

SAMSON AND HIS FAITH

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PREFACE TO 2003 EDITION

When people refer to Samson, we often hear Delilah mentioned in the same breath, much like how Bathsheba is often associated with David. Nevertheless, many people are aware that the biblical record of David is not limited to his affair with Bathsheba, and that in the final analysis, he was "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). But the same is not true concerning Samson. In many people's thinking, Samson is inseparably connected to Delilah, and they seem to think that the entirety of his life as recorded in Scripture has to do with his moral weaknesses and sexual lusts. Thus they say that he is the classic case of one who has "charisma without character."

However, that is an incomplete and inaccurate portrayal of his life. The Scripture's own commentary on Samson is that he was a man of faith, one of whom "the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38). Given this biblical perspective, if you read the biblical record about Samson with the presupposition that his life had consisted of only his moral failures and ultimate downfall, then you are bound to miss his significance.

In this book, we will begin not with the usual distorted view, but with the Scripture's own perspective toward Samson – that is, no matter what flaws he had, he had "gained approval" (Hebrews 11:2, NASB) from God through faith. Therefore, instead of reading sins and lusts into all the passages about Samson, we will read them with the intention of learning from his faith. When we read his life's story with this scriptural presupposition, the biblical record concerning him will be better understood, and what the story of his life has to teach us will be more apparent.

1. SAMSON'S FAITH

We will not begin from Judges 13, where the biblical narrative about Samson's life actually starts. Rather, since most people read his story with false presuppositions in mind, we will first correct them by examining the Bible's own commentary on the life of Samson. Having done that, we will be able to study him from the correct perspective.

Hebrews 11:1-2, 6, 32-38 says:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for....

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him....

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

According to verses 1-2, the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 – including Samson – were commended for their faith, that they had "gained approval" (NASB) from God by their faith.

God does not grant his approval to things for which many people think they should get credit. God does not approve or disapprove of us because of our race, gender, or social standing, nor does he accept us because of our good works. He cares about whether or not we have faith, granted by his sovereign grace. Jesus asks in Luke 18:8, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Is there true faith in your heart, or is there only unbelief and rebellion?

Then, Hebrews 11:6 says, "without faith it is impossible to please God." Those who approach God must believe that he exists, and that he "rewards those who earnestly seek him." The people listed in Hebrews 11 were imperfect. The list includes great men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. These were not weak believers, but they were people who had committed sins.

Moses sinned by disobeying God in the wilderness. As God says to him in Deuteronomy 32:49-52,

Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.

David also sinned. He first committed adultery with Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, David murdered her husband. God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, saying, "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:9).

So these were imperfect people, but they are included here in Hebrews 11. This is because they did not please God by their good works, but by their faith. God was satisfied with them because of their faith, but even this faith came to them by the sovereign will of God, and did not originate from their own decisions, so that there was no room for boasting. As Psalm 130:3-4 says, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared." God gave them the gift of faith, and sovereignly forgave them of their sins.

After citing a number of examples on how various characters were justified before God by faith, verse 38 says that "the world was not worthy of them." In all its rebellion and wickedness, the world is unworthy of those who have faith in God. Many people claim to be Christians, but most of them do not regard "disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:26). Thus their faith is false, and they are in fact non-Christians, and will suffer endless torment in hell. If you really have the faith that God sovereignly gives to his chosen ones, then you will manifest the signs of faith like these people listed in Hebrews 11.

Some people may be surprised to find Samson listed along with the great fathers of the faith such as Abraham and Moses. They may protest, "What about Delilah?" Well, what about her? The story of Samson is not about Delilah. Those who think that his story is

mainly about his immorality and lack of self-control are sorely misinformed. Here in Hebrews 11, he is commended for his *faith*.

Thus when we study the life of Samson, we should not focus all our attention on Delilah, nor should we look for indications of sexual lust where there is none. Rather, we should try to find his faith. What made him so great? What did God cause Samson to believe so strongly that Samson was able to delight the heart of God? We will truly understand the story of Samson as told in the Bible when we look into the nature of his faith.

The story of Samson is not only about his relationship with Delilah. Samson faces two similar situations in Judges 16:4-20, where Delilah appears, and in Judges 14:12-18. In each instance, information is coerced out of Samson through psychological manipulation by a woman – that is, through crying, nagging, and words such as, "You don't really love me." Although sexual issues may have had something to do with it, the direct cause for Samson's downfall was not his sexual lust, but his vulnerability to manipulation by women.

Contrary to the Bible's own perspective in Hebrews 11, not many books and commentaries portray Samson in a positive light. Although his life may warn us about sexual sins, it has more to teach us than that. Most professing Christians nowadays lack Samson's faith, partly because most who claim to be Christians are not true Christians. One of our main concerns should be to discover and imitate his faith.

Make no mistake about it – Samson had his weaknesses, and they ultimately cost him his life. The point is that his problems were not what most people think they were, and that overall, the Scripture acknowledges him as a person of faith.

2. HIS HISTORY

The Book of Judges records a recurring cycle of sin and idolatry in Israel's history. Whenever a godly leader died, the people would plunge themselves far into idolatrous worship. God would then allow them to be conquered by their enemies. After some time, when they began to groan in repentance, God would send them a deliverer to release them from bondage. But the people refused to learn their lesson, and they returned to sin and idolatry after the deliverer died. Thus the whole cycle would begin again. The story of Samson begins at the outset of such a cycle: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years" (Judges 13:1).

In this chapter, instead of going straight into the story of Samson, we will first study this recurring pattern, since this will give us some background about the circumstances surrounding his birth and his work. In addition, Christians can learn some valuable lessons from this destructive cycle in which the Israelites remained.

So, we will deal with Judges 13 later. For now, we will turn to Judges 2 to see how these sinful cycles started. The Bible says in Judges 2:7-9:

The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Joshua was a close follower of Moses, and he became the leader of Israel after the death of his mentor. Joshua led the people well. Verse 7 says, "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel."

Many miracles happened when Moses led Israel. The nation witnessed the Ten Plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, and other spectacular wonders. God also demonstrated his power when Joshua led Israel. During one battle, in response to Joshua's words, God's power was so evident such that even "the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day" (Joshua 10:13). The fall of Jericho is another example of the great victories that God granted to Israel under Joshua's leadership.

The Scripture says that while Joshua and the elders of his generation were alive, the people of Israel served God. But "after that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel"

(Judges 2:10). The implication is that the previous generation had failed to teach this new generation about God's mercy and power in their deliverance from Egypt and their conquest of Canaan. However, when God gave his laws to Israel and worked wonders among them, he intended for the record of his words and works to be taught to future generations so that they may also learn to fear and worship him.

When God instituted the Passover, he said,

Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" then tell them, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians." (Exodus 12:24-27)

If the previous generation had faithfully observed the Passover and explained it to the next generation, how was it that the latter "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel"? The previous generation must have failed to perform their duty.

After parting the river of Jordan to let the people of Israel cross over to Canaan, God commanded them to construct a monument of stones:

...to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, "What do these stones mean?" tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever. (Joshua 4:6-7)

To illustrate the point further, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25 reads as follows:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates....

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders – great and terrible –

upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

God was very explicit when he commanded the people of Israel to obey his laws, and to teach them to future generations. Therefore, the answer to why the next generation "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel" must rest in that the generation led by Joshua failed to teach their children about God's works and to train them to obey God's laws.

Today's "Christian" parents are not doing any better – they do not teach their children to worship and obey God, to study and affirm Christian doctrines, and to reject and refute all non-Christian beliefs and religions.

Some parents say, "Let the children decide what they want to believe, or what religions they wish to adopt." Now, they tell their children to refuse gifts and rides from strangers, to avoid touching a hot stove, and to stay away from sharp objects. They tell them to look when crossing the streets, to study hard at school, and to choose their friends with care. But when it comes to the most important matter in life they suddenly "let them decide," and avoid giving them strict and thorough admonitions about the truth. Why not "let them decide" on whether or not they will attend school? Why not "let them decide" on whether or not they will use drugs? Why not "let them decide" on whether or not they will steal and murder?

When it comes to religion, these parents let their children select from hundreds of options. They claim to be Christians, so they supposedly believe that there is only one way that leads to life, and that all the non-Christian beliefs and religions inevitably lead all of their adherents to endless conscious torment in hell. But still, these parents think that they should let their children decide by not teaching them biblical doctrines and not raising them according to biblical principles. We expect non-Christian parents to be like this, but even some parents who claim to be Christians believe the same way. Then, they have the audacity to say that they love their children!

If you follow any form of this unbiblical "let them decide" approach, then you have nothing but hate for your children. You have committed a great sin against God, and you are a very wicked person. Scripture commands you to teach your children the Christian faith as truth, and to teach your children that all non-Christian beliefs and religions are false. If you refuse to do this, it may be that you are not a Christian yourself, and that your destiny is endless conscious torment in hell.

Although only God can sovereignly grant faith to those whom he has chosen, it is your duty to teach your children the Christian faith, and to teach them that it is the only true

faith. If you are truly convinced that your God is the only true God, that Jesus Christ is the only savior, and that the Bible is the only divine verbal revelation, then should you not at least "train a child in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6)? No loving and devout parent would do otherwise.

If you have been neglecting this important and sacred duty, as most parents do, then you must immediately repent of your great wickedness and begin to obey the Bible in your parenting. Tell your children about Christianity, and explain to them why it is the only true and rational system of belief.¹ Take them to church, read them the Bible, and train them in theology and apologetics. The Scripture commands you to constantly be teaching your children the laws of God: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

In addition, tell your children about the other systems of thoughts that they will encounter at school and from friends, and explain to them why their non-Christian beliefs are all false and wicked. Demonstrate to them how all non-Christian thoughts and religions can be conclusively refuted. Training in theology and apologetics is *the* most important part of your parenting.

Similar to many people who claim to be Christians in our time, Joshua's generation neglected the spiritual development of their children, and an entire generation grew up that did not know the ways and the works of God: "Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths" (Judges 2:11-13).

This new generation began to follow the "various gods of the peoples around them." They were not taught by their parents to serve the God who brought them out of Egypt, so they were instead influenced by those who were around them, and eventually began to serve their gods. Likewise, if you do not teach and influence your children, other people probably will. There are many people who are eager to tell your children what to do and what to believe.

Because of Israel's unfaithfulness, "In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress" (Judges 2:14-15).

This is how each cycle of sin and idolatry occurred. When a strong leader was presiding over the affairs of Israel, the people would serve God. But when the leader died and the people had failed to instruct their children about the things of God, the next generation

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

would grow up without knowledge of the ways and the works of God. Instead, they were influenced to serve false gods by the nations surrounding them. As a result, they "provoked the Lord to anger," and God would hand them over to their enemies.

We see an analogous pattern in our society. "Christian" parents are failing to instill biblical ideas and habits into their children, and as a result, these children are being influenced by unbelievers to adopt unbiblical ideas and habits. Many of these children end up becoming detestable idolaters, worshipping celebrities, money, and false gods, instead of worshipping Jesus Christ. Then comes judgment and captivity, and they become slaves to sin, being entangled in a web of filth and wickedness.

In his sovereign grace and mercy, God did not leave the people of Israel in their pitiful condition: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders" (Judges 2:16). Likewise, God has been raising up ministers who are knowledgeable of the Scripture and bold in their speech. They are as deliverers who would lead the people of God out of spiritual blindness and captivity, and back into the true worship of God. Those who listen and respond because of God's sovereign work in their minds will escape this destructive cycle of sin. But many people will refuse to listen, and they will continue in that destructive cycle. Their lives will continue to be meaningless, and their minds full of darkness.

These deliverers whom God sent to Israel were called "judges," and they managed to obtain relief for the people of Israel from their enemies. But after that, the people would return to idolatry again:

They did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the Lord; they did not do as their fathers. When the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:17-19)

God was merciful to the people, and sent them strong leaders to rescue them out of captivity and destruction. However, their hearts were never sincerely devoted to God, so that "it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them." This happened generation after generation – when a strong leader passed from the scene, the people would return to idolatry.

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua. (Judges 2:20-23)

Although God had shown them mercy, the people of Israel continued to sin against God, and so God determined not to completely destroy their enemies. The surrounding nations would become a bothersome reminder to them, and under God's sovereign control they will persecute the people of Israel whenever they fail to rightly worship and obey God. Thus the people of Israel were never able to fully overcome their adversaries in battle. When their apostasy had become great, God even allowed them to be captured by their enemies.

Now, all the words of Scripture were written for our instruction. As Paul explains, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). The life of Samson contains lessons for us to learn how to rightly worship and obey God, and this is the purpose of the present study.

3. HIS DESTINY

Coming now to Judges 13:1, where the record of Samson's life begins, we read, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years." Samson's story begins during another cycle of Israel's apostasy and captivity. God would then raise him up to deliver the people.

Judges 13 continues:

A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.'" (v. 2-7)

Samson was to be a Nazirite. As the *Holman Bible Dictionary* explains:

[A Nazirite is] a member of a class of individuals especially devoted to God. The Hebrew term means consecration, devotion, and separation. Two traditional forms of the Nazirite are found. One was based on a vow by the individual for a specific period; the other was a lifelong devotion following the revelatory experience of a parent which announced the impending birth of a child. The Nazirite's outward signs – the growth of hair, abstention from wine and other alcoholic products, the avoidance of contact with the dead – are illustrative of devotion to God.²

Because Samson was to be a Nazirite, his mother was commanded not to drink any wine or to eat any unclean thing. Samson himself was also required to observe the conditions

² *Holman Bible Dictionary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991; p. 1011.

imposed upon the Nazirite, including not cutting his hair.³ As he explains to Delilah later, he was "a Nazirite set apart to God since birth" (Judges 16:17).

Samson had a destiny, and "the angel of the Lord" came to tell his mother of God's plan for him. His calling was unique – he was called to a specific task at a specific point in history, and God gave him certain unique abilities to fulfill his task. His strength was supernatural – it was available to him through the Holy Spirit, and not because of any unusual strength inherent in his body. To fulfill God's plan in the way that God had foreordained for it to be done, Samson required the superhuman strength demonstrated in his ministry, which implies that God had called him to a humanly impossible task, and it was only by God's supernatural power that Samson was able to fulfill what God had called him to do.

Since the sovereign God predetermines all things, he has a plan for each of his elect. Although his command for all believers to attain knowledge and holiness applies to every Christian, he indeed assigns different tasks to different Christians, and gives them the corresponding resources by which they must complete their tasks.

Parents must have this in mind, so that they may prepare their children to worship and obey God, and to fulfill the specific tasks that God has for them as outlined in Scripture and arranged by divine providence. To do this, parents must be highly knowledgeable in the word of God. The Bible says that it is by renewing our minds that we will be "able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). When we desire to know God's will for our lives and for our children we must not look first to extra-biblical sources – visions, dreams, prophecies, or impressions. Rather, we must look to the Scripture.

The Bible continues:

Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. The woman hurried to tell her husband, "He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!" Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, "Are you the one who talked to my wife?" "I am," he said. So Manoah asked him, "When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?" The angel of the LORD answered, "Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her." (Judges 13:8-14)

³ See Numbers 6:1-22 for the detailed instructions God gave to Moses about the Nazirite. Whereas one usually volunteered to be a Nazirite, God sovereignly imposed the vow upon Samson before he was born.

Manoah prayed and asked God to show him how to bring up Samson, that is, to let him know what was to be "the rule for the boy's life and work." Many parents, even those who *claim* to be Christians, do not take the time to read the Bible and pray to God for instructions on how to raise their children. They often raise their children as the unbelievers do, and often even teach them the unbelievers' values and priorities. Are these parents real Christians in the first place?

Of course, the negligence of the parents does not imply that their children will fail to come to Christ or to fulfill God's plan, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). By God's sovereign grace, his purposes for the elect will stand and succeed. Nevertheless, God commands parents to bring up their children to worship and obey God.

Then, Judges 13:15-22 continues:

Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you." The angel of the LORD replied, "Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD." (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.) Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?" He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."

Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD. And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. "We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"

The angel may have been the pre-incarnate Son of God. More than a few scholars agree that "the angel of the Lord" refers to the person of Jesus Christ before he took on human form. In addition, this "angel" seemed to have accepted worship, having "ascended in the flame" of the sacrifice. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* explains as follows:

A mysterious messenger of God, sometimes described as the Lord Himself (Gen. 16:10-13; Ex. 3:2-6; 23:20; Judg. 6:11-8), but at other times as one sent by God. The Lord used this messenger to appear to human beings who otherwise would not be able to see Him and live (Ex. 33:20). The Angel of the Lord performed actions associated with God, such as revelation, deliverance, and destruction; but he can be spoken of as distinct from God (2 Sam.

24:16; Zech. 1:12). This special relationship is a mystery similar to that between Jesus and God in the New Testament.⁴

People believed that if a person ever saw God, he would die. Thus in verse 22, Manoah exclaimed, "We are doomed to die! We have seen God!" But his wife reasoned, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this" (v. 23).

Manoah's wife soon "gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him" (v. 24). God performed a miracle in Samson's mother, causing her barren womb to conceive and enabled her to give birth (Judges 13:2-3).

Soon after, "the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol" (v. 25), showing the reader that the Spirit of God would sovereignly demonstrate his power in Samson's life and work. It was the Holy Spirit who enabled Samson to do what God had called him to do. Later, Samson would betray the anointing by violating the conditions imposed upon him by God, and the power of his ministry left him – until he was restored.

When God calls you to perform a certain task, he also empowers you by his Holy Spirit. Any degree of success that we attain comes only because of God's sovereign foreordination and the Spirit's empowerment. God sees to it that no one may boast in his presence. Our dependence should not rest on human credentials and resources such as academic degrees, financial support, or strategic relationships.

No one can accomplish what God has called him to do without the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Even those who produced the furniture of the Old Covenant tabernacle were especially anointed by God's Spirit:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you."
(Exodus 31:1-6)

God has called us to "take captive every thought" (2 Corinthians 10:5). As Paul writes, "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16), but then he adds, "but our competence comes from God" (3:5). Thus although we are powerless in ourselves (John 15:5), by the power of the Holy Spirit mere human beings like us can preach and write words that God will use as the means by which he will sovereignly enlighten and transform others.

⁴ *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986; "Angel of the Lord."

4. HIS STRENGTH

By Judges 14, Samson had grown to an age suitable for marriage, and he told his parents that he would like to marry a Philistine woman:

Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife." His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me." (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.) (Judges 14:1-4)

This passage reflects God's absolute and exhaustive sovereignty – his total control over people and circumstances.

Israel was under the control of the Philistines, and God had chosen and enabled Samson to attack the Philistines and to deliver the Israelites. As the angel said, he would "begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). When Samson wanted to marry a Philistine woman, his parents were surprised and dismayed. But verse 4 says, "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines."

God had constructed in Samson a destructive weapon against Israel's enemy, and this was his way of deploying it. Samson's desire to marry a Philistine woman was from God. He was sovereign not only deciding the purpose of Samson's life, but also in how he was to accomplish this purpose. By choosing a Philistine woman to be his wife, there would arise an occasion, or opportunity, to "confront the Philistines." The marriage would create an opportunity and a reason for Samson to fight against Israel's enemies.

Nevertheless, since it was against God's preceptive will to marry an unbeliever, it was a sin for Samson to marry this Philistine woman. God was sovereign over Samson, and could cause him to perform righteousness or wickedness according to his own divine will. "Free will" is such a popular and desirable concept for many Christians that they are blind to the Bible's absolute rejection of free will. Rather, Scripture teaches that God controls everything, including all human decisions.

In this case, God's decretive will caused Samson to commit this sin of marrying an unbeliever, having decided that Samson would accomplish the divine purpose in such a manner. Nevertheless, it was still a sin, and Samson was still responsible for his action,

since responsibility is based on whether God holds someone accountable, and not on whether the person was able to do otherwise.

One commentator writes, "While Samson's desire was sinful, God sovereignly used it for his own purposes to bring judgment on the Philistines. Although God's providence incorporates evil and moral ambiguities, it does not justify wrongdoing."⁵ God's decree for a person to sin does not justify his sin because God himself will count or judge that sin as wicked. However, this does not mean that God is unjust, since it is God himself who decides what is just and what is unjust, and he says that he is always just. Therefore, it is just for God to judge a person for his sins, even though this person committed those sins only because God had decreed that he would do so.

Of course, as a parent you should never allow your child to do anything that is against God's preceptive will – that is, his commands as revealed by Scripture. In this case, Samson's parents resisted, but eventually capitulated to his demand. Children may often demand something that goes against God's precepts, and it is up to the parents to insist on obedience to Scripture.

But sometimes the reverse may be true. The child may find himself having to insist on obeying God contrary to the wishes and demands of his parents. This may be especially true when one is called by God to the ministry. Today's parents, even those who claim to be Christians, are often disappointed when God chooses their child to be a preacher. As Jesus states, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24). This demonstrates how far their minds have wandered from God.

Rather than being disappointed or even horrified, parents ought to be most thankful to God that he has chosen their child to be a minister – to hold the highest office available to a man. A lack of gratitude toward God for calling the child is not only tragic for the parent and child relationship, but it is sinful and wicked, seeing that they despise the gift and calling of God. They would prefer that their child become a slave to money rather than a slave to Jesus Christ. They may claim to be Christians, but it is likely that their faith is not genuine and that they have never been regenerated in the first place.

Those who are called to the ministry must not be too eager for the approval of relatives and friends, lest they compromise God's commission toward them. Jesus had predicted that his coming would destroy many human relationships: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'" (Matthew 10:34-36).

But Jesus also promised to reward those who would remain loyal to him and prefer him in all things regardless of family opposition: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times

⁵ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*; Zondervan, 2003; p. 369. See also Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29). He also warns, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:37-39).

Some people claim that true religion would never divide relatives or friends, and if your faith damages your relationship with relatives and friends, then your faith must be false or distorted. However, Scripture teaches that true faith will often divide relatives and friends, probably depending on whether they share your faith. Of course, if accurately affirming the Christian faith divides you from your relatives and friends who do not share this faith, and if you are not bringing this division about by any unbiblical aggravation, then such division is their fault and not yours. Since Christianity is the only true religion, they ought to be affirming the same things that you now affirm.

The family of Jesus had not always understood or supported him. For example, we read the following in Luke 2:42-50:

When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

Other passages imply that his family did not endorse his work. Matthew 12:46-50 is one example:

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Matthew Henry writes as follows:

Christ was interrupted in his preaching by his mother and his brethren...perhaps it was only designed to oblige him to break off...His mother and brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him, when they should have been standing within, desiring to hear him...Frequently those who are nearest to the means of knowledge and grace, are most negligent. Familiarity and easiness of access breed some degree of contempt...They not only would not hear him themselves, but they interrupted others that heard him gladly. The devil was a sworn enemy to our Saviour's preaching. He had sought to baffle his discourse by the unreasonable cavils of the scribes and Pharisees, and when he could not gain his point that way, he endeavoured to break it off by the unseasonable visits of relations...We often meet with hindrances and obstructions in our work, by our friends that are about us, and are taken off by civil respects from our spiritual concerns.⁶

John 7:3-5 makes explicit the resistance of Jesus' brothers toward his ministry: "Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.' For even his own brothers did not believe in him." Some of Jesus' brothers believed on him later, but at first they did not.

Your commitment toward Christ must be such that there would not be any struggle or anguish to put him first if your loyalty to him conflicts with your loyalty to family and friends. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). If you cannot do this, you are not even a Christian, and you are still unconverted.

Then, the Bible continues in Judges 14:5-6:

Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done.

Back in Judges 13:25, we came across the words, "the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him," but the verse does not tell us what the Spirit would do through him. Thus the above passage shows for the first time what special gift God gave to Samson, and in what special way the Spirit would manifest through him. "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4) – the Spirit illuminated Joseph about dreams, caused Samuel

⁶ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991; p. 1676.

to prophesy, and enabled David to rule as king. By the same Spirit, God gave to Samson the gift of supernatural strength.

God called Samson to deliver Israel from the Philistines, but he did not give Samson a gift of military leadership. Indeed, Samson had no army and he did not need one. God could have given Samson the wisdom and ability of a military leader, as he did to Joshua and Gideon, who led the people of Israel to fight against their enemies, at times against tremendous odds, and were victorious by the power of God. But God had given Samson the strength of an entire army.

After killing the lion, Samson "told neither his father nor his mother what he had done" (Judges 14:6). Most people would tell everyone they know if they were to accomplish such a feat of strength, but Samson did not tell his parents. It appears that Samson did not think that killing a lion with his bare hands was some great feat to boast about. This was not because he was especially humble, but probably because something like this was not too unusual or surprising to him. When we see his reactions to his future feats of strength, we will see that this inference is probably correct.

Judges 14:7-9 continues to say:

Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her. Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass.

Samson went to the Philistine woman and talked with her. As he was returning to her after a time to marry her, he remembered the lion's carcass and so went to look. There he found a swarm of bees and some honey.

No sooner had we witnessed the divine gift in Samson do we see him betraying it. Samson was a Nazirite and was not supposed to touch the dead: "Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body. Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head" (Numbers 6:6-7). But Samson touched the lion carcass and even ate from its corpse.

The fact that Samson was able to tear a lion apart with his bare hands, and that he did not think it was a big deal, implies that he had great faith in God's power. However, this passage shows that he did not take his Nazirite vow seriously enough. Although he appeared to have faith in the Lord, his faith was severely marred because he lacked the fear of the Lord. One who does not fear the Lord can do some foolish things. Since "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10), all who do not fear him have not even started

to become wise. This lack of godly fear ultimately led to Samson's downfall. His greatest problem was not Delilah.

Jesus said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him" (Luke 12:4-5). Fearing God was what Samson failed to do. Perhaps his view of God was distorted so that he had some confidence in God's power but failed to recognize God's holiness, and the seriousness of his Nazirite commitment. He demonstrated no fear that he might have done something to offend God. This attitude would prove to be fatal, but not before God changed him and accomplished his sovereign decree through him.

5. HIS WEAKNESS

One of Samson's character flaws was that he lacked the fear of God, and this was the ultimate cause of his downfall. This chapter brings us to another of his character flaws that turned out to be the immediate cause of his downfall.

We will begin by reading from Judges 14:10-14:

Now his father went down to see the woman. And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. When he appeared, he was given thirty companions. "Let me tell you a riddle," Samson said to them. "If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes." "Tell us your riddle," they said. "Let's hear it." He replied, "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." For three days they could not give the answer.

The passage refers to Samson's wedding. We noted earlier that although Samson sinned by marrying a Philistine woman, God had sovereignly decreed Samson to commit such a sin so that Samson would gain the opportunity and reason to attack the Philistines.

Verses 10 and 11 say, "And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. When he appeared, he was given thirty companions." According to the custom of that time, Samson gave a wedding feast, and while the bridegroom had "companions," the bride had "virgins" with her.

During the feast, Samson challenged the Philistines to solve a riddle within seven days. Orientals were fond of riddles as a form of entertainment, especially on such occasions. Here the loser was to give the winner "thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes." The "linen garments" were worn next to the body, often by people of rank and wealth, and the "clothes" refers to outer woolen clothing. Since these were expensive items, there was much at stake.

The Philistines still had not come up with the answer by the third day, and so they threatened Samson's wife:

For three days they could not give the answer. On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?" Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the

answer." "I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people. Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" Samson said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle." (Judges 14:14-18)

The riddle was really about the lion Samson killed and the honey he later found in its carcass (Judges 14:5-9). No one really knew the answer to it except Samson – he had not even told his parents what happened on the road to Timnah, and when his wife asked him for the answer, he said, "I haven't even explained it to my father and mother, so why should I explain it to you?" It was important for the Philistines to solve the riddle, because both money and pride were at stake. They were not about to be outwitted by an Israelite! So in verse 15, they threatened Samson's wife to get the answer from her husband.

Thus Samson's wife pressed her husband for the answer to the riddle and would not relent:

Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer." "I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people. (Judges 14:16-17)

This brings us to Samson's other major weakness. We are not referring to sexual lust, since even if one can show that lust was one of his problems, it was never the immediate cause of his downfall. Rather, we are referring to his vulnerability to manipulative women.

Every unregenerate person has the inclination to manipulate others for selfish purposes. This evil tendency comes naturally to all non-Christians and should not surprise us. It is only by God's sovereign work of regeneration and sanctification in us that it may be changed. It does not matter if you claim to be a Christian, or if your lips call Jesus as "Lord" – if your basic motivation is self-preservation, then you are not a Christian, and you have never been a Christian. You may call him "Lord," but you do not believe it, and you have never meant it:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple....In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-27, 33)

In this case, we are referring to psychological manipulation coming from a woman. She "cried the whole seven days of the feast" (v. 17), and said to Samson such things as, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer" (v. 16). This kind of manipulation is demonic. Christian women should never try to manipulate men like this, and Christian men should become immune to such manipulation, but rather disallow it altogether.

Of course, although psychological manipulation is sinful, not every type of control is wrong. God places people in positions of authority to exercise legitimate control over others according to his purposes. For example, he has instituted positions of authority in the family, the government, and the church:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1)

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

Although human beings often abuse what God has ordained, this does not negate the fact that he has placed certain people in positions of authority.

Samson's wife was trying to get the answer out of Samson by psychological pressure and manipulation. His specific weakness in this instance was not sexual, but it was his failure to endure or confront manipulation by a woman. It is true that his illegitimate desire for and sinful marriage to this woman placed him in this situation, but he finally gave her the answer to the riddle not because of any sexual urges he had, but it was only because he could no longer endure her constant nagging: "So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him" (v. 17).

It seems popular to think that Samson got himself into all his problems because of his allegedly insatiable sexual appetite. However, his weakness in this case was plainly not sexual but psychological. He could not be firm with his wife and tell her to be silent. He could not maintain a decision he had made against a woman's prolonged nagging. Later, Samson would compromise his Nazirite vow for the same reason.

Do you try to get your way with your husband by nagging him? Stop it! It is an evil thing to do, especially if you are badgering him to do something against his biblical agenda for

the family, or a biblically permissible decision that he has already made. If you are in the habit of badgering your husband or arguing with him, then you are an annoying and wicked woman:

A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. (Proverbs 19:13)

Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife. (Proverbs 21:9)

Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. (Proverbs 25:24)

A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand. (Proverbs 27:15-16)

Even before Samson surrendered to his wife's manipulation, she had already betrayed her husband by submitting to external threats. Although a woman may badger her husband about various things, one common theme is that the woman may want her husband to conform or measure up to some worldly and non-Christian standard. A wicked woman may become dissatisfied and ashamed when God calls her husband to do something that is not respectable or important according to the world. Instead of placing her trust in God and her husband's spiritual gifts she may attempt to influence him so that he may conform to the worldly standard of what is respectable or important. Instead of taking Samson's side and trusting in him, Samson's wife surrendered to the Philistines' demand so that she manipulated and betrayed her husband. But what she compromised to keep, she later lost anyway.

If your husband has been called to the ministry, you must not allow the values and standards of this world to control your thinking, so that you become of your husband's calling. The world may despise ministers of the gospel, and think that they are unimportant and irrelevant, if not altogether harmful to society. There is no greater calling for a human being than the calling to oversee the flock of God. Instead of pressuring your husband to conform to worldly standard, you should instead defend his calling and encourage him to pursue it with diligence and passion. Do not allow yourself to be the biggest hindrance in his determination to obey God.

On the other hand, if your husband has been called to a profession that even the world deems respectable, do not consider yourself fortunate, but rather be humbled by the fact that God has chosen to withhold the most honorable profession from your husband, and that he has not entrusted him with the most sacred task available to man. Likewise, the husband must never succumb to pressure from relatives and friends to compromise his calling. Jesus said, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

Samson had lost the challenge, and therefore he owed the Philistines "thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes." Judges 14:18-20 tells us how he managed to pay the debt:

Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" Samson said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle." Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house. And Samson's wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding.

The Philistines did not play fair, since they threatened Samson's wife to get the answer to the riddle. Now, God "was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines" (Judges 14:4), and perhaps in revenge for the way the Philistines solved his riddle, Samson went about thirty miles away from where he was, through the territory of the Philistines to a place called Ashkelon. There, Samson "struck down thirty of their men stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle." "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power" to pay the Philistines by robbing some of their own people!

God had called Samson to be a killing machine against the Philistines. As we examine his life, we will see that he slaughtered the Philistines over what appeared to be personal issues. In reality, God was arranging situations in which he would unleash Samson to bring judgment and destruction against the Philistines.

6. HIS VICTORIES

Samson had lost the challenge of the riddle, and after paying his debt to the Philistines (by robbing other Philistines), Judges 14:19 says, "Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house."

After some time, Samson desired to be reconciled with his wife, and so he went to her:

Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in. "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your friend. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead." Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves. (Judges 15:1-5)

Samson was "burning with anger" at how the Philistines were able to solve the riddle and how his wife had betrayed him by giving them the answer. When his anger subsided and he wanted to be reconciled with her, and so he "took a young goat and went to visit his wife." But when he arrived, "her father would not let him go in," but explained, "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her that I gave her to your friend."

The father thought that Samson must have "thoroughly hated her" because of her betrayal. The word translated "hated" here may have been a technical word when used in the context of marriage, and implies the intention to divorce:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

The word translated "dislikes" here in verse 3 by the NIV is the same word translated "hated" in Judges 15:2, and it is correctly translated as such in the KJV. Thus the word "hated" in Judges 15:2 may suggest the idea of divorce, so that Samson's father-in-law may

have meant, "I thought you must have divorced her (or wanted to divorce her) after what she did to you."

Samson responded, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them" (v. 3), and he exacted his revenge by burning down the Philistines' crops. The attack was again the result of a personal issue between Samson and the Philistines, but God was fulfilling his plans through all of this. God had apparently decided to have Samson fulfill his calling in this manner. He created Samson to be a killing machine, and he unleashed Samson against the Philistines by generating personal conflicts between them. Recall that the sinful marriage itself was initiated by God to create "an occasion to confront the Philistines" (Judges 14:4).

God is sovereign to do whatever he wants, and to use whatever means he wants to do it. He arranged Samson's circumstances and his reactions so that even the personal details of his life served to fulfill God's plans. Likewise, God arranges our circumstances and our thoughts so that even the personal details of our lives serve to fulfill his plans. However, God is often pleased to have us fulfill his plans through our conscious involvement, but nevertheless a consciousness that is directed by God himself: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1).

Samson burned down the Philistines' crops by tying three hundred foxes together by their tails, fastened torches to them, and "let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines." This caused much damage. When the Philistines discovered that it was Samson who attacked them, and that he did it because his wife was given to another, they "went up and burned her and her father to death" (v. 6).

The Philistines had threatened Samson's wife that they would burn her to death if she had not manipulated the answer to the riddle out of her husband. Instead of being faithful and trusting to her husband, the woman betrayed Samson. But eventually she lost what she compromised to keep, so that she and her father were burned to death. If she had sided with her husband, he could have easily protected her against the Philistines.

Christians should never compromise biblical precepts to save themselves, and what you compromise to protect, you are likely to lose anyway. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).

If you desire to have approval of God, but you are desperately seeking approval from your relatives, friends, and unbelievers, then it is likely that you will lose both. If you compromise to gain the approval of unbelievers, then your life no longer pleases God, because "Anyone who choose to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

At the same time, as a Christian, you will also fail to gain the world's respect, since "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:19). The

world will never truly love a Christian, and one who compromises God's approval to gain worldly approval will soon lose both. As long as he remains this way, he will live in misery. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24), and Paul reasoned, "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Timothy 2:4).

God's power is more than sufficient to protect us from the world's intimidation, so that we have no reason and no need to compromise. Some people compromise the message of the gospel to attract sinners, or to make themselves more acceptable to the world. But if we do that, do we still get to keep what we are seeking to preserve? No, we would have lost it already. We must come to the place where we can sincerely say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

We do this not through an irrational commitment or "a leap of faith"; rather, by rigorous theological studies and by the assurance of the Spirit, we will realize that the Christian faith is the only true system of belief, and that it is not only rationally superior to all others, but that it is in fact the only possible religion and worldview. In an age when moral and intellectual cowardice and indecision are being disguised as "tolerance," even some who claim to be Christians abandon the uniqueness of our matchless gospel, as if God will be displeased with us for having too much confidence in the infallibility of Scripture and the atonement of Christ! Scripture makes it clear that those who affirm or preach another gospel are not Christians at all, and they will suffer endless conscious torment in hell.

Soon after Samson attacked the Philistines for the second time, he was again provoked against them. When Samson found out what the Philistines did to his wife and father-in-law, he said, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." Therefore, "He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam" (Judges 15:8). This was the third attack against the Philistines.

The Bible then quickly leads us to Samson's fourth attack against the Philistines:

The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."

Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me." They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me

yourselves." "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you."

So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. Then Samson said, "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men." When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi. (Judges 15:9-17)

After he "slaughtered many" Philistines, Samson "stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam." The Philistines went up to Judah and demanded that Samson be handed over to them. So the men of Judah came to Samson and said, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" In other words, they were saying, "What have you gotten us into? Don't you realize that the Philistines had conquered us, and our nation is currently under their rule? Why do you seek trouble with them?" And they told Samson that they were going to tie him up and surrender him to the Philistines.

Most crowds will yield to the greatest pressure without consideration of God's glory or his precepts. These men of Judah could have trusted in God's power in Samson's life, and recommended a full-scale insurrection, which would have also proved that they were cured from the sin and unbelief that resulted in their subjugation under the Philistines in the first place.

Samson was God's chosen deliverer for Israel. Thus to a great measure, their faith in his ability reflected their attitude toward God. If so, what can we infer from the fact that they abandoned Samson? They could have said, "Samson, we recognize that God has given you supernatural strength, and that he has called you to deliver Israel from the Philistines. We are grateful for God's provision and we have faith in his power, and therefore we also have confidence in you. Now, why don't we take this opportunity to declare war against the Philistine and be rid of them? Let us take this nation back for the glory of God!"

That is what they should have said, but instead, they complained against God's chosen one and said, "What have you gotten us into? Don't you realize that the Philistines are our rulers? We have come to surrender you to them so that they will leave us alone." They have decided to surrender to their enemies the man of God – their only chance for deliverance at that time.

Christian leaders should take a lesson from this. Most people cannot be trusted under pressure. This is true even concerning those who claim to be Christians. Of course, those who would betray God's chosen leaders are probably false converts in the first place. In any case, you would like to think that those who claim to be Christians would remain

faithful to God and to you, but most of them are not nearly as committed as they present themselves to be. Most crowds are fickle and easily intimidated by pressure. In fact, most professing Christians are not willing even to sacrifice part of their income for God's kingdom, let alone for you. But is it really that bad? Well, the truth is that you might be like this also. You may make bold claims about your commitment and resolve, but when the pressure comes, you are probably one of those who turn and run.

When Jesus was about to be arrested, he said to his disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matthew 26:31). But Peter protested, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (v. 33). Then, Jesus predicted, "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times," and it happened just like he said. The other disciples also misjudged their own commitment to Christ: "But Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same" (v. 35). But later, "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (Matthew 26:56).

Since what appears to be faith can be false, and since it is possible to misjudge our commitment, a faith that has been tested is priceless. As Job said, "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10), and Peter wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7). True faith is rare, but false converts abound. Even Jesus did not place his trust on his disciples, especially untested ones: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:23-25).

Christian leaders who base their confidence in the number and the loyalty of their supporters are deceived. They do not really have the support that they think they have. Those who place their trust in the crowds may be disappointed when the group faces pressure, or when the organization suffers persecution. Of course, it is possible that some people will remain faithful. The point is that not all who say that they will remain faithful will in fact remain faithful. Ultimately, one can only trust in God, since only he is pure in intention and unlimited in ability: "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD'" (Jeremiah 17:5).

This is not to say that no professing Christian will remain faithful to God and to Christian leaders under pressure, but it remains that not all professing Christians are genuine Christians, and as people who have never undergone spiritual regeneration and sanctification by the Spirit, they can be extremely fickle. On the other hand, a mind regenerated by the Spirit and renewed by the Scripture is also one that is being transformed into the likeness of Christ, enabling one to be bold to stand for the truth in the midst of pressure and intimidation. Scripture teaches that you should never overestimate yourself,

and that it is right to test yourself and examine your commitment. Employ the means that God has granted you to grow in faith, so that when tests and trials come, you will be ready for them.

Samson was aware of the people's weakness, but he had enough confidence in God's power working through him that he did not require their assistance. He only asked that they would not try to kill him themselves, but just hand him over to the Philistines:

They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves." "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. (Judges 15:12-13)

There has been much emphasis on "team work" in recent years, and this emphasis has influenced the thinking of many Christians, generating much hostility against the so-called "lone ranger" mentality. However, it really depends on the quality of the team, so that a greater number of people does not always translate into greater success. The effectiveness of any team has much to do with the competence and character of the team members, so that one "Samson" is better than an army of fools.

Now, it is true that God generally desires Christians to work together, and that each person has something meaningful to contribute: "As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:20-22).

Nevertheless, it is unbiblical to say that one person is always insufficient. An insistence on "team work" without exception comes more from secular social and business theory than from valid biblical exegesis, and shows little confidence in God's sovereignty and the Spirit's power. David said, "You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall" (Psalm 18:28-29). In another place, he wrote:

O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side. Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. (Psalm 3:1-8)

Although Jeremiah experienced much inner turmoil during his ministry, God had called him to face the rebellious nation alone, and God enabled him to fulfill his mission: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation" (Jeremiah 15:16-17).

We should reject every secular theory that undermines the believer's individual potential in Christ, so that we may imitate the faith of Paul, who wrote:

At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:16-18)

Although everyone left him, it was sufficient that God alone stood by him and strengthened him. He believed that God would deliver him "from every evil attack," and would bring him "safely to his heavenly kingdom."

Can we say with the apostle Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13)? Or, do we say, "We can do all things only through team ministry?" It is better to have a small team made up of spiritual giants rather than to have a large group of spiritual cowards who are psychologically dependent on one another, and where no one individual is truly strong. Otherwise, one is probably better off working by himself.

Samson was depending on God's power, and anything else could not have saved him. Many preachers say that this was precisely his problem – Samson trusted in God and not in people! They say that Samson would have been better off if he had worked with other people. But God himself called Samson to work alone. Besides, those people whom he was supposed to work with were the very ones who had surrendered him to the Philistines. Some falsely infer from Samson's story that if you work alone and trust only in God, then you are going to fail because you are not working with other people. Rather, a more proper inference would be that if you work with people, then you better trust in God to protect you from those people. The point is not that "team ministry" is wrong, since some variations of the concept are biblical, but the point here is that many people make false inferences from the life of Samson to support their ideas on "team ministry."

Samson's willingness to face an army of Philistines by himself reflected his faith in the power of God, although his attitude toward God was far from perfect, as we will see below. Nevertheless, to the extent that he did trust in God's power, we must imitate his faith, and learn to trust in God's power at work in our ministries: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:28-29).

Then, as the men of Judah handed Samson over to the Philistines, the power of God came upon Samson:

As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. (Judges 15:14-15)

Samson killed a thousand Philistines by himself, but earlier, three thousand men from Judah went to Samson just to surrender him to their enemies (Judges 15:11). It is better to have the cooperation of one "Samson," than three thousand "men of Judah" who would betray the man of God at the first sign of trouble.

After Samson "struck down a thousand men," he said, "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men." In Hebrew, this is a rhymed couplet with a play on words. The NIV has translated it perhaps as fittingly as possible: "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them"! Samson's confidence was such that he could make light of situations even like this one.

But then we see what may be another example of his lack of godly fear.

When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi. Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi. (Judges 15:17-19)

He prayed, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Although he had great confidence in God's power, he failed to address God with reverence. This made him spiritually careless and foolish. He took for granted God's deliverance, so that rather than giving thanks, he demanded God to meet another need. But Paul told us to pray "with thanksgiving" (Philippians 4:6).

7. HIS DOWNFALL

The premise of this book admits that Samson had problems with his character, but the problems that directly led him into trouble were not sexual, but spiritual and psychological. As a Nazirite, although he was supposed to exhibit a high level of devotion to God and to follow certain specific rules, Samson never lived an especially godly life. For example, besides marrying an unbeliever, he had violated his Nazirite vow by touching a lion's carcass and eating from it. Scripture seems to show him as one who had confidence in God's power, but who had very little godly fear.

At the beginning of Judges 16, we do see Samson going to a prostitute:

One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron. (v. 1-3)

Base on this passage, you should not think that Samson's main problem was sexual after all, since although most people who go to prostitutes may do so to satisfy their sexual lusts, that is often not the sole reason they go. Many sexually promiscuous men are that way because they have spiritual and psychological issues besides sexual ones, such as loneliness and depression.

We have no reason to assume that all the women Samson had been with were only to satisfy him sexually instead of psychologically also. For example, Samson wanted to marry the Philistine woman at Timnah because "he liked her" (Judges 14:7), so that his interests were not only sexual, but he was fond of the woman as a person. Further, if his interests were indeed only of the flesh, then why did he tolerate all the psychological pressure from the woman? Surely, there were attractive women elsewhere.

Even his relationship with Delilah was not only sexual, since the Bible says that he "fell in love" (Judges 16:4) with her. The popular portrayal of this relationship as one of intense seduction and uncontrollable lust cannot be substantiated by the actual biblical account. Lust was likely a factor, but to make it the exclusive factor in that relationship, or even to use it as the main factor to explain the whole of Samson's life, would be an irresponsible distortion of the biblical text.

We must also remember what Samson had been through. He married the woman he loved, but she betrayed him even before the wedding feast was over. When his anger subsided

and went to seek reconciliation, he discovered that she had been given away to someone else. Then, after seeking revenge on the Philistines, they burned her and her family to death. After exacting revenge on them again, his own countrymen surrendered him to the Philistines. His parents did not understand him, his wife betrayed him, his own countrymen failed him, and the entire nation of the Philistines was after him.

Men of lesser character may have already killed themselves by this point, let alone going to a prostitute for comfort. This is not to excuse Samson's sins, but to show that many popular presentations of his life tend to be unfair and inaccurate because they do not take into account all the information about him. Of course it was sinful for Samson to have gone to a prostitute, but I am inclined to believe that he was seeking company besides sexual gratification.

When the people of Gaza found out that Samson was there, they "surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate," and planned to kill him. However, Samson "got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts...and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron." If the "hill that faces Hebron" (NIV) means the top of a hill from which one could see Hebron, then the distance between the gate of Gaza to that location was about one mile. However, if the phrase means a hill that was within Hebron (NASB: "the mountain which is opposite Hebron"), then the distance over which Samson had carried the gate becomes twenty to thirty-four miles. Either way, it was a long distance to have carried an entire city gate. This reminds us of the physical strength that God gave to Samson.

It is not until now that Delilah appeared:

Some time later, he 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 we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver." (Judges 16:4-5)

Delilah is first mentioned here in the Bible. We have already gone through Judges 13, 14, and 15, but not until now do we see Delilah mentioned, and we have already arrived at the final chapter in the Bible on Samson's life. As asserted earlier, Samson's story is not mainly, let alone wholly, about his relationship with Delilah.

Rather than saying that Samson's relationship with Delilah was wholly based on sexual lust, verse 4 says that he "fell in love" with her. Of course he fell in love with the wrong woman, but he fell in love nonetheless. Thus I reject the notion that Samson's sexual problem, assuming that he had one, could satisfactorily explain his behavior. Rather, we must take into account his spiritual and psychological problems, such as his lack of devotion to his Nazirite commitment (and therefore to God), his loneliness, and all that he had experienced. It seems that Samson was a passionate person, but he could not keep his

feelings under control. He was intensely emotional over the people and events in his life. Rather than encouraging strong emotions, the Bible teaches self-control.

The Philistines said to Delilah, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver" (v. 5). Samson was about to be betrayed again by another woman he loved, but this time it was not even for self-preservation, but for money.

Delilah wasted no time, but asked Samson outright, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued" (v. 6). If you were Samson, would you not be alarmed? Then, Samson lied to Delilah: "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man" (v. 7). The Bible continues in verses 8-12:

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'll 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.

If you were Samson, and someone asked you how he may subdue you, and then proceed to do precisely what you told him, what would you think? It would be clear that the person was trying to harm you. You would have either retaliated or left the relationship. It is unlikely that Samson did not sense the danger at all, or did not know something of Delilah's intentions, but he remained in the relationship, and kept playing with her by lying about the secret of his strength.

Delilah tried again, and said, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." She was beginning to use manipulative tactics, but Samson did not surrender right away:

He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric [on the loom] and tighten it with the pin, I'll 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. (v. 13-14)

Then, Delilah escalated her effort, and applied even greater psychological pressure: "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'" (v. 15). Compare this to what Samson's wife said earlier: "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer" (Judges 14:16).

Delilah used the same strategy, but she was probably even more skillful. She said things like, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied," and "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."

Samson could have handled it if she had only said these things several times, but he could not withstand relentless nagging: "With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death" (v. 16)! Before this, Samson played with her by giving her false answers. He did not confront her about her manipulation, nor did he leave the relationship. By failing to firmly deal with Delilah's manipulation, Samson finally became "tired to death" of her "nagging," which she continued "day after day."

At last, he told her the secret of his strength: "'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'" (v. 17). The consequences were devastating:

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'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Then 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. (v. 18-21)

Samson sealed his fate by allowing Delilah to take away all signs of his Nazirite commitment to God. Likewise, the devil is "looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He will use manipulation, intimidation, deception, and all kinds of distractions in the attempt to have you break your covenant commitment to God. Satan himself deceived Eve, and then used her to tempt Adam, who sinned even though he was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:14). One who does not yield to one type of pressure may yield to another kind. Adam, who was not deceived by the devil, sinned because of Eve. And Samson, who was not in the least afraid of the Philistines, fell because of manipulation from a woman.

Samson's behavior was indeed strange. It was unlikely that he was oblivious to Delilah's intention; otherwise, why did he not tell her the truth about his strength the first time? After the first or second time, he must have known that Delilah's plan was to discover his secret, exploit it, and then hand him over to the Philistines. Knowing this, he could have left Delilah at any time, but he chose to remain.

Again, I am not convinced that his sexual lust could adequately explain this behavior, since his sexual lust could have been satisfied by another woman. In addition, the Bible tells us that he had fallen in love with Delilah. Thus his decision to stay with her should probably be attributed more to psychological factors rather than sexual ones.

Christians must not become overconfident simply because they are strong in certain areas. We must prevent ourselves from stumbling in any way. But ultimately, it will be God who keeps his elect "blameless" to the end (see 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 3:13, 5:23). Although we must "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling," it is "God who works in [us] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13), so that no one may boast in his presence. The enemy is after our spiritual commitment, and he will entice us to abandon or compromise our relationship with God. Although many are deceived into sin, others walk into trouble with their eyes wide open. Let us not be like Esau, "who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son" (Hebrews 12:16).

8. SAMSON'S COMEBACK

God exercises exhaustive control over all things, including all human thoughts and decisions. By his providence, the Philistines did not kill Samson, but they "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" (Judges 16:21). Although he had slaughtered more than a thousand Philistines and destroyed their crops, they did not execute Samson once they had captured him. Perhaps they thought they would make him an example, or maybe after all that Samson had done to them, they wished to humiliate and torture him for a while first. Having "gouged out his eyes" and bound him "with bronze shackles," maybe they thought he was no longer a threat. But God's providence was at work – taking Samson into the important city of Gaza, with or without his eyes, was like taking in a ticking time bomb. Although he was blinded, Samson was God's Trojan horse to the Philistines.

The Philistines "gouged out his eyes," which seemed to be a tragic event, but it was probably the best thing that had ever happened to Samson. He was a passionate, energetic, and outgoing person, but no one understood him. His commitment to God was weak, and he was seeking to satisfy himself by looking for love in all the wrong places. Losing his sight and freedom forced him, perhaps for the first time in his life, to turn inward – to reflect on his life and his commitment to God. Jesus said:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell. (Mark 9:43-47)

Paul wrote, "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:31-32). By God's sovereign grace, if Samson had repented, then he probably would not have suffered as he did. But as it turned out, he needed divine discipline, so that he would "not be condemned with the world. God works out all things for the good of his elect: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

God's purposes and plans can never be thwarted by man's disobedience, since man cannot even disobey his precepts without his active decree. Whether blind or seeing, bound or free, God placed Samson where he was supposed to be – right in the middle of the Philistines. God did this to destroy the Philistines, and to save Samson's soul at the same time. Now that Samson could not look outward, and now that he had no strength or freedom, he had to look inward, to examine himself, and to commune with God. We have

no indication of him ever having done that. And this is the beginning of his turning back to God.

Many people are so busy today that they blaze forward in their careers without stopping to give priority to prayer, study, and meditation. Their minds are constantly thinking on earthly things and selfish ambitions. Some of them assume that because they are Christians, God will automatically bless them. But if they are not devoted to God, they may not be Christians at all. Some tend to think that material concerns are more urgent, and spiritual matters should be reserved for times when they are "free" – perhaps during vacations, church retreats, or when they retire.

But it is foolish to favor the earthly at the expense of the heavenly: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). There is a misleading saying, that one can be "so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good." If this refers to one who seems to be so focused on his spiritual life that he fails to obey God's commandments regarding his relationship with other human beings, then he is not even spiritual in the first place (James 1:27), or at least he has a spiritual defect in this area even though he may be doing well in others. On the other hand, there is no limit to how "spiritual" a person can or should be. Often, this misleading statement is used by those who wish to defend their carnal lifestyle and attitude, and therefore deride those who are genuinely more spiritual. Only if you are spiritual will you be of any earthly good.

Christians must daily take time for prayer and study, shutting out all distractions. Once when Jesus was teaching his disciples, Martha, who had "opened her home to him," "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made," while her sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet" and was "listening to what he said." When Martha complained about Mary, Jesus answered that Mary had "chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42). Spending time alone in prayer and study is more important than all the outward things that we so often busy ourselves with, including ministry work.

"But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved" (Judges 16:22). God was not going to leave Samson in that prison forever. The power of the Spirit began to return to him. The Bible continues:

Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain." While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them." Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the

rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. (v. 23-27)

Samson's failure brought reproach to the God of Israel, since the Philistines interpreted their capture of Samson as the victory of their pagan god, Dagon. Similarly, when Christians fail to properly represent Jesus Christ – when they fail to stand strong in doctrine and character, they bring reproach to his name. Contrary to many people's opinion, your religion is not a purely personal affair – your beliefs and actions will affect other people. At the least, the quality of your faith will affect your family, and if you are a pastor, it will affect your congregation.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matthew 5:13). As Christians, we are the salt of the earth – although sin causes decay, we are the ones who prevent total corruption from taking place. However, "if the salt loses its saltiness," then "it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." If the salt loses its flavor, it is no longer acting as a preservative. Being good for nothing, it is thrown out into the streets, to be stepped on by people who walk by.

Without true Christians, society would erode. Without the true church, which is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), what is left of human morality and decency would crumble, purpose and dignity would disappear, godly fear would be not existent in society, and the earth would become the devil's paradise. Only Christians can prevent this from occurring, and whether or not they know it, all non-Christians are doing everything they can to stop us (Matthew 12:30).

However, when professing Christians lose their distinctiveness, or their Christian "flavor," then they become "no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." When professing Christians compromise their spiritual commitment and lose their flavor, they become overwhelmed by the world, even though the Bible says that they are the ones who should overcome the world because of their faith: "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1 John 5:4-5). Of course, in many cases, it is likely that these people have never been truly converted in the first place.

Having compromised his spiritual commitment, Samson lost his sight and his freedom to the Philistines. And they mocked him, saying, "Bring out Samson to entertain us," "So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them" (v. 25). Samson was a spiritual hero – he was called by God to be a man of God, a great deliverer, but because of his negligence and his sins, the Philistines captured him, gouged out his eyes, and made him an object of ridicule and amusement.

Then, we come to the amazing conclusion of Samson's life:

Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived. Then his brothers and his father's whole family went down to get him. They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel twenty years. (Judges 16:28-31)

After all Samson had done and been through, and when the situation looked so final, he still had faith to believe that God would work through him. What power must have been at work in Samson by God's sovereign grace, for him to have this kind of comeback faith! This kind of faith is rare even in professing Christians, who have the whole of Scripture to convince them of God's mercy. It is no wonder that although Samson is often negatively portrayed by people, God would instead honor him by placing his name alongside Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, and the other faithful men and women in Hebrews 11. The world is not worthy of one who understands and believes in God's sovereign grace.

If you look at Samson's life only in the context of his relationship with Delilah, you will not understand his greatness. But if you see him from the perspective of Hebrews 11 – as a man of faith – you will come to understand why God approved of him. God had mercy on Samson by granting him faith in God's sovereign grace despite Samson's flaws and failures.

The Bible says, "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). His promises toward the elect will always remain. On the other hand, he has promised nothing but damnation for the reprobates. This is not to say that one who has faith in God's goodness may go on sinning, since true faith believes in Scripture, which permits no such thing. As John explains, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). Christians are not encouraged to follow Samson in his sin, but they are rather encouraged to follow his faith in God's kindness. It is faith in God's mercy, not our good works, that enables the kingdom of God to advance. It is by faith that we will overcome the world (1 John 5:4-5). And even this faith comes only from God's sovereign decree, so that no one may boast.

In addition, it seems that Samson had finally learned to fear God, as evidenced in his prayer: "Then Samson prayed to the LORD, 'O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes'" (v. 28). This may not sound too special to you, but compare this to how he used to pray: "Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, 'You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?'" (Judges 15:18).

He was formerly irreverent and demanding toward God. But by Judges 16:28, he was humble and submissive, taking nothing for granted, and addressing God as "Sovereign LORD" (or, the "Lord God"; NASB). He now realized that God did not owe him his grace and mercy, and neither did God owe him the water that came out of the donkey's jawbone in Judges 15. God answered him, and he answers us, because of his sovereign kindness, and not because he owes us what we ask from him. We must never mistake arrogance and irreverence for faith, although I have heard preachers make exactly this mistake in their sermons, teaching people to demand things from God in a way that borders on blasphemy.

Jesus told the following parable in Luke 18:9-14:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Samson learned this lesson the hard way. It cost him his sight, his freedom, and then his life. This is the price and the folly of "learning by doing" instead of heeding the teaching of Scripture without having to experience the consequences of sin. Nevertheless, by the end of his life, Samson had truly learned his lesson and realized that all good things proceeded from God's mercy alone, and it is on his mercy that we must rely: "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

With his last breath, Samson performed what God had called him to do: "Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived" (v. 30). Some people teach that, because of his sins, Samson's death was premature, and he never accomplished what God had intended for him. I strongly disagree for at least two reasons.

First, when the angel announced Samson's birth to his mother, he only said that Samson would "begin" to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:5), and not that he would completely and permanently destroy them. Second, Samson's capture caused the "rulers of the Philistines" (Judges 16:23) to gather in one place. In fact, the Bible says that, "all the rulers of the Philistines were there" (Judges 16:27). Samson killed them all "with one blow" (v. 28).

According to his sovereign will, God gathered all the leaders of the Philistines in one place, and Samson was right there where he was supposed to be, and with his last breath, he did what he was supposed to do. Indeed, "in all things God works for the good of those who

love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35). Thus it seems that, by the sovereign grace of God, Samson accomplished exactly what God had intended for him to do. "For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27).

Hebrews is justified in including Samson as an example of great faith. God wants us to learn from his example, that we should imitate Samson in his faith in God's mercy and power. He wants us to believe that his mercy endures forever and that his calling and gifts are irrevocable. But at the same time, God's grace must not be abused: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2).