera shake? What depth do you want? Do you want to see any motion?

What is the picture of? Is it people, or a known location, or a branded item? You likely need permission to take the photo, which includes filling out forms.

Suppose someone else takes care of all of this. They masterfully set up the environment, pick the right time of day for the optimal lighting, adjust the entire shot around the placement of the sun so it gets that beautiful warm glow. They studied and handpicked just the right settings on the camera... oh, did I mention it was their camera? It is. You didn't buy it. You certainly didn't invent it or any of the photography ideas that have been advanced for the past several decades. They paid models and obtained the proper model releases to have the right to photograph.

And after all this, they ask you to come and push the button. There are some laws that say you, yes you, button pusher... you own the actual photograph captured in that camera.

This is effectively what we do when we seek praise for the things we do. Everything can be traced back to someone that is propped up in some way by someone before us. Only God stands at the true beginning. He is responsible for things that no one else can take credit for. He is the beginning. And He is the end.

I think it's still ok to thank others. I'd even encourage it. But, the plight of the Israelites wasn't in thanking others. It was that they constantly and consistently failed to remember how they got the good things in life. Who delivered them? Who protected them? Who heard their cries? It was God. It was always God. And after 40 years of Philistine cruelty, God answered yet again.

This angel wasn't about to take credit for the sovereign and grace filled wonders of God. Perhaps if they had remembered God more often, they wouldn't have needed to be bailed out yet again?

Manoah... and the other one

Samson's mom, Manoah's wife... doesn't have a name on record. "His wife" "the woman", etc. while customs may have played a large part it may be worth considering that many Biblical women were named.

Especially the mother of such a crucial son. She is whom the angel came to, she is who had to begin the Nazarite vow herself and change her lifestyle to honor God's gift. She is the one who calmed her husband and helped him see God's compassion in His plan. Yet she remains nameless.

Personally I'd like more of that in my life. How can I use the mighty gifts of God without being noticed? The purpose is for people to not notice us, but to be pointed to God. Didn't she nail it? She sacrificed, she comforted, she taught, she obeyed... and in the tales that follow she is "that woman". Well done, mam. You pointed directly to God and His purposes without convoluting the story along the way. Bravo! More importantly... praise God!!

Blessed to death

Manoah is worried he will die for having seen God. "Wife" calms him and explains God's way of doing things.

“If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.”

-Judges 13:23

Why would God do great things just to kill people off at the end? Why would He promise a son to a barren woman and then show Himself only to kill them? He wouldn't. That would be cruel. So let's extend this question to Samson. Why would God give Samson all this strength, just to kill him? He didn't. But Samson made choices that limited the narrative.

When Samson lived in God's plan, he was unstoppable. When Samson gave in to temptation and revealed his undoing, that was not God's choice. Remember, before Samson was even born, his mother had vowed that his hair would never be cut. This isn't day one we are talking about here. His entire life, he has lived with this vow.

To exclaim to Delilah how to physically bind him after all that he had seen and been through, and not to mention that she was a Philistine woman... This is so much more about Samson flirting with temptation and making poor choices than it is about God letting him be captured. It was a simple deal. Don't cut your hair. Don't even let scissors near it. And by his own actions and choices in extremely questionable situations, he allowed it to be done.

Monoah and his wife were not killed after seeing the angel. She was right in her reasoning that God had set them apart and He is a faithful God. He would not do all of that just to end the story incomplete. But Samson was not as faithful as his parents, so the ending was likely not as intended.

God still kept His promise. The Israelites were still saved. But Samson found that veering off the path has significant consequences. And I think it's important to know that they weren't necessarily punishments from God. It's just what happens when we “do evil in the sight of the Lord”. He leaves us to it.

Hear my roar

Right after Samson defeated the lion with his bare hands the Bible points out two details that are worth noting. The lion, was “roaring”. This was not a sickly, sleeping housecat. Nor was it a confused, docile, scaredy cat. The lion was roaring. We are meant to understand this was no fluke. This wasn't luck. Samson didn't accidentally overcome a random animal that he crossed paths with.

The lion saw Samson and with all the wild and strength in him, he approached Samson. If this cat had faith, he would have prayed, “thank you, Lord, for this meal I’m about to receive”. In one translation of Judges 14, it says ‘a roaring lion’. In another, it says, ‘the lion roared toward him’. Peter says this:

*“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a **roaring lion**, seeking someone to devour.”*

- 1 Peter 5:8

I believe this lion was seeking to devour Samson. Many parallel the lion as a warning to Samson. It’s God saying, ‘I disapprove of some of your actions... but I’m bigger than your failures.’ Either way, a man with his bare hands could not overpower a wild lion roaring towards him.

Fun Facts

A lion’s roar can be heard from as far as 5 miles away.

A lion can run for short distances at 50 mph and leap as far as 36 feet. 36 feet! According to the utility pole wiki page, a standard pole is 40 feet tall, but buried 6 feet in the ground, leaving it stand 34 feet above the ground. Did you follow the math? A lion can clear a telephone pole.

you might tear into a steak with 150 to 200 psi (890 newtons). Hyenas, lions, and tigers generate around 1,000 psi (4,450 newtons). -¹

The average weight of a lion seems to range between 300 and 400 pounds but they can get as large as 600. Also consider, wild lions don’t spend much time in front of the TV. They are muscle. All muscle. They don’t farm or eat their veggies. They kill and then rest from killing so they can kill again. So while their massive weight is impressive, we need to know that pound for pound, it’s still not a fair comparison. 1 pound of lion muscle would surely carry more power than 1 pound of civilized and domesticated man?

In terms of the swipe of a lion’s paw, it’s hard to gauge scientifically (some sources reported over 400 pounds of pressure in the swipe, but it was difficult to pinpoint a reputable source)... but there was an

¹<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/03/120315-crocodiles-bite-force-erickson-science-plos-one-strongest/>

incident where a captive lion managed to open his cage in the zoo and killed an intern with a single swipe of the paw. ²

The length of a lion (our height) can be up to 10 feet. And their height (our width) can be over 4 feet.

Lions aren't just big, strong, and scary... their abilities significantly outmatch us in every way. We can't outrun them, we can't withstand their paws or teeth, and we don't possess the strength to harm their massive frames. In short, there isn't much room for imagination here. A man killing a lion with his bare hands is not believable. Even with adrenaline. Even with luck. Let alone a lion roaring after him. Behold the strength of God.

Too good to brag

The second interesting thing right after his bout with the lion is that he didn't tell his parents about it. They were with him. They traveled with him as he sought out his Philistine wife. And after "tearing the lion apart" scripture also tells us, "But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done." Later when he returned and found honey in the carcass of the lion, he served that to his parents and didn't tell them where he got it.

This serves as great importance later when we learn about the riddle he gives and how no one could possibly know the answer... but before he finds the honey in the lion... he still doesn't share the details of the event.

This is difficult to understand in our day of social media. If someone eats a candy bar it's often posted online with pictures to go along with it. We document every event, and the importance of what we share diminishes day after day. But being attacked by a lion... a roaring lion... and not only surviving, but "tearing the lion apart". This wasn't news worthy?

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/08/lion-killed-intern-swipe-paw-inquest>

Right in my eyes

The journey to betrothe Samson's future wife started off with him telling his parents he saw a woman and that she was right in his eyes. "Right in my eyes" (Samson speaking). It appears as though he only just saw her because when he went back with his parents to get her, it says he talked with her and again mentions that she was right in his eyes.

Then, after 'some' days, he returned to take her. This feels like love at first sight. First he saw her. But wanted to marry her enough he involved his parents, argued with them about the disgrace of marrying a Philistine woman, then traveled to get her. Then he talked to her and found that he still wanted her.

If Samson were simply an Israelite with no other depth or consequences, marrying a Philistine would have been problematic for many reasons. First, it was forbidden to marry pagan god worshippers. The Philistines worship dagon. Next we have issue with the fact that the Philistines were oppressing the Israelites at every turn.

Let's table the problem with Samson falling for a Philistine woman for a moment. It carries two massive issues with it. The first being that they are pagan god worshippers and the latter being that they are at war with the Israelites. Forgetting those, momentarily, there is another cultural problem. People did not marry far from their families. Not only was it preferred that Israelites marry other Israelites, it was common to marry distant cousins and in-laws. Marriage was more transactional and this allowed property and professions to remain at home. While they did try and follow the strictest of laws against incest, they kept it in the family where it was allowed. This makes Samson's choice so much more abhorrent to his family and community.

Much worse than the Montagues and Capulets, there should have been a never ending sea of trust issues. And as we find out later... for good reason. Finally, Samson gives his reason multiple times. She is right in his eyes. He isn't looking to please God in his choice of spouse... nor his parents or his community. It's only about what he wants.

Let your yes be yes and your hair be long

But Samson isn't just an everyday, normal run of the mill Israelite. He has a nazirite vow as well. He is set apart. Luke 12:47-48 plays out a little here. Even more so, James 3:1. It is more important for him to remain holy as he has a vow to the Lord that he will remain so.

Deuteronomy 23:21 talks about the problems with making a vow to the Lord. Ecclesiastes 5:5 comes to the conclusion that it would be much better to not vow to the Lord. In Matthew 5, Jesus outlaws it completely. If I had to guess, God has grown tired of the sad history of mankind's inability to keep his promises.

I find this to be an overarching theme in the Samson story. Why did God leave Samson after his hair was cut? Why did God stay with Samson after he visited the prostitute? It's the difference between a sin and a vow made to God.

What did they not know?

So, I have to admit I am vexed by Judges 14:4 where it states that Samson's parents did not know him marrying a Philistine was from the Lord. I think that in our attempt to make sense out of all things we can try to justify how this relates to something else. Was Samson's heart hardened to bring down the Philistines? Did God approve of this marriage that went against His own commands? Did God allow Samson to make his own bed and blessed him until the job was done? Was it simply that Samson's parents didn't know one way or the other? Perhaps they simply didn't know that it was from God... or not from God?

Immediately we are told that God sought a way to bring down the Philistines. I would claim that God doesn't need a circumstance with which to work. The same power that allowed a simple man to overpower a roaring lion can operate outside of an illegitimate marriage. Are we to believe that God 'needed' Samson to marry a Philistine? I'll stop short of answering that, because we really don't know.

We may have some good educated guesses, but when it comes to the will of God, there isn't much I'm willing to stake a banner in and call myself an expert. There is a reason Romans 11:33 says that God's judgements are unsearchable after mentioning the depth and richness of His wisdom and knowledge.

We can glance at all of Job 38 to see God's response to Job when He tries to question the Almighty. As much temptation as there is to put a bow on this verse and claim it makes sense, I can't.

What we do know is that Samson was still blessed by God after he married the Philistine. God did not leave Samson until after he physically broke the nazirite vow with the cutting of his hair. There is a lot of room to interpret and this can cause trouble. I will make one claim as to what I believe this verse is not saying. God does not sin. God does not tempt us to sin. God will not deliver to you a marriage based on sin. God will not encourage you or speak to you and convince you to marry someone against His will. I realize that this may seem like what happened to Hosea.

This is where we live in perfect hindsight knowledge of Jesus' ministry and Paul's inspired letters. The Corinthians were taking a page right out of Samson's book. And Paul had to step in. 1 Corinthians 7:39 is pretty clear on that. Marrying a non Christian is a bad idea. What does the New Testament say? 1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14, 1 Corinthians 9:5.

To greatly paraphrase in only those examples we see explicit instructions to not marry non-believers and implicit instructions when discussing marriage, that it be to believers. This list is not nearly conclusive. If we were to investigate more general passages that point to the heart and ideology behind God's plan for marriage and our relationship with Him, we would be here for a while.

So what about the Old Testament, because, to be fair, the New Testament wasn't really there for Samson. Paul wasn't quite... alive yet. In 1 Kings 11, we see this quoted command from God.

"the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.""

- 1 Kings 11:2

The command is to not enter marriage with them... but the reason given is out of concern for the Israelites turning to the other gods. It's forbidden, but for good reason. Pay attention to what happens to Solomon in verse 4 of 1 kings 11:

"For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done."

- 1 Kings 11:4-6

There is that phrase again. "Evil in the sight of the Lord". This is how we begin the story of Samson, isn't it? Verse 1 in chapter 13 of Judges.

But let's back up just a tad, verse 1 says: "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women". But it appears that he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord once he allowed them to turn his heart to the other gods. Again, I'm trying to be careful to not spell this out too forcefully, as this is simply one opinion, but it appears that God is more concerned with the end result. Yes there was disobedience when Solomon sought women, but in his old age, he allowed them to convert him away from the one God and that seems to be when God has the most trouble.

A very bad example that we might be able to relate to is a misdemeanor versus a felony. I say this is a bad example because I'm not sure God ranks sin. But, in His infinite wisdom and love, He might have allowed grace up to a point. Solomon was a sinner when he ignored God's warning to stay away from other cultures that worshipped other gods. Jesus came to save sinners. He ate with tax collectors and forgave prostitutes. However when the pharisees, who knew the scriptures passed on judgement to others, He would draw the line and call them out.

God may have drawn the line when Solomon took it to the next level. Not only did he take on other women that he should not have, he allowed them to do the very thing God warned against. He looked to other gods. He put the true God second. And historically, that is the fastest way to get God to leave you to your own peril.

Our God is a jealous God and He will not tolerate second in our lives. (exodus 20:5). So could Samson be in a similar situation? Where he sought a woman that should have been off limits, making him a sinner, but when his hair was cut and he broke the covenant with God, that is when he crossed a line that caused God to take more direct action? And in so doing, the passage allows for God to be with Samson the sinner and Samson the one who looks out only for himself when choosing a spouse... so long as he keeps his nazirite vow?

But once his hair is cut and the line is crossed, God leaves. Does that mean God condones the sin? No, I don't believe so on any level. But does God love us as sinners anyway? Yes, and that will be evident very soon when we read about how God returned to Samson when Samson put himself back in line with God's plan for him. So even after crossing that line and really offending God, God can still forgive and provide.

How, then, can it be so difficult to understand that God allows us to operate as sinners in a fallen world, until He returns? This may not cross every t and dot every I to your satisfaction, but this is how I work out one of the very few scriptures in the Bible that does not add up to me. But again, I must preface, Only God knows what His intent and purposes are. And I am not in a place to question His perfect will. Proverbs 3:5 ("Trust God and not our own understanding"). Romans 12:2 ("God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect").

Does it matter?

Did God approve of Samson's choosing of the Philistine woman? More so, did He provide it? I don't know. But of most importance, does it change what God did through Samson? Does it change the Son God sent to abolish the law and provide grace, freedom, and salvation? No. It does not.

I will trust in God through this one confusing passage just as I trust in Him when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. (Psalm 23:4). I will trust that God knows what He is doing just as I believe that all of my sins and mistakes will be forgiven. I will accept that my knowledge is limited and my motives are less than pure. I understand that I live in a fallen world and when a mighty all powerful, all knowing, creator of all things works with us in this world, there are some things that won't calculate properly in our tiny, temporal, finite minds. In short, I'm not going to be the mouse that tells the Lion he is wrong. And this is not only out of fear... this is of the limited wisdom I have received that allows me to know as fact, that I do not contain all of the knowledge in the world, especially through times that occurred hundreds of years before me. I know just enough to know that I do not know, but I also trust enough to know that God is perfect and just.

Can we really go against His will?

Lets visit the other side of this discussion. Was God against Samson and the Philistine woman? And what I mean by that is, did this go directly against the will of God? Not was it a sin, but was it something God specifically didn't want to happen? For example, in Numbers 22 we find the story of Balaam and his talking donkey (one of my favorites).

Balaam is told directly by God to not answer Balaak's summons. I would also mention here that it seems that in the Old Testament, when God spoke to people, He actually spoke. And I think that is where I take issue with people using scripture like the Philistine woman being from God or Hosea's command to marry a prostitute... then they say things like, God told me to marry a stripper because I have feelings for her. Or, God is telling me I should divorce my spouse because I'm sad.

"People were often terrified after their life changing encounters with God"

When God wanted people to do something, He spoke plainly. People were often terrified after their life changing encounters with God. So God spoke to Balaam, and told him not to go. Balaam went anyway. God really didn't want him to go, so he sent an angel with a flaming sword. When Balaam didn't see the angel, the donkey did and stopped. When Balaam tried to force the donkey to keep going, the donkey talked. Look at what God did. In other words, Balaam was NOT going to make it to Balaak. Either through obedience or through death. The angel made that perfectly clear, "If she [the donkey] had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live."

I love that. No sense in punishing the obedient donkey... she would have lived. We have a similar story in Jonah. Another similarity exists in the attempt to build the Tower of Babel. When God decides something is going to happen... it does. If He doesn't want it to... it won't.

There is a big difference between God being against something and God allowing it. I think what God chooses to allow is too big of a subject to get into here. He allowed Job to suffer. He allows evil to work within the fallen world. But this does not mean that evil and horrible things come from Him. His allowance does not mean His approval. What it does mean is that it does not directly go against the planned order of things.

"His allowance does not mean His approval. "

My mom died of cancer. I do not believe that God killed her or that God cruelly chose for her to suffer from that disease. I believe that God sent Jesus to save her from her sins and she accepted Him and believed in Him. While

she lived in this evil world, bad things happened to her. After a culmination of her choices and the world's decisions around her, she passed and now faces an eternity with God and exciting happiness that my words could not possibly describe.

It's over for her. She ran the race, fought the fight, and through God's grace she has eternally won. She is now where God intends for all of us to be. A place where things are not broken. She no longer has cancer, where she is cancer does not and cannot exist. Why? Because like with Jonah and Balaam, and the tower, God will not allow it. He makes the rules, and He says heaven is pain-free and sorrowless.

So the ultimate question we really should be asking about the order of the world is, does God intend for us to have eternal joy by leaving this horrible place never to return to a system where evil rules? Absolutely and thankfully, YES! And though I miss my mom, she could have suffered another 20 years. I am thankful she is home, and the rest of us, whether we realize it or not, are fighting with our every breath to get to where she is.

So does God allow “bad” things to happen? Just like with the Israelites, He allows us to make our own choices. And just like the Israelites, when we go against Him and choose horrible things, we blame Him for allowing us to do what we wanted to do all along. Just like with Solomon. God said, don’t go after those women, they will lead you away from me. Solomon went after them and they led him away from God. Next follows crying out to God, why did you let this happen???!

Then, are we really free?

Will God allow things to happen? Yes, free will means we can really mess things up. Ask the Israelites who wandered for decades due to their disobedience. Ask anyone suffering from an STD where the Bible clearly warns against the lifestyle that leads to those. Ask almost anyone sitting in prison now. Ask Samson, who allowed his hair to be cut and was subsequently blinded and imprisoned.

But where we often get it wrong... the bad stuff is not the end. The pain is the interlude. Loss informs our true purpose for God. It reboots our system and kickstarts our emotions. Just like Samson, we see more clearly when we fall down and remember what really matters. Samson saw the clearest when he lost his eyes.

This is what it means that Jesus defeated death. The end isn’t when we fail. Grace and forgiveness allows for a newness of life. When Samson broke his vow, he got a little bit of what he deserved, but God wasn’t done. He was disappointed, but not ready to lose Samson. Samson remembered his purpose. He remembered His God. And the covenant was restored.

“Samson remembered his purpose. He returned to His God. And the covenant was restored.”

All about me

Most of this comes back to a statement made twice. Samson chose who was right for him... in his own eyes. He did not appear to care about politics, or family, or tradition, or God when it came to women. His parents tried to make the case for culture and God and he would hear none of it. This rings true again with the story of Solomon.

There were ignored warnings that lead to his downfall. How many times? How many women? How many chances did each of these men have to turn back? God is a graceful and merciful God. If we can see the true sin in our own lives, perhaps we can understand how God chose to work with Samson and Solomon, even when they started to veer down a forbidden path.

Rather than claim God was wrong to show leniency, or question His judgement... I'd rather look at my own life and find ways to see the warning signs before it's too late. What if I'm like Balaam and I've already missed the angel and ignored the donkey? The story of Samson is one of faith, prayer mastery, and redemption... but it's also a cautionary tale. What chance are we on with God? The second? Third? The last? Am I one step away from crossing the line and sending Him away while I face the raw force of deserved wrath due by my own ignorance and disobedience?

Surely I can learn from Samson? And I think one of the first places is to consider his choice in a spouse. "She was right in Samson's eyes". The more we live for what is right in God's eyes, the less opportunity evil has in this world to dole out just deserts. It doesn't mean bad things won't happen.

We still get cancer and we still suffer at the hands of true evil. But what many of us forget is that we additionally heap on our own mistakes to have to deal with as well. We have enough to deal with in a fallen world, how much more difficult is it when we add our own messes to the fire? Or put the other way, how much simpler would life be if we lived in God's grace by following His will for us?

Riddle me this

When Samson returned to marry his new bride he passed by the decaying lion he had previously killed with his bare hands. In it was a swarm of bees and their honey inside what was left of the Lion. He scooped it up, again, with his bare hands, and ate. But it also says that he had enough to share because he gave some to his mom and dad. But again, it is noted that he did not tell of the lion or where the honey came from.

While I think we could spend a long time discussing the lack of bragging, here, it really goes to show that the riddle he is about to tell was safely guarded. No one, not even his parents, knew the answer to the riddle. He just shared the honey with them and had nothing to say about how he got it or where it came from.

And so Samson challenges the Philistines to a riddle. He fails on 2 counts here. First, he makes a challenge that he cannot afford. When they coerce his wife to tell them, he is not able to pay it. He

does not have 30 outfits to pay. The Israelites are impoverished enough under the hands of the Philistines. This leads him to kill Philistines to take their clothes. The chain reaction continues in that the Philistines give his wife to his best man.

His second failure in making the challenge is that he tells his wife. Remember he did not tell his parents, not even about the lion let alone the honey. (the keys to his riddle). His wife is a Philistine and we already talked about trust issues.

But when she presses in, Samson does not sense the red flags of warning. He tells her. This is a sad foreshadowing of more trouble for Samson and something worth repeating... Delilah is not the first woman to get information out of Samson that later brings him much sorrow.

Should he have trusted his wife? Listen to her response when he first refuses to tell the answer to the riddle. "You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is." **My people.** Samson is not her people... the Philistines are. I fear this is what his parents were worried about when they encouraged him to honor God's command and marry an Israelite woman.

How dumb can one man be?

Lets also consider for a moment Samson's intelligence. Through the course of seeing him fall for multiple women from the enemy's camp and then giving in to each of them multiple times outrageous requests that specifically and immediately come back to harm him... you would think he must be some kind of new stupid.

Well, Riddles are typically something smarter people lean towards. His riddle in particular stumped the entire wedding party... and he gave them all 7 days to solve it. While this arrogance cost him, you have to admit that it was only his Philistine wife's cheating that allowed them any chance to figure it out. He had stumped... all of them. To the point where they were angry and worried about the humiliation of the combined lot of themselves not being able to come up with an answer in all that time.

I don't think this forgives his arrogance, but it certainly points to a noggin on his shoulders. It's important to understand that Samson isn't an idiot. He also refrains from bragging over his lion kill. Something else that folks of slower intellect struggle with. Finally we can simply look to God's calling of Samson as a judge of Israel. I find it difficult to believe that our sovereign God would put a damaged brain in charge of leading His people out of captivity.

It's important to understand that Samson wasn't suffering from a mental disorder, though with hindsight vision and a fair dose of third party judgmentalism, we can certainly want to smack him upside his head and ask what on earth was he thinking! We need to understand that Samson was just like us. Yes, he was called by God and blessed with holy strength. We each have our gifts, some more flashy than others. But we also each have our own weaknesses... and those too, are very diverse with various forms of effectiveness.

The whisper

Samson answers to the same whisper we do.

Just tell me, his wife demands. When he says no, she musters a surprisingly simple and seemingly worthless response... just tell me, she basically says again. Who on earth would fall for that? We all would, given our own specific vices and situations. It's what the devil does, and he is very good at it. More on this later with Delilah as he faces the same fate with her.

We see more of Samson's wit when he learns that his wife was given to his companion. He grabbed 300 foxes, tied their tails together with torches and set them on the dried grain fields, stores, and orchards. Let's be honest, who would have thought of that? Surely not someone dumb enough to tell his secrets to a woman who wins the answer by simply asking for it over and over? Yup, the same guy.

This puts us in the thick of the retaliatory relationship between the Philistines and Samson. After he burns their fields, they burned his wife and father in law. This was the very fate promised her if she did not coerce the riddle from Samson. She turned on her husband and still faced the same end result. From her people. The people she considered over Samson, just as Samson considered her over his people and his God. They both suffered from priority issues and they both lost much. Of note is that God keeps his promises. All of them. No other priority can promise the same. Not one.

"This is exactly how the enemy continues to operate today. He whispers what seems like wisdom and then burns you anyway."

I think this bears repeating, even in written text. Follow the thought process and historical event. When Samson's first wife was approached by the Philistine's they threatened to burn her if she didn't coerce Samson's riddle secret from him and tell them. She did as they asked, and then was later burned to

get back at Samson. This is exactly how the enemy continues to operate today. He whispers what seems like wisdom and then burns you anyway.

What about the details?

At losing his wife he vows revenge and then... “And he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow”. While many debate the specific meaning, it’s hard to ignore the general meaning, struck with a great blow. Especially when followed by the threat that immediately preceded the striking (or smoting in some translations).

I do believe this is a literal comment on a conflict that has absolutely no details. No number of men, no extraordinary feats of strength listed, no allies mentioned at Samson’s side. It’s just revealed that he caused great damage. Enough so that after he left, the Philistines sought him out and turned the Israelites against him.

I’m of the opinion that not including details is likely more intriguing than including them. He kills a lion with his bare hands. He kills 30 men by himself. Then he kills another thousand. When the Israelites intend to hand him over, the Bible says they took 3000 men to get Samson. Three thousand. Isn’t that a bit excessive?

Just speaking to logistics alone, how do 3,000 people even travel together? Do you think maybe they knew of Samson’s strength? Is it possible they feared his response? But again... his intelligence shines through, I might even use the word, brilliance, here. His plan to go with them bound, so as to keep their names clean from the Philistines is not only pretty smart, but very caring towards his people.

So we get these amazing, miraculous exploits showcasing situations that are clearly not humanly possible. I.E. the power comes from God. And in the middle of the story, we just get, ‘he smote them but good’. In other words, we don’t even have the full story here. Just one moment, the Spirit of the Lord, “rushed upon him” (15:14) and supernatural things happened again and again and again, then we get a comment that simply states, God did more than what we see here in the scriptures.

We don’t get the whole story, we get the story that relates to us. We get the God breathed, inspired, written history of His plan and will for us. If I might return once more to the problem passage where Samson’s parents did not know that his choice in wives was ‘from the Lord’. We don’t have the whole

story. Only God knows his innermost thoughts woven out in the heavens since the beginning of time. Only God knows the full story of which parts are withheld for His perfect plan.

And the whole story includes peoples and places separated by centuries of time and miles upon miles of space. One of Samson's follies was wagering 30 garments on the outcome of a riddle that he could not control. It feels similar when we claim to "know" the word of God from our very tiny spaces and excruciatingly brief moments in time. We are fractions of the masterpiece, so small, we can hardly calculate our own stitching, let alone the entire design.

This is all to say that if a passage is confusing to us, perhaps it's meant to be? Or it's not as altogether important as we might have deemed it? It may even be revealed to those who need it when they need it. Scholars often claim the word of God is intended for all people in all times... yet we get so confused when every piece of it doesn't make sense directly to us every day.

Wheel'n and deal'n

Just as Samson's first wife made a deal with the Philistines, so did the Israelites. The 3,000 men bound Samson and handed him over. He made them promise that they would not attack him before he allowed himself to be bound. I find this interesting. Samson is wanted for killing thousands and ruining crops. And on top of this, he was seen as a slave. This isn't written in the Bible, but I'm going to assume he topped their most wanted list.

They killed many other Israelites for much, much less. So what did the Israelites gain by promising Samson that they would not kill him? "We will surely not kill you." In a much smaller scale than normal, we see the fickleness of the Israelites. Samson was their judge. Appointed to free them from Philistine bondage. And they bound him and handed him over to a death sentence all while promising to not hurt him. If you don't see the absurdity here, know that it is very similar to the preposterousness of Samson trusting Delilah after she asks how to bind him 3 times, she actually tries binding him... and then he finally caves and gives her the real answer.

The hint is simple. There is an enemy. We call him Satan. He constantly whispers, "just tell me" to all of us. For some it's the secret to our covenant with God, for others it's a promise of safety and not being burned, for others it's a fear of not being protected from the oppressors. Samson is not the only one in this story being whispered to. 3,000 Israelites heard the whisper that convinced them to not trust God or his judge and to hand him over to the Philistines.

Samson's wife heard the whisper and feared for her life. You and I hear the whispers too. They might sound different, but they aren't. "Just tell me". One of the bigger lies of the enemy is that any one person is the antagonist in this story. It's everyone. You can pour over the text and see each puppet string masterfully tugged as every pawn submits to the whisper. The Philistines enslave, the Israelites lose faith, Samson puts his own desires first, his wife shares his secret (and so does his next wife). There isn't a good guy in this story save God. Behold the power of the enemy and how important it is to guard yourself against that whisper. He will tell you it is wisdom and then burn you anyway.

You started it!

Listen to the brief explanation as both the Philistines and Samson give their account of the story so far:

"We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us."

- *The Philistines (Judges 15:10)*

"As they did to me, so have I done to them."

- *Samson (Judges 15:11)*

This may be the first ever case of the "he started it!" defense.

I would offer only this... many of the Philistine army likely thought of Samson as the instigator. Not just because they didn't like him, or because he was getting the better of them, but because they seriously thought he was in the wrong. He attacked them, burned their fields, humiliated them, took one of their own as a wife... in just about every known category, this guy was the problem.

Since we have that perfect hindsight and wisdom from God to know that the Philistines were unjustly ruling over and enslaving the Israelites, it might be hard to see. But most of the Philistines aren't going to be able to see it that way. I would wager few of them woke up in the morning and told their children they were off to be a bad guy for the day. I seriously doubt they thought of themselves as doing any wrong at all. They were simply trying to protect what was theirs and follow orders.

Of course Samson has his own side of the story... and it sounds oddly familiar. What I would challenge to apply to our lives today is that in every conflict, there is another point of view. Just like with Samson, there may be a side that God takes, but that doesn't make both sides 100% in the right or wrong. We can again look back and see the mistakes of each character in the story.

Before we begin splitting hairs or defining who started the conflict, should we first seek God and make sure we are doing what is right in His eyes? Even though God chose Samson to deliver His people, every bad thing that happened to Samson can be traced back to that one line. His wife was right in his own eyes (Samson's). We can be pretty good at thinking God is on our side and charging into situations where we have clearly committed wrongs of our own. Samson finds out later, there is a line. Call it a limit, threshold, whatever you want, but God will leave us to our own vices if we choose for Him to.

“God will leave us to our own vices if we choose for Him to.”

Confident that God was with him he attempted to break free from the binding Delilah later puts on him. And then he learns... God's power was no longer with him. When Samson did Samson's will over God's, there was no power to be wielded.

In this side of heaven, we will see far less right and wrong, and much more wrong and wrong. We are sinners. We serve a mighty and forgiving God, but our pride props us up to fight battles with other sinners. When we should be praising God for salvation and freedom, we tear at each other... because the other party started it. When we take our eyes off the Savior we sink. (Matthew 14:30).

Revival

After killing the thousand Philistines that attempted to take in the bound Samson, Samson is exhausted. He asks for water, but after drinking the miraculously provided water from God, it says that “his spirit returned, and he revived.” His physical body wasn't quite up to the challenge that the Spirit of God gave it through the victory. So Samson needed more than just strength... He needed restoration.

When the fighting ends and the fatigue sets in on Samson, when the adrenaline dissipates and his body falls limp from exhaustion... He asks the obvious question, (paraphrased). ‘So that's it? You led me to victory in this epic, awe-inspiring, supernatural battle only to let me die of thirst? You got what you wanted and now you are done with me?’. (again, paraphrased). But isn't that the gist of what Samson was asking? Here are his actual words:

“You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”

- Judges 15:18

I love God's response. He doesn't answer. No words are spoken. Water just begins to pour out for Samson. God isn't one dimensional nor is He selfish. He doesn't just give strength. He provides all that is needed. (Philippians 4:19). He not only delivered Samson safely out of that battle, he used Samson to aid in delivering all of his people out from under the thumb of the Philistines. And when Samson needed water or honey or wit or brawn... God gave him what he needed.

But it's where our minds go. Look at how quickly we forget. When the Israelites were first released from their slavery and left Egypt... their very first stop was at the Red Sea where the Egyptians caught up to them after a change of heart. What was their response? 'Praise God, he just saved us so we can't wait to see what He will do next'? Of course not! Their actual words were,

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

- Exodus 14:11-12

That isn't just forgetting quickly, it's revisionist's history. You can almost picture them cheering in one breath and then cursing Moses for dragging them out of Egypt kicking and screaming in the next. And this is the history of mankind. It's not an exclusive plight to the Israelites. When all is well, we are happy, when things take a turn, we simply haven't learned to cope. Who can we blame?

Samson staggers on the very battle field of God's delivered victory, and already he sees only death and defeat in his future. Why? Why would God do this? It's the same question Monoah had and his unnamed wife had to calm him with the holy truth of it all. God wouldn't do that. Why would he?

They are his chosen people and He wants them to do well. He wants them to flourish. For what purpose would He grant victory only to see it fall apart in vain? God could have answered in many ways. I've already mentioned how He responded to Job when Job questioned His ways. God could have been angry with the lack of trust. He could have sent someone to smack some sense into him.

He silently sent the needed water to Samson. That is all. That was all He needed, that was all He sent. This is especially interesting in the context of Samson's cry that he is being left to die immediately after his deliverance. The only thing we really have left in the story of Samson is Delilah, who influenced him to effectively reject his vow to God.

Saved to betray

Talk about responses... what if God told Samson here that since Samson was about to betray Him, it would be best to just let him die right there? This isn't how God works. Jesus knew of Judas' impending betrayal and He basically encouraged him. "Friend, do what you came to do" (Matthew 26:50) In other words, let's just get this over with, I'm not going to stop you.

When it doesn't go directly against the specific will of God, we have free will. Does this mean we don't have a choice? No, we definitely have choices... but so does God. And He wins. Everytime. So when He says to stop worshipping other gods, He means it. We simply don't know when, how, where, or to what extent He will respond to our disobedience.

Now that we live in full hindsight of the Bible and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, it may be that many of us are simply left to choose for ourselves. God let decades pass before he intervened with the Israelites. He is a patient God (Psalm 86:15, 2 Peter 3:9)

God provides what is needed, but we struggle with the definition of 'need'. When the Israelites needed rescuing, he brought them out of Egypt. When their backs were against the Red Sea... He moved the sea. When they were hungry He provided mana. When Daniel was in the lion's den, he shut their mouths. When believers were thrown into the furnace, He protected them. When a thousand men attempted to capture Samson... God, not Samson, provided a way out. And, when Samson was exhausted from God's deliverance, he was given water and rest too.

There are two issues with this line of thinking. The biggest, in my mind, is what defines a need? What if we need friends? Or a better job? What about health? I personally feel like I need to be cut off in traffic less. Needs are on a varying scale to be sure, but what we notice in the Bible ties directly into what God specifically defines as His will.

Does Samson slaughtering thousand's of Philistines as an active effort to deliver God's people out of bondage have an everlasting impact towards His goal? I think so. Does me getting a wage increase in 2019 speak to the masses for centuries to come and point to God's sovereignty? I can't answer that so easily. Do I need it? That is even more debatable.

What about life and death? What if I'm dying with a terminal disease. Do I need healing? Maybe. Why maybe? Because Jesus defeated death. (Isaiah 25:8, 1 Corinthians 15:24-26, Revelation 21:4, and many others). The disciples understood this concept in very real terms and offered that their desires to live were mostly selfish in nature, (philippians 1).

Maybe death is too harsh or too cut and dry. What about general struggles of health, safety, and freedom? In Philippians 4, Paul explains the secret to contentment... and that secret comes during beatings, imprisonment, exile, torture, starvation, and loneliness. So did Paul need rescuing? "Need"? He didn't seem to think so... and he didn't offer this while sipping fruity drinks on the beach after the fact. He told us that his life was full and complete and meaningful while he was suffering by every possible definition of the word, 'suffer'. So our first and biggest issue with understanding how God works within our own needs, is first identifying what a need truly is.

What do we need?

We need God. It is very clear that we are unsalvageable without Him. We need the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so He can vouch for us during His return. What else do we need? Paul explains... 'nothing'. If he lives, He will continue to preach Christ even in prison, and if He dies, then its victory time and He goes to be with Christ, which is his end game plan all along.

So let me rephrase what I said earlier by adding some very key words. God gives us what we need... to fulfill His will. Remember that good and perfect will that we don't understand because He is God and He created us, and we are just people that He created? If it doesn't bring us to God now, it will bring us to God later. This is what Paul figured out. This is contentment in all things.

"There are two places that we can live. The moment where great things are happening, or the moment where what is happening will lead to great things."

All things work together for good at some point. Perhaps they seemingly are horrible now... much like the cross. But at some point the tomb door is removed and resurrection occurs. So there are two places that we can live. The moment where great things are happening, or the moment where what is happening will lead to great things. Paul says, it's basically a coin flip as to which he would prefer. I either get to go with Jesus... or I can

help others find Him. This goes straight back to Peter's plight on the water. When he kept His faith and eyes on Jesus, He experienced a miraculous moment with the Master. When he looked to himself, he lost faith and began to drown.

Samson only thought of himself when he chose his wife and this caused many problems. He needed God. He did not "need" that specific woman. When we are hand in hand with God, our needs are

His needs. They are simple and they are eternal. Get to heaven and bring as many as you can with you. When we are not hand in hand with God... our needs branch out into many confusing and defeating areas. Health, job satisfaction, social, etc.

So we tend to do those 2 things that can blur together a bit. We can greatly overestimate what a need actually is... and we can see needs through temporal, earthly minds and hearts. Both of these put us in the shoes of Samson seeing things in our eyes. Paul says to look through Kingdom eyes. To look at Jesus in ALL situations, and therein lies contentment.

Twenty years on the job

Chapter 15 verse 20 says: *“And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.”* Then chapter 16 begins the story of Delilah. How would you like this to be the story of your life? Can I call you Bob? “Here is a mistake Bob made. Oh, let me tell you about another one. Wait, I almost forgot the time when Bob did this horrible thing! Then Bob did some stuff for 20 years and then... you won’t believe this... listen to this catastrophe!”

Samson got yada, yada, yada’d over potentially the best part of his life. For 20 years of “judging” which is what God created him to be, all we get is, he did his job. I feel like we should let this sink in for a bit. The Bible isn’t a book to glorify man. Paul tells us that the only thing we can boast in is God. Think about how the rest of literature would favor if we behaved as we should all the time.

Sauron would have been defeated in the first 5 minutes of the first movie in the Lord of the Rings. Jaws would have starved because no one would have gone in the water. Little Red Riding Hood would have never even met the wolf because she would have obeyed and stayed out of the forest, and Darth Vader would have never even learned of the dark side because he would have controlled his anger. There would be no stories.

We don’t need works of literature to teach us the things we are already doing well. These stories exist as cautionary tales or as works of art to explore our great vices. Even in fiction we see the same mistakes made over and over again and we are entertained by them because, even when it’s not us, we can empathise with both hero and villain.

As Christians, we don’t need a book telling us to keep doing what we are doing. We need a book that tells the story of why everything is ruined and how we can do our part to stand on the right side of

fixing it. When Paul wrote to the Churches he actually did tell the people what they were doing right... and it took about 1 line of a several page letter.

This single verse gives me great hope. God chose Samson to be a judge. And for 20 years Samson fulfilled his purpose. His whole life isn't summarized as a bumbling idiot that fell for his wife's trickery THREE times after failing multiple times for the same type of trickery before that. He was a judge. He led his people. Specifically, he lead his people towards safety from the Philistines. It was the same task Moses had. To lead the Israelites away from slavery. A situation they found themselves in over and over and over again because they continued to make bad choices.

That one line transforms Samson from a total failure and laughing stock, to a man of God that reached his potential. He was a cog in the well oiled plan for humanity. He made some mistakes. Some embarrassing ones. We can learn from him on many levels. But his life's retelling is true to the call of Christians. Camera crews don't show up to witness your good deeds. When you get it right, it's between you and God. But when you mess up... the whole world is watching and taking notes.

It is what it is

If you are driving and you let someone in your lane, do you get a medal? If you pick up someone's tab in the drive through behind you, do you see your heroics on the nightly news? We just aren't built that way. We don't crave news of things that are supposed to happen. The status quo is boring. Samson was supposed to rule his people well and he did just that.

What is there to tell? Do we want to be notified every time anything is ok? That would be so annoying and repetitive. No, we want the juicy stuff. The choicest news that doesn't look like anything else. We seek scandals and hijinx. Can you imagine the newspaper headlines... "All is well". That might sound great at first but then as you read deeper and deeper it just gets harder and harder to follow.

People are breathing and water is wet. Dog's lick and fish swim. Tires are still rolling and flames still flicker. The sun is warm and bright and the wind is cool. Page after page things are doing exactly what they did yesterday. Where are the plot twists? Where are the protagonists? When you are doing what you are meant to do... there isn't much to tell. If God created you to be a judge, then in so doing, you are following your calling the same way gravity does. Now isn't it worth telling if one day gravity up and decided to stop working?

This is, perhaps, why our Bible is filled with so much turmoil. It's newsworthy when things don't behave the way they were created. When a fish starts talking, we would call the news stations. The world would flock to the internet and their tv's to see the spectacle. It may feel common... but that is a lie from the enemy. When we walk outside of the path God created us to be in, we are creating devastating news that shocks creation to its core.

For 20 years there was nothing to write about because all was as it should be. But one day, Samson chose to step out of alignment... he saw a prostitute and veered off course. The story worth noting now continues. God's plan is being averted and our cautionary tale including sad historical commentary picks up where we left off. It's not that its good to break up the cycle and start doing newsworthy things. It's that it's so bad to be outside of God's plan for us that we need the warnings.

Living in God's grace and protection is wonderful. But the snake told Adam and Eve that they needed wisdom so they disobeyed and we have all been miserable since. That same lie still works today. He told Samson he needed that prostitute. It wasn't that Samson was bored and miserable doing God's will. It's that the devil wanted to throw a wrench in God's plan. Samson was lied to and believed the lie that he needed more. And now he is out of alignment. Yet again.

More than sin

Samson visited a prostitute and yet the ambush that was set for him while he was with her was not successful. You may be thinking, why? He just did a sinful thing, right? Why would he wield God's power right after such a disobedient act? If God left him after losing his hair, why not just leave him after this disgraceful endeavor?

I want to make it clear that I'm not speaking for God here, but I do have a theory. When Samson allowed his hair to be cut by telling Delilah his secret, he broke his covenant to God. The Bible talks about how important oaths are and in the New testament we even see a discouragement against making them.

He broke his vow. And this is what the Israelites consistently did. They weren't just committing sins, they had oaths. Commitments. Obligations to God. It was a pact. A signed agreement. God promised one thing for them to return another. When they broke the vow, God was under no obligation to keep His part of the deal.

Samson's hair cutting was significantly more than just sin. He was releasing God from His part of the promise. God left Him per the terms of the agreement. Samson stopped setting himself apart for God, so God stopped setting Samson apart and protecting him. Much like the agreement between Adam and Eve. I will give you everything if you just don't eat of this tree. Ok. But now we want the tree too. Ok... then you lose everything. That was the deal.

Conversely, I don't believe our God is fickle. He doesn't storm off at every sin. He isn't ready to smite with righteous thunder every time we veer off course. Let's be honest... none of us would have a relationship with Him if He did. What if every lustful thought drove Him away? What about every thought of anger? Every time we eat too much or drink more than we planned? How about greed? When we want more than we should or covet something we don't have? It's another dishonesty game the enemy likes to play. Let's rank the sins shall we?

I think they all break God's heart. They all drive a nail into the crucified Savior. But they are also all forgiven. God wants to be with us that much. We can't stop sinning so He sent a Savior to bridge the gap and make a connection between us and Himself. God doesn't turn His back on sinners, He saves sinners. He didn't send His Son down to pick out the sinless... such a creature does not exist. He sent Him to make the sinful able to withstand His holy presence. He desires us and created a path for us. You don't do all of that just to run away when things don't go well.

"God doesn't turn His back on sinners, He saves sinners."

Samson made a mistake... and God was still with him. He didn't just bolt through the door. He didn't just knock it down. He lifted it up, posts, bar, and all AND carried it up a hill before dropping it and safely escaping. Another instance of God showing His presence. There were many ways Samson could have escaped that would have been impressive by man's standards. But this exit was one only God could have orchestrated. A God that still loves his creation when they make mistakes.

I mean it until I don't

The difference between a mistake and breaking an oath is significant. That is a big part of the problem. We have become so consistently dishonorable that we fail to see the reasoning behind God's frustration with oath-breakers. We make promises that we can't or won't keep.

We aren't invested enough in our own lives to let our words and actions remain consistent with each other. After my divorce I found cards that my ex had given me over the years. It was clear that at one point she really did love me. Many of them were signed "eternally yours", "yours forever", etc.

She didn't mean it. And it doesn't matter now whether she thought she meant it or not. She did not keep her vow. And the neglect to that vow caused life changing shifts for many parties over several years. If she forgot to call home before staying late at work... that would be a mistake. But to go through the process of divorce... a ceremony of destruction to the contract we made... that is not a 'mistake'. That is with intent and certain meaning.

You don't accidentally hire an attorney, sign dozens of documents, pay thousands of dollars, turn your life upside down and then start it all over again. It's not a passing mistake. It's a turning of the heart. When Samson told Delilah his covenant secret, that was no accident. It was the cessation of his contract with God. Samson was divorcing himself from God's presence by choosing satisfaction with yet another Philistine woman instead.

In short, there is a saying about doors closing and using windows instead. In this case, even in Samson's sin, he didn't need doors or windows. He had God's strength to lift gates and carry them off. God does not abandon the imperfect. I find this portion of the story to be extremely encouraging. As a sinner that makes lots of mistakes, I love the notion that I do not have to live under condemnation. God is not fickle. He is holy and righteous and defines love and sacrifice. He yearns to be with me.

This certainly isn't an excuse to go and sin and it up. Paul answer that very clearly. "By no means!". But it does allow me to ease up off my own self judgement enough that I can course correct and live under God's grace.

Show me the money

After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. 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."

- Judges 16: 4-5

I want to pause here for a moment. 1100 pieces of silver? It's very difficult to translate that into today's math, so I want to give you a little book report on what I found. First, let's edit the amount paid. There were 5 lords of Philistine (Judges 3:3) and it said she would get 1100 from "EACH". SO the amount promised to her was 5500 pieces of silver.

The *IVP Bible Background Commentary* states,

"Eleven hundred shekels of silver is an exorbitant sum – a king's ransom (see 2 Samuel 18:12). The 5500 shekels would equal 550 times the average annual wage [at that time]. If we took \$25,000 as an average annual wage today, that kind of offer would be [just short of \$14 million]." [In other words, the sum she received would seem to her like \$14 million seems to us today.]

But this was from the IVP. published in 1994, so I looked up current numbers. For 2018, since 2019 isn't finished yet. The average income was \$46,644 (that takes into account unpaid holidays and missing unpaid work for severe weather and emergencies). Meaning this is a pretty conservative number. (and since I'm a good book reporter, this is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics³. So... 5500 shekels of silver would feel like over 25 million in the U.S. today.

The actual value is highly debatable, so let's look at other things in the Bible that were paid for by pieces of silver.

- Exodus 21:32 30 shekels as a price for a slave.
- Matthew 26:15 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus.

Can we let that sink in for a moment. Forget translating values and inflation. Just counting weight in coins, Delilah was paid over 183 times more for betraying Samson, than Judas was for betraying Jesus. At this point, it's an unbelievable number. I think if Delilah were paid 60 shekels, we could say she was paid double what Judas was, and we would be disheartened. It would be an astonishing number.

But 183 times... It's not even a realistic number. It's so far above sensible it has no sting to it. It sounds like the boy who cried wolf. How much money? Yeah, whatever! How much hatred do the Philistines have for Samson, that they would pay this much? How much ego? But it isn't just an

³ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf>

empty promise. It's not just a fake motivational technique. Spoiler alert! They actually pay it!!!! Look at the impact Samson has against his enemies when he is living right with God.

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

- Judges 16:6

Um.... excuse me? She is very detailed. She didn't just ask, “where does your strength come from?” That might have made some sense. I could almost, just barely understand where he might fall for this question. Wow, you are really strong... do you work out? What is your secret?

No. I picture her reading from a notecard that they gave her. “Um, like, I need your strength and how I could bind you up... and, in a way that you cannot escape... like ever. It says so right here... I'm not asking its for a friend.”

Listen to how Samson responds to her... It sounds to me like he wants to mess with her.

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.” Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. 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. Then Delilah said to Samson, “Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound.”

- Judges 16:7-10

So... another read flag? Was it not odd that the very thing he told her happened? He just woke up bound in fresh bowstrings and all these men were ready to grab him. And then, to top it all off, she is mad that he didn't tell her the truth so that he could be caught. She might not have been the first attempt to get answers. Because even after she complains, he keeps messing with her and giving fake answers:

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." 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. 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." 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.

- Judges 16:11-14

Now this is interesting. First, the lie he tells her, keeps happening. Someone needs to give this man a clue. Fool me once, right?... but even more interesting, we are getting close to the secret. This may not be intentional, but on her third attempt to hand him over, he mentions the hair. This sounds to me like he is trying to play with the fire and not get burned.

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." And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. 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."

- Judges 16:15-17

We don't know how many times she tried to trick him outside of the times we see detailed here, but then it says day after day, and, He was "vexed to death". This strong, mighty, invincible warrior of God couldn't take it anymore. Perhaps this went on for a very long time?

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. She made him sleep on her knees.

- Judges 16: 18-19

So... I don't get this. Clearly, she wants to remove his power and hand him over to the Philistines. She basically tells him so night after night and then proves it afterwards by trying the things he tells her. He finally caves in and tells her, not just how to do it but why.. And it says she made him go to sleep on her lap. "So all I have to do is cut off your hair?, 'yes'. Good, lay down right here!". Hello! Red flags!!! As if the other dozen or so weren't enough, he lays his head down in prime razor real estate.

It doesn't matter how much faith you have or how long you have been a Christian, or how tough you are... the simplest, most obvious, most embarrassing, ridiculous requests can bring you to utter ruin. And it won't come from the person who's name tag says, "enemy" on it. He likes to start with the people you love and trust the most. You know why people hate the church so much? Because we give in to that sin too and it really hurts when it comes from places of safety and compassion.

Others can give up too

We should also note the tenacity of the Philistines. In addition to providing every fake resource Samson originally claims will subdue him, they still have to cough up 5500 shekels of silver should they actually get him. Night after night they expend men in hiding and plan and plot and scheme. At what point would they just assume, this isn't going to work? Shouldn't they have questioned Delilah at some point? Maybe she was taking advantage of them? They appear to have stayed razor focused on a single common cause. Get Samson. This happens when an enemy works in unison among people willing to reject right for riches. At any point anyone could have rejected the plan and put a fast stop to Samson's downfall. Delilah could have quit trying. The Philistine lords could have given up. The soldiers could have decided this was going nowhere. But none of them were the mastermind. The enemy does not quit. We cannot see him as a man with feelings and ambitions and weaknesses. He is

solely focused on the destruction of our souls and will work tirelessly to bring us down to his level (quite literally).

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. 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. 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.

- Judges 16: 19-21

So, he broke his Nazarite vow and God left him. That might seem a little harsh as he really feels like the victim here, but we will get into that in a minute.

But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained. Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.

- Judges 16: 22 - 30

This is how temptation works.

I got an email from our pastor. It might be easiest to just show it to you:

"are you available? I'm in a conference meeting right now and that's why i'm contacting you through here. I should have call you, but phone calls is not allowed to be use during the meeting. I don't know when the meeting will be rounding up, And i want you to help me out on something very important right away please mail me back"

So, right here, I know this is a scam. I mean they nailed the dialect, accent, and mastery of the english language of our pastor... but everything else is a dead give away. Not to mention the email came from "Pastor" and not the actual name.

Also consider that if you are actually in a meeting that doesn't allow calls or texts... email isn't allowed either.

At this point. It's a scam. I know it's a scam. I've read it a few times and had a laugh. And I'm thinking... I have some time to mess with this guy. So I email him back. Or her... girls can be criminals too. I just say:

"Yes, am available"

And I get a very quick response. They got a bite and are very eager.

"Good to hear from you, How are you? I would have called. I need to get a Google play gift card for a cancer patient that I promised her as a birthday gift but I can't do this right now because I'm currently in

*a meeting . Can you get it from any store around you?
I'll pay you back" .*

So... a few things:

1. Nothing says you have cancer like Google Play
2. Gift cards are digital now, in fact it's actually much more difficult to buy a physical card and attach it to your account than to just buy the digital code directly from Google. It's even easier to gift the codes than it is to send the cards. Even as a scammer, notice he didn't want me to send him a digital purchase... that could have been tracked digitally. So he specifically wanted me to leave the office, go to a store, and lose my parking spot (deal breaker), buy the card, register it, and send him the number on the card. Just that last part, applying the number from the card to the account, is how difficult it is to just buy direct digitally from Google Play. So all this is a huge red flag... and further confirming what I knew to begin with, that this guy was a crook.
3. That was in regards to the request, but he again says, he can't do it right now. If you can send an email... you can purchase a digital gift card through the app or store. It would have been quicker than the 2 emails so far.
4. The cancer patient doesn't have a name.
5. He points out that its a cancer patient, but its a birthday gift. An intentional draw on sympathy to create fake urgency. A real request would have been, I forgot to get Suzy a birthday card. But he's hoping the word 'cancer' becomes a blocker to anything else.
6. It was a promised birthday gift. How many of you promise a birthday gift in advance (some people actually like surprises) and then deliver it in a conference that is so strict, you can't call or text?

I had decided to mess with him before this second email. It's the only reason I replied. Now I'm all in. I cleared my calendar and I'm ready to dig in and have some fun. So I email him back:

"Sure, how much?"

Make sure if you are gonna mess with scammers to provide as little detail as possible. It's part of the fun. I very promptly received another reply:

"300.00\$". I suspect that if I had hesitated or asked some clarifying questions, he might have gone with a lower number, but he's got a sucker now. In terms of favors, he's shooting pretty high. He also

explained how to send him an image of the gift card. He was very specific in step by step instructions so that he would get his money... I mean the cancer patient's money... I mean the birthday gift!

And this is where things get weird. I gave you lots of details so you would understand my background. I have 20 years of IT experience. I've seen all kinds of spyware, malware, greyware, and every other kind of ware you can think of. I knew this was a scam from the second the first email hit my inbox. And I was about to have lots of fun.

My first thought was, I was going to tell him I accidentally put in an extra zero and now I have this 3 thousand dollar gift card that I didn't know what to do with... just to watch him squirm.

Somewhere, against all these facts, and all this experience, something was speaking to me. What if... just what if, our pastor is having one of those moments? What if something is going on in his life that's making him not think clearly? Am I really gonna be a jerk to someone in the midst of a life changing and desperate time?

I started rereading the emails. Yeah, that's a scam... but is it? YES!!!! It's clearly a scam! But I'm not ready to find a new church home! What if I were in need and I mean REALLY in need and I didn't make sense or follow conventions? Do I want the church to just ignore me? Or better yet, make it harder for me? That's what I was about to do.

I sent the office admin a text and asked her if I could call. And the whole time I was waiting on a response, I just kept kicking myself. Why did you do that? It's never been more obvious that this is a scam. Already I was regretting my action. I kept thinking... they are gonna laugh at me. 20 years of IT experience and I'm checking up on a scam that 8 year olds try and pull. The admin texted back that I'd get a call soon.

I'm sitting there regretting how gullible I felt, and now I'm wasting her time too! It dawned on me that 'soon' wasn't fast enough. I don't know how much longer they have until cancer gets the best of them... they need their gift card, so I call another elder. I kind of hear him chuckle when he says yeah, a few other people have received a similar email, just mark it as spam.

I didn't just think it was a scam. I knew it with hard evidence and experience. But by the end I was frantically calling trying to save what was left of a life soon not for this world.

... this is how temptation works. I knew better, by every fiber of my being I knew it was a scam, but something nagged at me and I ended up making the phone call any way.)

Just tell me

I'm sure Samson knew better. He had to have. I have to believe we can't be made that dumb. But when there is an enemy at work... look at the things we can justify. He lost his eyes, his freedom, and shortly thereafter his life... all over this little nagging voice that just kept saying, tell me. That's it. No monster showed up. No huge beast. No visual demons. No pitchfork. Just, "tell me, tell me, tell me". And he gave it all for that. If we could be honest, and I mean really honest, some of us aren't even being honest with ourselves. We think we aren't guilty of giving in like Samson did... oh yes we are! If we could blurt it out for all to hear it would be embarrassing. We have all made ridiculous, insane choices to quiet that nagging voice. That subtle nudge. That little itch.

All of us are able to be sin-abstinent for a time. But the devil doesn't just tempt us once. He comes back. Over and over and over again. There is a reason Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. We often read it like it was a one time event. Satan came and offered something and Jesus said no, and the devil was like, ok, my bad. See you later. I don't think that is how it worked. I've never been tempted like that. Satan doesn't play Nintendo. He doesn't have a social life. All he has is to win or lose your soul. He's got nothing else. He has already lost it all. The game is over, he is simply fighting for scraps to take with him.

He will ruthlessly and relentlessly seek out your weaknesses and he will keep pressing in until you crack. Or, until you stand behind Jesus by submitting your whole life to Him. What is your whole life? Samson was a nazirite. They made vows to God. Numbers 6 describes the vow, but it essentially means no wine, no dead bodies, and no cutting of the hair.

God takes vows VERY seriously. Jephtha made a foolish vow and it cost him his daughter. Jesus later says (in Matthew 5), don't make vows to God at all. Perhaps He has seen enough of our inability to

keep them, and how much we lose once they are broken. When Samson told Delilah about his strength, he was welcoming in the enemy.

You've probably seen these elaborate crimes in tv/movies where there is this impenetrable vault that needs to be broken into. Or this fortress. How do they get in? They bribe some janitor or low level security guard to just leave a door open. Or turn their back for a bit. Nothing sinister. Nothing against the law really. Is it against the law to "forget" to lock the door? well, yes, it is, it's called aiding and abetting, and it lumps you directly in with the master criminals.

When Samson told Delilah his secret he was leaving the door open. He broke the vow made to God. And oh my, did the enemy ever pour in. Remember the enemy has nothing else to do. One of the bigger lies of the enemy (there are many), is that he is so busy. He is not going to notice everything. Yes he will. If you leave the door open, or just slightly ajar, or even unlocked, he is going to unleash everything he has on you. Every time. There is no luck. There is no Murphy. If the door is open, he WILL enter. Every time! We serve a living God and until he returns there is an active enemy constantly trying every trick, lie, and deception to get us to fall. It's not a question of 'if'. He will take advantage of EVERY opportunity.

There is no chance that he will just let the impenetrable temple of God go unguarded for even a second. And that is what Samson did. We are the temple and he invited the enemy in. I can have one beer and drive. what are the odds? 100% The odds are 100% that the devil will ruin your life or someone else's. You may even make it home safe... but that is because he found another way to decay your soul that you can't see yet.

One little lie. I can tell just one. What are the odds he will choose that one, that little itty bitty white lie... how can he use that? He will destroy you with it. It's just a flirt, maybe even a kiss. No One will notice it missing. Here is a hint. If you are being whispered lies.... the enemy is already actively attacking you... Do you think the criminals paying you to leave the door open will forget to try the door you left open for them? That is absurd, right? I've got this urge to steal... I hope the devil isn't around. Where do you think the urge is coming from? of course he is going to notice if you give in... he is the one whispering, "tell me, tell me, tell me... just tell me the secret of your power".

Vexed to death

“Vexed to death”. This is what Samson said of Delilah’s nagging. He was tortured, worn down, and dismayed. He should have prayed for water. When he needed restoration God provided. When he needed deliverance, God provided. When he needed wisdom, God made him wise. When he needed an exit, God made one. Samson proved true, many times over, the scripture written in 1 Corinthians 10:13. For every need, there was a God to provide. When Samson thought he was about to die of thirst, God, without speaking a word, made water appear. But upon being vexed to death, he couldn’t muster a thought for the Lord.

He asked for nothing. I believe what we are seeing here is that Samson’s desire and God’s will aren’t in alignment. When it was his life on the line, both God and Samson wanted Samson to live. And so Samson would shout out to God and receive great strength to overcome. When it becomes Samson’s weakness for women, well it may just have been that Samson didn’t want to be delivered. He, perhaps more than anyone, knows that God can rip us away from peril. But after success and victory and glory... he just couldn’t hold true to the whispers of the enemy... through this woman.

This feels like a simple math problem worth repeating. When what we want and what God wants are in alignment amazing things happen. The Bible says we can do all things through Christ! What does it say we can accomplish through the devil? What does our lust provide? Will our ambitions deliver us? Samson removed the only part of the equation that mattered. And guess who steps in to fill the vacancy?

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.”

- Judges 16: 28

God does not stop listening to us, just because we stop listening to Him. Look at how quickly God responded. He was already touching the pillars. He asked for God’s help and immediately received it. That isn’t always the case, but the point is that returning to God isn’t this long arduous journey. It’s a

changing of the heart. With a God that is omnipresent, He is already with us... everywhere. When we turn back to Him, He is right there facing us, ready to walk together again.

It'll cost ya

"Let me die with the Philistines."

- *Judges 16: 30*

The solution gets harder when we mess up what God is trying to do. I'm not certain what God's plan was for Samson, but I'm going to go out on a limb and claim that if he had not told Delilah how to undo the covenant he made with God... he wouldn't need to bring down the house on top of himself. He did a great job with the circumstances he was in, but he created those circumstances. Like every other old testament judge, life was good when he was obedient. I think he would have kept slinging donkey jaws for years to come (read the previous chapter if that doesn't make sense). But when we leave the door open for the enemy... he ruins everything. God will always take us back, but it will never be as easy as if we had remained obedient the whole time.

Delilah who?

We don't know what happened to Delilah. Did she die among the 3,000 that Samson killed in the temple? Did she have remorse? Did she ever love him? What did she do with all that money? We don't know. I think there is a reason why.

We tend to look into the how's and why's of things. We know the name of Delilah. She is a historical figure now. Delilah was a whisper. "Tell me, tell me, tell me". She was a weapon against God. When she was no longer useful, she was no longer worth documenting. When we live in the human world,

we have names like Delilah, Herod, Pharoah, Judas. We would boo them if they were to walk on stage. We have more modern versions in Hitler, Stalin, and Keanu Reeves. If we were living in the spiritual realm, we would see Satan and demons.

I might suggest that Delilah's story ends because the enemy is through with her, but the real story, the complete story, the eternal story keeps trucking along in every single whisper from the enemy. The face may change, but the whisper is powerfully tempting no matter how silly it seems and no matter how much we train against it. The story of Samson reminds me that we are NOT the first people Satan has tempted. He has a lot of practice, he has been doing this for a long, long time, and his resume is pretty impressive.

We might get a comical image in our minds when we think of the mighty Samson putting his head in Delilah's lap while she is holding a pair of scissors and a comb... but the reminder here is that the enemy works in plain site. No person is off limits. No approach is too simple. No number of times is too many. Failure does not mean stop. While Samson was socializing, the enemy was at war. Not only do we need to protect ourselves from the enemies attacks through other people... we are all Delilah in this story as well. We have whispered to someone else. Just tell me, tell me, tell me. In someone else's story we are a bleak reference on a page where for some unknown reason we cause great devastation in their life and then we disappear from their story.

Different gifts

Samson was not a politician. His downfall was spending time in weaknesses that did not compliment his God given gifts. We don't hear about his gifts of tongues, or prophecy, or healing. God granted him the gift of strength. And when he tried to please people with relationships... he lost the gift that was given to him, the very gift that kept him alive and his people safe.

If God has given me the gift of working behind the scenes and I go after life in the public eye, I'm going to fail and fail hard. Our worship leader asked me if I would help run the sound system. When we first met, he said he really needed people on the mixer board. When I mentioned how foreign

music in any form was to me, he said, it was pretty easy to figure out. And then I think things changed when he heard me sing. Tone deaf isn't a strong enough word to describe how awful I sound.

I may know what sounds bad, but I have no clue how to make it sound good. I sit there and watch people slide levers and turn knobs and the sound never changes in my ears. I have no idea what they are hearing that needs to change and when they change it, I can't tell the difference. Part of me thinks the buttons don't even work, it's just all for show. Can you imagine me trying to make worship sound good? You know, after hearing me sing, he has never brought it up again.

If anyone thinks we don't have a great worship team, you should let me handle sound for a day. I think we have excellent and gifted musicians, singers, and technical folks to keep things running smoothly and I know to stay far, far away from anything with music... or even rhythm. Samson's vow was pretty strong, it didn't just say don't get a haircut... a razor wasn't even allowed to touch his head. So it is with me singing. It's not that I shouldn't sing... I shouldn't even hum or whistle. And thank God He also blessed our worship leader with the gift of discernment and I'm not allowed to touch the mixer panel. In fact... we now we have people with Ipads that sit out in the auditorium to control the music volumes. That's because I started singing back in the audio booth. Live out your gifts. When Samson was obedient and swinging in his wheelhouse, look at what was accomplished. Things so amazing some believe they are fairy tales. He is of legend. When he sought after things that did not compliment the gifts received from God, he lost his eyes, his freedom, and pretty soon his life.

A very quiet exit

"But he did not know that the Lord had left him."

- *Judges 16: 20*

If there is a tragedy in this story, I think this is it. It has a happy ending. Samson restored his faith in God, his people were delivered. But in the course of living out his life he made choices that caused God to leave. And he didn't even know it. How many of us are here today and we THINK that God is within us? This is one reason people tend to seek God at the lowest point of their lives. That is

when they finally figure it out. God isn't with me... I need to get him back! It took Samson, not just losing his strength, to know that God had left him... but needing his strength after he lost it... that is when he knew that God was not within him.

Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes."

- Judges 16: 28

This is a prayer of faith. Notice the signs. He prays for God's strength and then he pushes on the pillars. This tells me he was asking God for supernatural strength. He wasn't asking to get him out of this mess. He wasn't hoping to take one or two down with him. He didn't ask God to send in reinforcements. He didn't seek a weapon... He asked for enough strength to knock a building down with his bare hands.

Compare this prayer to our own. Do you believe that God intended for us to water down our prayers with weak requests simply because we live in a different time period? Do you believe that your circumstances change how God wants you to pray? Do you remember that Samson did not feel God's power leave him? He thought he would escape from his captors after Delilah bound him and he only found out he had no power when he could not get free.

So, when he began pushing on the pillars... do you think he knew for a fact God was with him? Or did he use the same faith that he did in all of his other triumphs? He asked for supernatural strength and then he tried to use the gift. I would call this praying in faith.

He believed that God wanted to give him amazing and unbelievable gifts, and then he had faith that the gift was received. I think we know too much and see too much today to easily believe in the supernatural. We are too quick to pass things off as circumstance or misunderstanding, or even luck. "Wow, you got lucky!", some will tell you. Did you? How many of us are here today that wouldn't be if it weren't for God?

Many of us have gone through medical procedures and life changes, and been in accidents, and don't forget lucky... I wonder how many of us aren't able to see God's gifts. We will never see them if we

don't try and use them! We pray for things, but do we sit and look around for something that our human minds would come up with? Or do we start pushing on pillars after we pray?

Samson the brain

Samson appears to me to be very smart. He loved riddles. And he stumped EVERYONE at his wedding party. They had 7 days to solve it and no one could. So they threatened his fiancée and she enticed him to give the answer. He said no one knew it, not even his family. But he told her. All of a sudden the people knew the answer that stumped them for days. You could argue that this shows how unbelievably stupid Samson is. Not only did he fall for the demands of Delilah, but this happened to him before. The moment he confided in a Philistine woman... he lost everything. Fool me once... Each test of Delilah was ludicrous... then we find out this happened to him before! Come on!!!

I think there is a reason we pause in the story of Samson to hear his riddle. It's important to know that Samson wasn't lacking wisdom. It is our sin that makes us weak.

Samson prayed for something that fit within God's plan for him. He was set aside at birth... a Nazarite. To be special for God's purposes. Specifically to free the Israelites from the Philistines. Samson's prayer was right in line with that on all levels. It was not a help-me prayer, as much as it was a help-You, prayer.

Samson isn't a story about strength. Supernatural strength can be replaced with any gift and the story would remain the same. Prophecy, healing, kindness, teaching, self control... it does not matter what God has blessed you with, the enemy is whispering in your ear, just tell me, just tell me, just tell me. To me the story of Samson is about faith, prayer, and how God responds to those that believe in Him and are willing to use His gifts in faith.

Samson saw his first wife. "She was right in his eyes". He saw a prostitute. He saw Delilah. Guess what he lost first? His eyes. Just like Peter on the water, as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus, he began

to sink. Samson had his eyes on women rather than God, and it cost him. But what a way to bring out Matthew 18:8... After Samson lost his eyes he gained his sight.

We become mighty through obedience. Our strength is in our humility. The more we lean, not on our own strength, the stronger we become. Samson was unbelievably powerful when He trusted in God and did what was right in God's eyes. He was easily captured when he just assumed he could power through on his own.

So after reading the story of Samson, I end up with two sets of questions that haunt me when not answered correctly.

1. Would I know if God left? How long until I figured it out? What would I try to do and in what type of moment would it dawn on me? Has He already left? Will my next mistake be the final straw? Can I learn to live in His presence where I transform into the image He created me in and the thought process is shifted where I am with Him... instead of thinking in terms of Him being with me?
2. Will I push? Will I pray powerful prayers that only God can answer, and after praying will I step out with the faith of Samson? Will I stop praying for luck and correction of all my mistakes, and start praying in alignment with God?