

Samson and Delilah

By Rev. Lee Woofenden

February 10, 2002

Bible Reading

Samson fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so that we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.

So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued." Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I will become as weak as any other man."

Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the thongs as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied."

He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I will become as weak as any other man."

So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom, and tighten it with the pin, I will become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric, and tightened it with the pin.

Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, “Come back once more; he has told me everything.” So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

Then she called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I will go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the Lord had left him. The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes, and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. (*Judges 16:4–22*)

Joseph took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.... Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Naza-reth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.” (*Matthew 2:21–23*)

Sermon

Samson and Delilah are two of the most famous, or infamous, lovers in the Bible—probably because they are a classic case of almost everything that can go wrong in a relationship.

By the time Samson met Delilah, he had already had a disastrous marriage with a Philistine woman. She had nagged him for a secret of his in order to betray his trust to her people, who were enemies of Israel. Her betrayal led to many deaths—most of them inflicted by Samson in revenge on the Philistines for their betrayal of him. This led to a cycle of violence in which the Philistines killed Samson’s wife and her father, and Samson killed even more Philistines—eventually killing a thousand of them with the jawbone of a donkey. This was good for the Israelites, who rejoiced at anything that made their Philistine overlords weaker. But to modern eyes, it looks like one sick relationship!

Samson did not learn from his mistakes. In our story, he falls in love with Delilah, another Philistine woman, who proves just as treacherous as the one he had married earlier. No sooner had Samson hooked up with Delilah than the Philistines were at her to find out the secret of his strength so they could subdue him.

As we read about Samson lying to Delilah three times about what will take away his strength, and Delilah each time trying it out and shouting, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” we may wonder why Samson would ever tell her the truth. Of course, the Philistines who intended to capture Samson were hiding, and we are not told that they came out on these three occasions; perhaps Samson did not realize Delilah was laying a trap for him.

Regardless, Delilah eventually wore Samson down with her continual nagging and prodding day after day. Finally Samson told her the truth: that his great strength came from his consecration to the Lord as a Nazirite, and that if his hair were cut, he would become “as weak as any other man.”

We may not have the strength of ten men, but each of us has developed some strength of character—especially in those areas where we have turned to the Lord for guidance and help. Yet don’t we also make the same mistakes over and over again? Once we have gotten used to some addictive habit, we

seldom quit cold turkey and never look back. Much more often, we struggle again and again with the same shortcomings that have been plaguing us for years. For all the spiritual strength we may have developed over the years by going to Sunday School and church, reading the Bible and other spiritual books, and so on, when the rubber hits the road, we are still fallible, mistake-prone humans!

Samson's story is our story. To refer to another mighty hero from mythology, our "Achilles heel" is represented by Delilah. Delilah is that simple, stubborn bad habit that we continue to fall into even when we have seen its destructive effects. We know that the excuses and arguments we use to justify it are false. But when we feel that allure . . . when that desire comes over us . . . when something or someone pushes our buttons, we throw aside all our spiritual principles, ignore everything our rational mind tells us, and surrender to the moment once more.

Samson's story does not have a happy ending. This, too, is realistic. When we continue to live in ways we know we shouldn't, it hurts both others and ourselves—just as Samson both killed others and was eventually killed himself in his revenge against the Philistines. For us, it sometimes does take the breakup of a marriage, the loss of a job, the destruction of family relationships and close friendships to wake us up. If, like Samson, we do not heed these warnings, things will continue to go downhill.

That old life must die before we can begin a new one—just as Samson died so that the Israelites could go on to the next step in their development as a nation. We can only hope that in the death of the old, what dies is our old attitude of pride in ourselves, and the false notion that what matters is what we believe, and not whether we live by it. This attitude of belief without action, of religious faith that is not expressed in kindness toward others, is what the Philistines represent. And this attitude is just as deadly to us today as the Philistines were to the Israelites in Samson's day.

Each time we indulge once more in that bad habit or yield to that old weakness, we demonstrate once more that our beliefs must be backed up by action or they mean nothing. Each time we feel the consequences of what we have done, or have neglected to do, it is another opportunity to learn that when we abandon our faith by not following it in our actions, it results in damage and pain both to others and to ourselves.

Yet there is always the possibility of redemption. In the Old Testament, there is only one other mention of the Nazirite vow after Samson's story (in Amos 2:11, 12)—and it is a reference to breaking the Nazirite vow. However, in our brief reading from Matthew, we have a tantalizing New Testament reference. Joseph took Mary and the young Jesus, and they "went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, 'He will be called a Nazarene.' "

There is no Old Testament prophesy that says "He will be called a Nazarene." Perhaps it is a reference to a book that is not in our present Bible. But I suspect Matthew was making a play on words ("Nazarene" instead of "Nazirite"), referring to the angel's prophecy about Samson. Once again, we are reminded that when our own strength of character is not enough to overcome that old character flaw that has bedeviled us for so long, we do have a place to turn for a new and deeper strength that is equal to the task: we can and must turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, when we trust in our own strength, we bring harm both to others and to ourselves. Our strength is not equal to the task. Despite our greatest efforts, we fall back into the same old destructive patterns. And so we turn to you, the true source of all strength. We lay down our own will, and invite you to come into our lives. Be our strength and our guide, O Lord. For only in your strength can we prevail over our inner enemies. Amen.

Rev. Lee Woofenden