

Judges 13-14

Strength & Weakness: *What Makes A Strong Man Weak?*

Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher said, “He who gains victory over others is strong, but he who gains the victory over himself is all powerful.”

The truth is, the hardest control of all is self-control. But, there are 30 places in the Bible where God commands us to be strong.

Listen to some of these:

In Deuteronomy 11:8 God says through Moses, *Therefore you shall keep every commandment which I command you today, that you may be strong.*

In Joshua 1:9 the command is: *Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*

The New Testament says, *Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.* (Ephesians 6:10)

Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. (II Timothy 2:1)

God charges us to be strong, but then He gives us the way to real strength. It comes though His grace, His power, His personal presence, and His might.

So why is it that so few people seem to gain the victory over self? Why is the hardest control of all self-control? And why can God’s people struggle just like anyone else? What is it that can make a strong person weak?

Over the next 4 weeks we’re going to explore that question by looking at the life of a man who’s name is synonymous with physical strength but his story is also synonymous with moral weakness.

His name is Samson and his story is found in the book of Judges in the Old Testament.
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The events of the book begin after the death of Joshua and progress to just before the ministry of Samuel and Israel’s first king, Saul. Up to this point God has repeatedly

shown His people His faithfulness and His power. He has miraculously brought the Jews out of Egypt and faithfully preserved them during their 40 years in the desert. Finally they enter the Promised Land.

The events described in the book of Judges cover about 300 years and describe a time in Jewish history when God was recognized both spiritually and politically as the King of Israel.

Tragically though, the book of Judges records a long and shameful series of sinful rebellions against God by the Jewish people. The cycle goes like this: The Jewish people rebel, God brings retribution against them, the people repent, and finally God restores them. That cycle is repeated again and again in Judges.

But along with all that, there's a theme that that really makes me sit back in amazement. It's about the character of God and His sovereign working in the world. This is it: Even the most rebellious of people can't prevent God's ultimate plan from being accomplished.

As low as Israel stoops, in the end, God still uses them to bring us the Bible and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. That shows that God is a whole lot bigger than we often realize. And God will fulfill His promises.

And so one of the people God worked through is a man named Samson.

How can we be strong in spiritual strength? As we look at the life of Samson in these coming weeks I want you to take note of his strengths and his weaknesses. I want you to look for his priorities and characteristics of his personality. I believe we're going to see some things that were either lacking or misdirected.

Why would God choose to include in the Bible such negative things about His people and Samson in particular?

I believe the answer is in the New Testament book of I Corinthians. *Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.* (I Corinthians 10:11)

All these things, the good, the bad, and the ugly, were written as examples to us. God wants us to learn from the examples of His people.

NIV says, *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.*

Samson's life is a warning and also an example. One more thing before we look at the life of Samson. You might not get this from just reading about his life in Judges, but Samson was a believer in God. It's important for us to know that.

The New Testament book of Hebrews has a chapter we call the great faith chapter. After listing great heroes of the faith like Noah, Abraham, and Moses, there's this verse

... And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah. (Hebrews 11:32)

So if nothing else, we know that Samson was a believer. To me that makes the warning of his life all the more ominous. As we review his life let's ask ourselves, Just what makes a strong man (or woman) weak?

Let's begin with this thought...

I. All Of Us Are Incredibly Blessed

Read verses 1

Here's this reoccurring theme of the book of Judges. Over time God's people begin to set God aside and go after the lifestyle of the culture around them. Eventually God allows the very culture they lusted after to gain control over them. In this case God uses the surrounding Philistines to dominate Israel.

But God had a bigger plan for Israel than they realized and so He brought a judge to deliver them. That judge's name was Samson.

Read verses 2-5

For a Jewish woman who hadn't been able to have children this was the ultimate Mother's Day present.

Not only was she promised a child but this was a child with a mission. When he grew up he would deliver Israel from the Philistine invaders.

The whole no wine, no unclean food, no haircut thing was part of a vow that Israelites could take to consecrate themselves to serve God. In this case God says this boy's going to be consecrated from birth.

He wasn't even allowed to cut his hair. By the way, I have this from very trusted sources, Samson never had a mullet. God would have never allowed that.

Samson's mother was incredibly blessed. We are all incredibly blessed. If you think about it, we're blessed by our very nature.

The creation around us is absolutely spectacular. Currently scientists have identified 1,367,555 species of animals. In fact, last Tuesday researchers discovered a new species of spider in a subdivision in Auburn, Alabama!

We have vertebrates, invertebrates, mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, fish, crustaceans. Here are all these species but only one is said to be made in God's image. Only one bears the stamp of the divine nature. That's us. That alone is a tremendous blessing.

All of us are incredibly blessed but here's what's even more exciting. Not only are we made in God's image but God set His love on us before time began.

Even though we're all made in God's image we've marred that image through our sinful choices. The Bible uses several words for sin. Here's their basic meanings:

- Miss the target
- Immoral or grossly unfair behavior
- Stepping over the boundary
- Violation of a law

That's all of us. We've all missed the mark, we've all crossed the line, we've all broken the law. We've all chosen our way over God's way. God in His holiness is offended by our thoughts, words, and deeds when they don't line up with His holy purposes.

But God acted in love by choosing Israel and using them to bring us His Son. God acted in love by unleashing His wrath on Jesus instead of us.

So we're all blessed. We don't always realize how blessed we are but we are all blessed.

But even though Samson's mother was blessed with the birth of her child she wasn't immune from heartache.

Her son was going to be Israel's deliverer but he was also going to break her heart. This is something moms know about in a very unique and intimate way. Our children are a blessing but at times they can break our heart. Even believing children can break our hearts.

- I. All Of Us Are Incredibly Blessed*
- II. All Of Us Are Incredibly Vulnerable*

Read 13:24

Remember that Israel had been under the thumb of the Philistines for 40 years. They were a pretty tough enemy that terrorized the Jewish people. So finally Samson the deliverer grows to be a young man. He grows up and the Spirit of the Lord moves on him. God's Spirit empowered Samson. Unfortunately Samson didn't always follow the Spirit's leading.

Read 14:1-3

Timnah was in Philistine country. For some reason Samson was hanging out in enemy territory. One of the dictionary definitions of "Philistine" is a person who is hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts, or who has no understanding of them. We use the word to describe an uncultured person.

I thought this was interesting... the most numerous artifacts unearthed from Philistine ruins are beer mugs. Gives you a good idea of where their priorities were.

Unfortunately Samson doesn't act much better than the Philistines. He goes down, sees some hot looking Philistine babe and orders his parents to get her for his wife.

This is the first of a whole series of decisions Samson makes without ever asking God for guidance.

The Bible says, *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.* (Proverbs 3:5,6)

This is the first indication that Samson is living life totally based on feelings. The Philistines are the sworn enemy of Israel. God had commanded His people not to intermarry with the people of the pagan nations around them because inevitably they'd pull God's people into idolatry.

Can't you just hear mom ask, "What? Aren't there any nice Jewish girls to marry?" But Samson wasn't asking God what to do. He wasn't using God's clear commands as his guide for life. He saw what he wanted and guess what? Mom and dad didn't have the courage to say "no" to their only child.

Now in one sense Samson was unbelievably strong. He tears a lion apart with his bare hands and he kills a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. He's a powerful, strapping, formidable, industrial strength dude. He's definitely not someone you want to mess with.

But as strong as he was physically, that's how weak he was in character. One writer said, "He was an incredibly strong man with a dangerously weak will."

What makes a strong man weak? What makes any of us vulnerable?

First of all, if we leave God out of our decisions and just do life our way we're going to make some terrible mistakes.

Remember Deuteronomy 11:8 *Therefore you shall keep every commandment which I command you today, that you may be strong.*

I Chronicles 28:20 *Be strong and of good courage, and do it; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD God--my God--will be with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.*

God's promised never to leave us or forsake us. But it's possible for us to leave and forsake Him. It's possible for a child of God, a believer, to walk their way instead of God's way.

Here's Samson doing it his way and it's like God's not even on his radar screen. How about you? Are you acknowledging Him in all your ways or is God an afterthought?

Samson didn't even end up with this woman. Here's what happens:

Samson gets the girl temporarily. Actually he only gets her up until his wedding reception.

On one of his trips to Timnah he kills a lion.

Read 14:7-11

You think modern day weddings and receptions are time consuming affairs, in those days the custom was to party for 7 days. The feast lasted 7 days.

The party included the families and 30 of the Philistine woman's friends and relatives. The word translated "feast" in verse 10, *mishteh*, comes from the verb *shathah* which means "to drink" or "to be drunk."

Samson who was a Nazarite and wasn't supposed to so much as have a Margarita at the Mexican restaurant is having a 7-day drinking bash. That usually doesn't bode well for anyone, especially when your God's man.

So Samson, who obviously has pride issues to begin with, gets a bright idea.

Read 14:12-14

He figures he's so clever they'll never guess. But there's something he didn't count on.

Read 14:15

Samson's wife cries continually until he finally tells her the answer which she then tells the guys who threatened her.

When they give Samson the answer it's obvious where they got it. So an enraged Samson goes out and kills 30 Philistines, takes their clothes (which means he had to touch dead bodies (another thing Nazarites weren't allowed to do) and gives the clothes to the 30 guys at his wedding party.

In the end, Samson never calls on God for guidance. In the 4 chapters that detail Samson's life there are only 2 recorded prayers.

The first is in chapter 15. Samson kills a thousand Philistines who had come to take his life. He does it through God's strength. He should have been on his knees humbly thanking God for sparing his life. Here's his prayer: *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?"* (Judges 15:18)

That's a real prayer of humility and dependence on God!

The only other prayer is in chapter 16 after he's captured by the Philistines. He's enslaved. His eyes are poked out. He's going to die. So he prays, "God help me take vengeance." That's it.

In the middle of all this I believe God has a question for us. What are we doing about life's choices? How are you making decisions? How do you decide a marriage partner, about job choices, about church involvement, about how you spend your money?

Are you looking for God's guidance through the principles of the Bible or are you kind of pulling a Samson? "I'm just going to fly by the seat of my pants!"

Samson only looked to God when he thought he needed Him. His philosophy was, "I'll run my own life my way. I'll make all my own decisions based on what I feel like doing."

Remember, this was a guy with clear direction from God for his life. God was empowering him. But Samson totally disregarded God and did what he wanted to do.

We're all vulnerable. No matter how strong we think we are, we are all vulnerable when God's not at the center of our lives.

I. All Of Us Are Incredibly Blessed

II. All Of Us Are Incredibly Vulnerable

III. All Of Us Can Be Incredibly Strong

What were Samson's philosophical bases for life?

A. I want what I want when I want it. He saw the Philistine woman and he said "Dad and Mom, get her for me." Not "Dad and Mom what do you think I should do?" or "Dad and Mom will you pray with me about finding a wife?" He was driven by lust.

Craig Groeschel writes: "A man who wants something who slips into a pattern of lust, forgets about all logic."

"It may be that he wants the woman, the hit, the quick fix, the sexual thrill. It could be that he wants the advancement in his career or the money, or to conquer something. It may be the boat or the new house, or the new car, whatever it is. But when he wants it, he'll forget about every step of logic and he'll pursue what he wants with reckless abandon."

I would add to that, it's not just men who fall into this trap of bad decisions based on "I want it. I gotta have it." We've all vulnerable to making bad decisions because we're all susceptible to letting our emotions run our lives.

B. Another of Samson's bases was a sense of entitlement. Why did Samson not think twice about taking a Philistine woman when God clearly said it was wrong?

Not only was he running on his lust he sincerely believed he was justified because he believed he deserved to have whatever he wanted. He was Samson. He could rip lions apart with his bare hands for Pete's sake. I wouldn't want to get on his bad side. He got what he wanted.

Isn't that how we think? "I work hard, I deserve it! I've been slaving away, I deserve it! I put up with him (or her), I deserve it!"

"I know that Venti Caramel *Macchiato* from Starbucks that I get every afternoon has 300 calories and costs \$5.60 a pop. I know I'm on a diet and need to save my money, but hey, I deserve a little indulgence now and then."

"I know I shouldn't be getting so close to that guy at the office but he shows me attention (unlike my husband) and it feels good. I deserve it."

Samson is so much like us it's scary. He had so much potential for greatness, and yet again and again he squandered that potential with just plain old stupid living. And I don't know what it would be for you, but we see it all of the time.

C. There's a third philosophical basis that Samson lived by and that was pride. His approach was "I can handle it."

Remember, Samson was a Nazirite. In Numbers chapter 6 God gave the law of the Nazirite. This was essentially a way where a non-priest, an ordinary person, could make some vows to be set apart for the use and glory of God. So, a non-priest could say, "I'm living by these vows. I am devoting myself to serve God wholly."

During the time of the vow, and Samson's was for a lifetime, there was no haircut, no alcohol, and no touching of a dead body.

So what does Samson do? He figures he's the top dog so he lets Delilah cut his hair. We'll get to that in a week or 2. But he ends up enslaved. He has a drinking bash at his wedding and gets himself backed into a corner.

By the way, he never did get to live with the Philistine woman. Her dad ended up giving her to Samson's best man.

And then he touches numerous dead bodies all in direct contradiction to God's direction.

Here's where foolish pride gets us: *When pride comes, then comes shame.* (Proverbs 11:2)

By pride comes nothing but strife. (Proverbs 13:10)

Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall. (Proverbs 16:18)

A man's pride will bring him low. (Proverbs 29:23)

How many of us have gotten ourselves into places we never thought we'd go by saying "I can handle it?"

And that's what happens to strong men and women over and over and over again. God has given great potential to do works to bring glory to His name; and yet we think, "I'm strong, I want it, I deserve it, I can handle it!"

So it's "I want a drink, or a bottle, or a pill, I want to smoke that," or whatever it is, "I can handle it!" And one day we wake up and it's handling us.

How about, "I want the boat, I want the car, I want the toy! I deserve it! I can handle the payments!" And before long, we're drowning in a sea of financial debt.

All of us have the potential to be incredibly weak and foolish but God's purpose for us is just the opposite. His purpose is that we be incredibly strong. How does that happen?

Here it is. You want to be strong? Admit your weaknesses. This is the opposite of Samson.

Rather than going through life with an "I want it" attitude try this. Going through life with an "I want God" attitude. "I want God more than anything else. I want Him to be in control of my life. I want Him to be preeminent. I want His glory above everything else."

Attitude number 2: Rather than "I deserve to have whatever I want," try this... "I deserve nothing from God. God doesn't owe me a thing except judgment. I don't deserve anything but hell. God's not in debt to any inhabitant of the planet, especially me."

And then #3: "I can't handle anything without God. I'm not in control. I can't create something from nothing. I can't sustain life on Earth. I can't heal the sick or forgive people's sins. I can't do any of the most important things of life and I surly can't run my own life."

God wants us to be strong but here's how it works: *Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. (Ephesians 6:10)*

The biblical command is not, Be strong in who you are, it's be strong in who He is. All of this is extremely humbling. All of this undermines foolish pride.

God wants us to be strong, but it's a different kind of strength. God just kind of turns what we think is right, what we think is normal, upside down. And this is what He says, *My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.* (II Corinthians 12:9)

God's grace brings salvation. God's grace teaches us how to live. God's grace strengthens us to live lives that serve Him and serve others.

“He who gains victory over others is strong, but he who gains the victory over himself is all powerful.” How about this instead: “He who gains victory over others is strong, but he who lets God control his life finds the power to really live.”