

THE WEAKNESS OF GOD'S WARRIOR

• JUDGES 14–16 •

"Then Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines. So he came back and told his father and mother, 'I saw a woman in Timnah, one of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore, get her for me as a wife'" (14:1, 2).

Weakness and old age usually go together. Typically, old age is characterized by many frustrations which result from the diminishing of abilities. These feelings of frustration were expressed by the lady who was celebrating her one hundredth birthday. As she sat rocking on her front porch, one of her grandchildren said to her, "Grandma, you must have seen a lot in the last one hundred years." "Not much," she replied. "Everything was always over by the time I could find my glasses."

When we think of Samson and his conflicts with the Philistines, weakness is the last thing that comes to our minds. Physical strength stands out in Samson's story. At Ashkelon, he killed thirty Philistines (14:19, 20). At Timnah, he caught three hundred foxes, set their tails on fire, and burned up the crops of the Philistines (15:1-5). At Lehi, he killed one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (15:14-17). The Philistines waited to ambush Samson at Gaza when they saw him visit a prostitute (16:1-3). In the middle of the night, he got up to leave the city. When he arrived at the city gates, he found them locked. To escape the Philistine

ambush, Samson grabbed the gates, removed them, along with the posts, from the wall and carried them to the top of a hill outside of Hebron. At the end of his life, Samson pushed the pillars out from under the temple of Dagon, killing himself and a multitude of Philistines (16:29, 30). All of these events indicate the mighty physical strength of Samson.

Though we could study Samson's feats of strength, we will look deeper into the man himself. The story of Samson is a story of weakness. In 1 Corinthians 1:25 Paul said, "The weakness of God is stronger than men." While many look with admiration at the well-defined physiques of the body builders of our day, God is not impressed. Physical strength alone is not important to God because physical strength alone does not get His work done. Paul said, "God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27). To see true and lasting strength, one must look past the physical body to the soul of man. When Samson is viewed in this way, he is seen to be a very weak man. Weaknesses of character plagued Samson.

A SELFISH HEART

Thus far in Judges, five judges have delivered God's people from oppression and given them relief for a considerable length of time. Othniel gave the people relief from the oppression of Mesopotamia and "the land had rest for forty

years" (3:11). Ehud delivered them from the Moabites and "the land had rest for eighty years" (3:30). Deborah destroyed the oppressing Canaanites, and "the land had rest for forty years" (5:31). Gideon eliminated the Midianite oppression, and "the country was in quietness for forty years" (8:28). When Jephthah was through with the Ammonites, "the children of Ammon were subdued before Israel" (11:33). These judges were victorious through the strength God gave them.

Samson was given similar strength. God helped him when he was confronted by a lion (14:6) and as he fought the Philistines. But a common thread runs throughout the stories of Samson's power. On each occasion, Samson appears to use his God-given abilities to benefit himself. Once he delivered himself from the Philistines, he stopped. He was a constant thorn in the side of the Philistines, but he never completely relieved the persecution of God's people. (16:31). During his twenty-year judgeship, the Philistines continued to rule over God's people. Not until the days of David's reign in Israel were the Philistines finally subdued by God's people (2 Samuel 8:1). Samson seems to be more interested in using his God-given abilities for personal gain than for divine glory.

God has blessed His children with special abilities. Romans 12 pictures all Christians as members of the body of Christ. We are all vital to the health and welfare of that body. Just as each limb and organ of our physical bodies must be functioning for our bodies to be healthy, the same is true in the spiritual body of Christ.

Some have the talent of public speaking. Some have the special talent of serving others in a variety of ways ranging from mechanic ability to housecleaning. These people can be a blessing to others. Others are gifted in exhorting or encouraging. They can say just the right thing at just the right time. Others have the gift of making money. Obviously, a prerequisite to giving money is the ability to make money. A generous person can be a servant of others. Others have the ability to rule or lead.

God's people have been richly blessed with a variety of talents. We use our talents in our day-to-day activities. Promotions are achieved, friendships are established, and home projects are accomplished. That should not be the extent of our use of these abilities, however. God expects us to use our talents for His work as well.

Peter discussed the use of the abilities which have been given by "His manifold grace." These abilities, he said, should be used for two purposes: in "serving one another" (4:10) in such a way that "in all things God may be glorified" (4:11). God fully expects us to use our abilities in service to our fellowman and in glorifying Him. Many Christians, like Samson, are content with using their God-given talents solely for their own personal gain. These people are spiritually weak because of a selfish use of the abilities that God has given to them.

A MISPLACED TRUST (16:4-20)

In Judges 16 Samson became involved with Delilah, a woman who got him into trouble. He met her in the Valley of Sorek (16:4), which begins about twelve miles west of Jerusalem and winds its way northward to the Philistine coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Once Samson fell in love with this woman, the Philistines saw an opportunity to destroy him. "The lords of the Philistines came up together" with a proposition (16:5). They proposed that if Delilah would discover the secret of his great strength, each of them would give her eleven hundred pieces of silver. Thus, the Philistines offered Delilah a sizable bribe to betray Samson.

Delilah went right to work nagging Samson to reveal the secret of his strength. He toyed with her by saying to her that if he were bound by seven green bow strings, his strength would vanish. That evening while he was asleep, she tied his hands with the bow strings and awakened him with the cry that the Philistines were upon them. Samson arose, broke the bow strings, and chased the Philistines away. Delilah accused Samson of being unfaithful to her because he had lied to her about the bow strings. She illustrates that the best defense is a good offense. Rather than defending what she had done in binding Samson, she confronted him about his lie. Samson responded by telling her another lie. He said that if he were bound by new ropes that had never been used, his strength would become like that of any other man. That evening, Delilah tied Samson up with the new ropes while he was slept and awakened him by screaming that the Philistines were approaching. Again, Samson arose, broke the ropes, and put the Philistines to flight. Delilah complained about Samson's dis-

honesty again and urged him to tell her the truth. Samson should have realized what she was trying to do. After a few more days of her nagging, Samson told her another lie by saying that if his hair were braided into seven locks, he would lose his strength. Again, Delilah webbed his hair together and awakened him. As at other times, Samson arose and chased the Philistines away.

This time, Delilah's nagging reached the extreme. She nagged so much that Samson "was annoyed to death" (16:16). The record says, "He told her all that was in his heart." He said, "If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me." Predictably, Delilah sent for the Philistines, who came while Samson was sleeping. They gave Delilah the promised reward money and proceeded to cut his hair. When they were through, Delilah awakened Samson, crying that the Philistines were upon them. He arose, expecting to chase them away, only to find that "the Lord had departed from him" (16:20). The Philistines tied him up, put out his eyes, and paraded him to Gaza. No doubt, this was done in revenge for the humiliation he had given this city when he tore off their gates and carried them away (16:1-3). Once in Gaza, the Philistines put Samson into the prison house, where he pushed a grinding wheel for their grain.

Samson seems to have been an extremely self-assured person. He appears to have been very naive to continue to trust Delilah after repeated betrayals at her hand and telling her "all that was in his heart." As he saw it, the source of his strength was in the fact that a razor had never touched his hair, which was one of the terms of his Nazirite vow. He thought that the keeping of the vow was what gave him strength. He had violated other terms of the vow earlier in his life. The cutting of his hair was probably the only part of the vow to which he had been true.

Why would this particular term of the vow be his source of strength? Samson lost his strength when "the Lord had departed from him." This truth becomes even clearer when we look at Samson in the prison house. While he was pushing the grinding wheel, "the hair of his head began to grow again" (16:22). Once his hair began to grow back, what happened to Samson? He continued as a slave.

As he rested in the lap of his betrayer, Samson shared what he thought was the secret of his

strength. When Samson was standing in the arena of the temple of Dagon, he called upon God. Only when his strength was gone did he feel the need for God. As a result of calling upon God, he was filled with strength one more time to push down the pillars of the temple, and the temple came down, killing everyone in it (16:28-30). This last surge of strength was given to Samson from his true source of strength all along. How tragic that Samson had to die in the process of discovering the source of his strength.

Misplaced trust cripples God's children today. The problem in our case, however, is that we refuse to serve because of our weaknesses. When it comes to giving, some of us say, "I don't have enough money left over after paying all of my bills." Regarding leadership we sometimes say, "I don't have enough time in my schedule." Almost every excuse for not doing the work of God is based upon a person's weaknesses. In making these excuses, we are forgetting the true source of all abilities. God has enough talent and ability to get the task done. All He needs from you is *you*! Ricardo Montalban penned the following letter to his son:

Dear Son,

As long as you live in this house you will follow my rules. When you have your own house, you can make up your own rules. In this house, we do not have a democracy. I did not campaign to be your father, and you did not vote for me. We are father and son by the grace of God. . . I am not your pal. Our ages are too different. We can share many things, but we are not pals. I am your father. This is one hundred times more than what a pal is. I am also your friend, but we are on entirely different levels . . . Whatever I ask you to do is motivated by love. This will be hard for you to understand until you have a son of your own. Until then, trust me!

Your Father

This letter expresses what God is communicating to His children. He will be available throughout our lives. He will make up the difference for our weaknesses. Samson had a hard time learning this lesson! He met his death while he learned the true source of his abilities.

A PARTIAL SURRENDER (15; 16)

As Samson stood with his hands stretched between the pillars of the temple of Dagon, he asked God for the ability to perform one last feat of strength. Instead of being a scene of victory for

God's deliverer, however, this is a depressing scene which reminds us of "what might have been." Think what Samson could have accomplished with his life had he been totally dedicated to God all the days of his life. Samson was meant to deliver God's people from Philistine oppression, but the task was more than his limited faith could conceive.

The task of serving God requires our all, all the days of our lives. Many come to Jesus in full sincerity, promising to remain faithful to Him. As time goes on, they begin to experience hardships and trials which tempt them to back out of that commitment.

Discouragement is not a license to quit serving in God's kingdom. Paul, for example, was no stranger to discouragement. Acts 18 tells of Paul's stay in Corinth on his second missionary journey. Besides having been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, Paul was opposed in Corinth by the Jewish teachers who followed him wherever he went. God appeared to Paul in a vision saying, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9, 10). Paul overcame his discouragement and continued in his service to God. He realized that times of trouble and depression were no license to quit God's work.

Times of discouragement and struggle will come to all. Setbacks must be counteracted, and adversaries must be faced. However, none of these give us the right to lay down our arms.

Do you have any mettle in your spiritual life? In times of trouble, will your determination cause you to remain faithful? Will you, like Samson, be only partially committed to God?

CONCLUSION

When we think of Samson, our minds naturally go to the amazing feats of strength that Samson performed. But the story of Samson is a story of weakness. If Samson had been as strong in character as he was in physical prowess, he would have stood as one of God's all-time great champions. He was selfish at times in the way he used his God-given gifts. He failed to see the true source of his strength until the last of his life. He failed in completely dedicating himself to God until the last moment of his life. These weak-

nesses prevented Samson from being the great man of God he was intended to be.

Christians need to remember that they can do great things through the strength that God provides. Let us avoid the weaknesses that plagued Samson and get busy with the task God has given to each of us.

—Craig Tappe

David L. Larsen on Preaching

"The sermon must have a destination in view, unlike the arrow shot into the air: 'It fell to earth, I know not where.' Clovis Chappell used to say that the sermon should be like a journey—you start, you travel, you arrive. This is what structure makes possible."

"I remember a motor garage in Minneapolis which carried the invitation: 'Limp in, leap out.' Isn't this a delightful description of what ought to be a regular experience of our people as they come to worship?"

"Exposition without application is like a banquet without silverware."

"Abstractness is always a great enemy of preaching. The sermon is an invitation. It is a knock on the door. It is not only to inform; it must inflame."

"Some go so fast that listening to them is like drinking from a fire hydrant."

"Someone must suffer for the sermon. If it is not the preacher who is willing to pay the price then it will be the congregation."

"Blessed is the preacher whose train of thought has a caboose."

"In one sense creativity is doing what other people don't. There are those so adept at creative expression that they can preach about Noah's ark and their listeners can hear it rain!"

David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989).