

BACK TO SUNDAY SCHOOL: SAMSON

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*by Alfred Gerente, 1851, Ely Cathedral
Cambridgeshire, England*

Judges 16:4-31

⁴After this he fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.
⁵The lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, “Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower him, so that we may bind him in order to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.”
⁶So Delilah said to Samson, “Please tell me what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so that one could subdue you.”
⁷Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that are not dried out, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.”
⁸Then the lords of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not dried out, and she bound him with them.
⁹While men were lying in wait in an inner chamber, she said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he snapped the bowstrings, as a strand of fiber snaps when it touches the fire. So the

secret of his strength was not known.
¹⁰Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have mocked me and told me lies; please tell me how you could be bound.”
¹¹He said to her, “If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.”
¹²So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” (The men lying in wait were in an inner chamber.) But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.
¹³Then Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies; tell me how you could be bound.” He said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.”
¹⁴So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web, and made them tight with the pin. Then she 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.
¹⁵Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great.”
¹⁶Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death.
¹⁷So he told her his whole secret, 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 were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else.”

¹⁸When Delilah realized that he had told her his whole secret, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, “This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me.” Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands.
¹⁹She let him fall asleep on her lap;

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and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him. ²⁰Then she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him. ²¹So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison.

²²But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. ²³Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice; for they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." ²⁴When 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." ²⁵And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, and let him entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars; ²⁶and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them." ²⁷Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed. ²⁸Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes." ²⁹And 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. ³⁰Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at

his death were more than those he had killed during his life. ³¹Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

Context

The "judges" are military leaders who unite the loose federation of tribes in Israel, especially when faced with military threats. The Philistines are a constant foe to the Israelites.

There is a narrative cycle in the book of Judges made evident in 2:18-19:

¹⁸Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. ¹⁹But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

This cycle is a downward spiral in that the judges themselves reflect the increasing sinfulness and waywardness of Israel. Each new judge and each new iteration moves Israel closer to destruction, setting the stage for the next version of rule in Israel's history: a united monarchy. At the same time, the Samson story anticipates the exile (captivity) of Israel by those empires that not even a monarch could stave off.

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Samson comes on the stage at the very end of the spiral: the last judge who is selfish, violent, and consistently transgressing God's holiness.

As a Nazarite, Samson is not to drink wine, touch a corpse, or cut his hair. By the end of his life, he has done all three.

The Samson story has been interpreted throughout Christian history as a prefigurement of Christ:

- Both born to a childless woman
- Both visited by angel announcing birth
- Samson took a Nazarite vow, Jesus called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23)
- Both betrayed by their own people
- Both captured and tortured
- Both conquered enemies by their own death

Big Ideas

1. The real secret of Samson is not that his hair makes him strong, it's that he gets strength all wrong.
2. True strength doesn't inflict pain, it transforms pain.

Reflect

1. Read the scripture passage carefully and slowly. What word or image stands out to you? Why?
2. What troubles you about this story?
3. What do you make of Delilah and her portrayal/role in the story?
4. How are the life (and death) of Samson and Jesus similar? How are they different?
5. Strength is often imagined in physical and domineering ways, as Samson is. What are other forms of strength? What is "true strength"?
6. How do you strengthen your spirit or your faith? How do you strengthen a relationship?

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