

JUDGES—WEEK 13

A GIFT LOST



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Samson kills a lot of Philistines. So they search for a way to get rid of him. Eventually they recruit Delilah, but Samson keeps feeding her disinformation. However, in the process, he breaks yet another one of the Nazarite vows.

This time the LORD leaves Samson, and he loses his eyesight as well as his strength.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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Joshua, Week 13 — A Gift Lost
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1 Judges 15:9–17 (ESV)

Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” They said, “We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us.” Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?” And he said to them, “As they did to me, so have I done to them.” And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves.” They said to him, “No; we will only bind you and give you into their hands. We will surely not kill you.” So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men. And Samson said,

*“With the jawbone of a donkey,
heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
have I struck down a thousand men.”*

As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi.

Why were the men of Judah so willing to help the Philistines kill Samson? Did they know he would win?

No, they were really trying to help the Philistines. They were used to subjugation. Just look at the incredible nastiness the Philistines displayed towards Samson’s first wife, threatening her and her father with burning over a silly bet. Then they go ahead and burn them even though she helped them win the bet. The Philistines were the Israelites’ lords, and they had no appreciation for Samson as a deliverer.

It’s hard for us to imagine the cramp that subjugation puts on one’s thinking. Abused wives and children often cling to their abusers in ways that can fool the casual observer into misreading the situation.

After collapse of the Soviet Bloc, eastern Europeans struggled to handle their new freedoms. After years of people being jailed even for writing poetry about goodness, they couldn’t think about right and wrong.

A lifetime devoid of choices left them unprepared for simple decisions that we think nothing of.

This is a complex and hot topic in psychology. Over time, a wide variety of puzzling behaviors have come to be classified under a label originally given to a hostage case—Stockholm Syndrome.

<https://www.britannica.com/science/Stockholm-syndrome>

2 Judges 15:18–16:3

Then he became very thirsty; so he cried out to the LORD and said, “You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?” So God split the hollow place that is in Lehi, and water came out, and he drank; and his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore he called its name En Hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day. And he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her. When the Gazites were told, “Samson has come here!” they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. They were quiet all night, saying, “In the morning, when it is daylight, we will kill him.” And Samson lay low till midnight; then he arose at midnight, took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two gateposts, pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

All teenagers think they’re invincible; that’s why their car insurance rates are so high. Samson is close to being actually invincible. This makes his impetuosity even worse.

But extreme thirst acts as a wake-up call and, for just a moment, his attitude is impressive. He’s incapable of staying alive on his own, and he cries out to the LORD.

Good. Maybe he’s growing up and becoming aware of what’s really important.

Most importantly, he gives credit to the LORD for *this great deliverance*. That’s encouraging. Then Chapter 15 closes with the first of two mentions in Judges that Samson judged Israel for twenty years.

Maybe he’s even gotten on track and can be the great judge he has the potential to be.

Fat chance.

Chapter 16 starts right off dashing any hope that Samson has outgrown his teenage attitude (though he’s likely older now). His tryst with a harlot leads to his being surrounded by enemies who deign to kill him.

They think they have him hemmed in, but he pulls a superman stunt and escapes. It’ll take the locals a while to even find where he put the gates. Getting them reinstalled will take a very long time—during which the city will be insecure.

So, once again, Samson’s adversaries have seen their schemes backfire.

But there’s an even larger issue. How come the guards weren’t awakened by the gates being uprooted? And how come they decided to wait until morning to attack Samson in the first place?

The answers are, I think, related. Their priority was partying.

These guys are not a high-functioning bunch.

3 Judges 16:4–9 (ESV)

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

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.

Imagine that you’re a football running-back who has a remarkable ability to break tackles. You slip a tackler’s grasp almost every time. So, imagine further that someone asks you the secret to your tackle breaking. What do you say?

Now imagine further that the person asking is on the team you’re playing against next weekend. Furthermore, he tells you he needs to know so he can tackle you. What do you say now?

I’d say something flip like, “Go barefoot,” or, “Rub Vaseline on your hands.”

That’s exactly what happens with Samson’s response to Delilah’s ridiculous question. He feeds her baloney. But what on earth could get her to ask such a stupid question in the first place?

She can’t be serious; no one’s that stupid. So let’s try to puzzle out a credible guess.

First of all, to put us in the right mindset, imagine this as a movie. Of course, the lead is played by Arnold Schwarzenegger (in his prime, right after making *The Terminator*). Samson isn’t just a Nazarite on steroids; he’s the “Judginator.” Now picture Marilyn Monroe playing Delilah. This gives the story the right romantic action film feel. It is, after all, a love story, despite all the action.

The Hebrew word in verse 5 translated as “seduce” (יָפְתָּהּ, pah-tee) is based on the verb that means to be simple. Here it means to make another simple—to deceive. But Delilah isn’t deceptive at all. Why?

Recall how the Philistines treated Samson’s wife earlier. Delilah can’t just tell them to buzz off; they’re one nasty bunch. Still, her obedience to their orders isn’t all that impressive either.

It seems that her heart’s not in it.

This scene is going to play out over and over. Neither Delilah nor Samson are being serious.

They’re under the watchful eye of a bunch of thugs, and it looks like they’re just playing to the audience.

4 Judges 16:10–14

Then Delilah said to Samson, “Look, you have mocked me and told me lies. Now, please tell me what you may be bound with.”

So he said to her, “If they bind me securely with new ropes that have never been used, then I shall become weak, and be like any other man.”

Therefore Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And men were lying in wait, staying in the room. But he broke them off his arms like a thread.

Delilah said to Samson, “Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me what you may be bound with.”

And he said to her, “If you weave the seven locks of my head into the web of the loom”—

So she wove it tightly with the batten of the loom, and said to him, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled out the batten and the web from the loom.

At first glance, this passage seems repetitious, even trite. But there are some between-the-lines points that support the theory that neither Samson nor Delilah are being serious.

Twice, Delilah says, “*The Philistines are upon you, Samson!*”

But they aren’t actually *upon* Samson. Had they been *upon* Samson, he would have ripped their lungs out. Instead, they’re keeping their distance.

So, why would Delilah describe the situation falsely, ascribing more courage to the Philistines than they actually exhibit? Might she be mocking them?

No. It’s fun to imagine that she was, but her situation was way too bleak for that. Delilah lives in an oppressive thugocracy. They control everything. She wouldn’t be safe, even if she had Samson as a bodyguard.

Her words are phony, but in a society where nothing is sincere, that’s just the way people talk.

So, Marilyn Monroe turns out to be especially apt for playing Delilah. Their lives have significant parallels. Both were dominated by others. Despite very different life paths, in vastly different eras, they had similar challenges.

Delilah mocking the Philistines would be downright dangerous. There’s no way she would even consider such a thing. That’s not a hill she’s willing to die on.

She’s not willing to die on any hill. She’s just trying to survive.

5 Judges 16:15–22

Then 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 have not told me where your great strength lies.” And it came to pass, when she pestered him daily with her words and pressed him, so that his soul was vexed to death, that he told her all his heart, and said to her, “No razor has ever come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.”

When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, “Come up once more, for he has told me all his heart.” So the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hand. Then she lulled him to sleep on her knees, and called for 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!” So he awoke from his sleep, and said, “I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!” But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.

Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison. However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven.

The key line in this passage is, “*But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.*” That gives us two clues as to what’s actually going on here.

First off, it’s not really about the hair. Samson’s strength is gone because *the LORD had departed from him*. God may have done that because of the hair (or Samson’s careless attitude about the hair) but his strength departing is not a direct result of his hair being gone. Samson doesn’t have magical hair.

Secondly, Samson didn’t expect to lose his strength when his hair was cut off. His claim about the hair was just another lie. But then what does “*told her all his heart*” mean?

It means he told her all that he knew, but the bit about losing his strength was, he thought, a lie. It was a betrayal of all his secrets, but he didn’t know how significant it would turn out to be.

Okay, but then why mention that *the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven*?

As Tim Keller explains in *Judges For You*, “*The point is that the Philistines let his hair grow back.*”

Even though they obviously bought into the magic hair thing, they carelessly let his hair grow long again.

The word that describes everyone’s behavior here is “sloppy.” That’s where we should see ourselves in this. We don’t think of life in Christ as dangerous. We tend to relax, let our guard down, and lose focus.

This can be a dreadful mistake. The enemy isn’t sloppy.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you seen or read about Stockholm Syndrome?
2. Have you seen simple laziness hurt the church?
3. When are people expected to be insincere?
4. How are our personalities shaped by our challenges?
5. What can we do to be better prepared for the enemy's attacks?

Items for prayer: