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## HOPE WHEN MY STRENGTH BRINGS WEAKNESS WITH IT

### *Samson*

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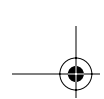
JUDGES 14 — 16



**N**O ONE, SURELY, CAN READ THE SAMSON STORY WITHOUT thinking, *This is tragedy*. Tragedy is a waste of good, a squandering of potential, and Judges 14—16 is a tragic story of much good being wasted because of the way Samson allowed himself to play the fool.

Yet Samson is a hero of faith. We know that because in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews he is named specifically: “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets” (Heb 11:32). The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that these were men who “through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouth of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became





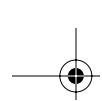
powerful in battle and routed foreign armies” (vv. 33–34). “Whose weakness was turned to strength”—*strength*, that is, for service that would not otherwise have been rendered. That is part of the story of Samson—as it is part of the story of many more of God’s imperfect people.

So Samson was a hero of faith. In fact, a central theme of Samson’s story is that God had appointed him to serve as a savior. When the angel of the Lord announced Samson’s coming birth to his mother, the angel said that her son would be “set apart to God from birth,” and that “he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines” (Judg 13:6). So he did. We read that he led and ruled Israel as its judge for twenty years, and it is clear that his actions weakened Philistine control of God’s people.

The story of Samson’s life as the writer of Judges narrates it is, however, very much like the sort of thing you read in paperback thrillers: women and fights all the way. Samson was undoubtedly a Rambo-type of person, but he is not entirely to blame for that. The book of Judges tells us of a people who lived in a permissive society, and a culture of permissiveness leads naturally to random and irresponsible behavior. We today know that firsthand. “Permissive society” is a description that applies very directly to modern North America. We Westerners live in post-Christian days, and as in Samson’s time, the old rules are not regarded. Everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes (see Judg 17:6; 21:25). All kinds of wild things done today involve all kinds of waste of good. We must realize that we live in an era and in a place that is a likely backdrop for just the sort of tragedy that we see in the life of Samson, and take warning.

The essence of tragedy, as I said, is waste of good, the nullifying of potential. And waste is a description of Samson’s life, as





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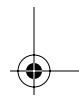
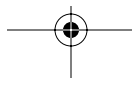
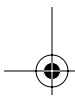
surveyed here. Samson was a strange sort of hero, as wayward and incorrigible as any juvenile delinquent. He was given enormous physical prowess to battle the Philistines, and he battled them successfully. Scripture says that the Spirit of the Lord came on him in power again and again (Judg 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). And right at the end of his life Samson prayed for and was given strength to bring down the temple of Dagon. He died with the Philistines—as he had prayed that he might. The narrator comments at that point that Samson killed many more when he died than while he lived (16:30). His subduing power over the Philistines is the golden thread that runs through the murky elements of Samson’s story. Alongside these escapades Samson, as we noted, was Israel’s acknowledged leader for twenty years. We can only guess what he might have achieved had his weaknesses not been what they were.

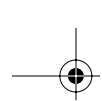


### Flawed Sexuality

For our own warning I must now be specific about the flaws that I see in Samson’s character.

First of all, Samson couldn’t resist a girl. As a young man he told his parents, much to their distress, “There’s a Philistine lass I want to marry.” He wooed this pagan woman right at the start of his career, and he ended up with another pagan woman named Delilah. Between the two, Scripture tells of his visit to a prostitute in Gaza. Neither marrying pagans nor bedding prostitutes can please God, but clearly when Samson’s sex drive was stirred, nothing could stop him. Nor is this difficult for us to understand. Powerful and successful males still think of physical sexual pleasure as a recreation to which their achievements somehow give them a right, and they still act as if restraints and restrictions that apply to others do not apply





to them. Examples need not be given, though they are bound to come to mind. Experience has taught us all that this is true.

### Flawed Humor

Then too Samson couldn't resist a joke. He was, among other things, a buffoon who prided himself on being a comic, gaining admiration and respect by making people laugh at his whimsy and his wit. I have known people like that, and I expect you have too. His riddle is a case in point. He wrecked his own wedding breakfast by setting before the young Philistine men (his wedding guests) the following conundrum:

Out of the eater, something to eat;  
Out of the strong, something sweet.

"What am I talking about?" he asked. The answer was, as we know, that Samson remembered the time when he'd found bees nesting and making honey in the corpse of a lion that he'd killed. Naturally, he did not expect that anyone would know this. The young men (not willing to be embarrassed by this outsider, especially when they had each bet a set of clothes that they could solve any riddle he set before them) put pressure on his bride to ask him for the correct solution. She did as they requested, then she told the young men, who at once gave Samson the answer. Realizing what they had done, Samson then got mad, wrecked the marriage feast and went home in a fury.

Why did he get mad? Well, because no one was expected to top Samson's own jokes. His riddle had been solved, he'd been upstaged by these Philistines, and he didn't like it. His vanity as a buffoon was hurt, so his euphoria gave way to fury. Unsuccessful with that joke, Samson soon followed it up with more destructive humor involving animals, fire and fields of standing grain. He





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caught three hundred foxes (how, I wonder?), tied them together by the tail in pairs, fastened a lighted torch to each pair of tails, let the terrified creatures loose and so burned up the entire Philistine harvest. I imagine that as the foxes ran, Samson stood at the edge of the field, laughing his head off. As anyone else might have foreseen, the joke sequence then escalated with unnecessary (and tragic) loss of life (Judg 15:3–17).

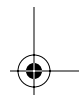
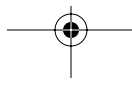
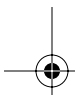
On another occasion, after his time with the Gaza prostitute and aware no doubt that an attempt might be made to stop him from leaving, Samson thought it frightfully funny to get up in the middle of the night, wrestle the pair of city gates and gateposts out of the ground, carry them on his back thirty miles, and plant the whole structure on a smooth, rounded hilltop facing Mount Hebron, nowhere near any human habitation. This again is Samson letting his sense of humor lead him into fantastic behavior.

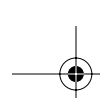
In the end we find Samson teasing his good-time girl Delilah with silly tales about what made him strong. She was plotting his downfall while he was making fun of her. When he finally told her his secret (that as a Nazirite, his hair had never been cut), his joking had fatal results—this time to himself (Judg 16:4–30).

Samson's unbridled humor made him behave repeatedly as a childish buffoon, thoughtless and irresponsible, and this was a real weakness of character. Humor, as such, is a God-given sweetener of life and safeguard of sanity, but we have to control our sense of humor, not let it control us.

### Flawed Anger

Samson also had trouble, as we have seen, controlling his temper. Anger is an urge to strike out, hurt and destroy, and Samson's story shows him to be a constantly angry man. He couldn't endure a putdown. One of his fixed ideas, it seems, was that he



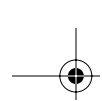


had to pay people back. Tit for tat was the rule of Samson's life. He would deal with others the way they dealt with him, only worse, so that he got a triumphant revenge and ended up top dog. This attitude appears in his very last prayer: "O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judg 16:28). Samson did not see that there is more to life than keeping even with the wrongs that are done to us. It was a further character weakness on Samson's part not to be able to control his temper but instead to let anger and pride overflow again and again in hurting other people. (Neighbor love as taught by Jesus and the apostles does the exact opposite: see Mt 5:38-48; Lk 10:25-37; Rom 12:17-21; 1 Jn 3:11-24; 4:7-21.)

In light of that, look again at Samson's practical jokes. People still think that by making others laugh they're somehow vindicating themselves as members of society, so that if their jokes have been expressing malice and anger, that will be forgiven and forgotten because they have given people some fun. Samson was evidently a man of that kind. As we see, his comic actions really have a rather nasty side to them. They are cruel and heartless jokes. They are jokes that express a desire to be one up and to score over the people on whom the jokes are played. Such jokes are not expressions of goodwill. They are funny, but the fun is ugly fun. The jokes are anger in thin disguise. It was a defect in Samson that his conscience seems not to have troubled him about this.

I criticize Samson's jokes with some hesitation because when I started preaching, I was super-serious. The senior minister with whom I was working said to me one day, "Look, you are too serious when you preach for anyone to take you seriously. God gave you humor. Use it!" (He was actually an Irishman, so he said





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*yummer* [rhymes with *plumber*]). I've been planting jokes in my sermons ever since, and I rather think it is a good idea. But I try to keep them from being malicious or demeaning. I see Samson as a man in the grip of his sense of humor, a man who habitually acted the fool and thought the very fact that he was doing something funny justified his bad behavior.

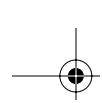
### God's Person

Yet God appointed Samson to be his special servant. Every once in a while in the Samson story up pops a reminder of the fact that Samson is God's man, set apart for God's work, and it is God who is overruling the course of Samson's actions and experience. It is this part of the Samson story that brings us hope. We too live tragic-comic flawed lives, lives full of mistakes and deficiencies, lives in which what we think of as our strengths take us ego-hopping and so become our real weakness. But God was God to Samson—and is God to us.

Oddly, there are things in the Samson story that remind us of the Lord Jesus—another person miraculously born for the purposes of God's kingdom. Jesus had a sense of humor also. True, it was a rather grim and sharp sense of humor. But we are surely meant to smile a bit at the thought of a camel going through the eye of a needle or a man with a plank sticking out of his own eye trying to get a speck out of someone else's eye. Yet Jesus wasn't enslaved to his humor. He was man of courtesy, wisdom, goodwill and restraint in a way that Samson never was.

As for self-control, not losing one's temper, Jesus was reviled but did not revile again. He committed himself to the one who judges justly. That's true human maturity, a maturity that all we who are Christ's are called to aim at (see 1 Pet 2:19–23). In this respect Jesus and Samson are polar opposites.





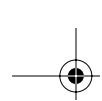
### Christian Caution

The story of Samson is a cautionary tale, and it is appropriate that we Christians take Samson's biography as a warning to ourselves. Samson was physically strong, that's true. At the moments when God's Spirit fell on him, God gave him unbelievable strength. But this very strength brought weakness—the specific weaknesses of self-centeredness, self-reliance, self-indulgence and self-satisfaction. All four are clearly here in Samson's track record. Had he been less spectacularly strong, he would have been less vulnerable to these attitudes. As it was, he fought the Philistines well but seems to have made no progress at all in the war with sin—which meant that all through his life he was weak within.

We evangelical Christians are strong too in at least one sense, that is, numerically. When statisticians count numbers, they tell us that there are about forty million of us in the United States alone. We have seminaries, technologies and the megachurch movement. The ministry and impact of a giant-sized Southern Baptist leader named Billy Graham, honorary chaplain to North America, has been incalculable, and he is, as we say, "one of us." Our literature ministry expands and expands. God has given Christians impressive strength, yet our very strength makes us vulnerable. Are we in danger of falling victim to some of the same self-destructive weaknesses we see in Samson? That, I think, is a question we must face very seriously.

Evangelical Christians live in an enclave. It is a large enclave, but it is an enclave all the same. We cannot escape our family relationship to each other. Who and what we are individually impacts all of us. And things in our enclave are not always what they should be. We need purity of heart—especially in sexual matters. We know that there are folk in our Christian circles to-





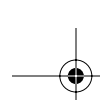
day whose sexual lives are all too similar to Samson's. Beyond sexual purity there was a certain high quality of character that Samson never attained, and in evangelical circles we don't always attain that quality either. In some of our Christian ministries we see an unwillingness to accept accountability, a desire to lead others and to be our own boss as we do so. We see emotional attitudes—resentment, bad temper, vindictiveness, discourtesy, unlove—that spell the same lack of maturity and sanctity that Samson displayed. Christians are quarrelsome. Christians are conceited. Christians are power-hungry egoists; we build empires. This happens over and over again.

These character flaws (Samson's and ours) are real weaknesses—weaknesses that can have a tragic effect both on our personal lives and on the impact that our evangelical strength makes in North America today. Defects of character destroy credibility in no time. In my travels I have spoken many times on the character of Samson. Every time I speak of him, I see in him a disturbing mirror of what I actually observe around me. So now I shall offer some lessons from Samson, this man of flawed character, divine vocation and real if unsteady faith.

### On Being Weak and Being Strong

Where we feel strong, there we may very easily be weak. The Scriptures say, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor 10:12). Let everyone who loves to be independent in Christ realize the danger of being independent of Christ. Samson was a loner; he did his own thinking. But that wasn't the path of blessing from every standpoint. Had he listened more to his parents (note Judg 14:2–4) and had he made himself accountable to elders and friends (note 15:7–13), he would surely have done better and honored God more. So mistrust your own





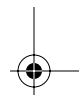
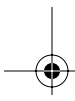
sense of strength and realize your own need for fellowship and accountability. We all need that to keep us in order.

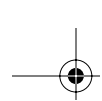
And realize that God in his mercy may have to deal with us eventually as he dealt with Samson. Through Delilah's treachery Samson was taken captive by the Philistines. He was blinded; they cut off his hair; the strength God had given him seemed gone forever; his usefulness seemed to have gone as well. In the goodness of God Samson recovered just enough strength for the final act of his life. We cannot help thinking, however, how much better it would have been if Samson had never got involved with Delilah in the first place.

But there's a message here for us. God may have to weaken us and bring us down at the points where we thought we were strong in order that we may become truly strong in real dependence on himself. He's done that before, and he may have to do it again—perhaps on a grand scale with Christians in North America, maybe on a personal level with you and me. If he does, there will be mercy in it. It will be God working to make some sense out of rambling lives that have reached the point where it seems that nothing good can come from them anymore.

One more encouraging thought from Samson's story. God does use us. He uses us right now in spite of our flaws. He is a kindly God and uses flawed people as a part of his regular agenda. No matter how conscious we are of our own limitations, shortcomings and sins, we may look to God to make use of us again—and in his great mercy he will.

Christians live by faith in Jesus Christ, which means we live by being forgiven. And Christians (forgiven sinners) are given a share in God's work in a way that, over and over, goes beyond anything we could have expected—certainly anything that we deserve. Samson's story is not all gloom and doom and despair. It





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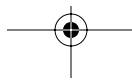
shows that we serve a gracious God who could and did use even a wild man such as Samson was. So in spite of all our shortcomings there is hope that God will reveal a positive role for you and me in the affairs of his kingdom.

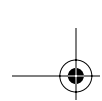
So let us take courage and learn from Samson's story the lessons it has for us. We must seek to get our lives—and keep our lives—in a shape that will glorify God. That's not easy. It means fighting our sins, disciplining our thoughts, changing our attitudes and critiquing our desires in a way that Samson did not try to do. But let's trust in the Lord who uses flawed human material for his glory, and by faith let's seek strength to serve God in good works and good attitudes that at this moment we feel are beyond us. Those who seek find; for Samson's God, who is our God, is a God of great patience and great grace. Thus there is great hope for us all. Praise his name.

*Holy Father, you know us, you have loved us and redeemed us through the blood-shedding of your Son, and exalted us to the glorious dignity of being your children and heirs. Keep us mindful of our privileged identity, and teach us to live lives that are Christlike in their maturity of faith and hope, their consistency in aiming to please you, and their humility in looking to you for the help we need at all times. Make us honest in recognizing our weaknesses of character and conduct, and in repenting of our sins. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. So may we follow your servant Samson in contending for the welfare of your people, and by your grace go beyond him in self-denial and purity of heart and life. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord. Amen.*

**Study**

1. Read the biblical account of Samson's life in Judges 14—16.





2. What evidences do you see of God's kindness in this description of Samson's life?

3. Review the ways that Samson used his enormous physical strength. What character weaknesses do these actions suggest?

4. What are some of your own areas of strength?

5. What cautions can you take so that your strength does not become a source of weakness?

6. What situations tempt you to use humor as a weapon?

7. Before Samson was born an angel spoke to his mother about her son (see Judg 13:3–5). How might the angel's words at that time have helped Samson's mother as she witnessed the events in his life?

8. Hebrews 11:32–34 speaks of Samson as one whose "weakness was turned to strength." In what ways did God use Samson—in spite of his flaws?

9. One of Samson's weaknesses was the way he misused his strength. What misuses of power seem especially tempting to Christians?

10. As you consider some of your own flaws, what warnings and what encouragement do you take from the Samson story?



### Pray

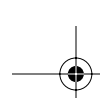
■ Spend several moments in quiet contemplation asking God to remind you of some of the strengths that he has given you. List several of these as a reminder of his kindness to you and of the responsibilities he has given you to use those strengths for his glory.

■ Even though it may be painful, ask God to reveal some of the flaws in your character. (It may be appropriate to kneel for this prayer communication.) One by one in prayer, turn these flaws over to God, asking his forgiveness. Ask also for his strength as you attempt to overcome your flaws.

■ Sometimes we can best overcome our weaknesses when we join with one or two others who will pray for us and regularly ask us how we are doing in these weak areas. Consider, in prayer, whether this may be true for you. If it seems appropriate, begin a search for partners in accountability.

■ God uses us "right now" in spite of our flaws. Thank God for this. Ask





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that he will point out to you this day how you can serve him.

**Write**

Prayerfully review the section in this chapter titled “On Being Weak and Being Strong” (pp. 33-35). Ask God to show you how it ought to impact who you are and what you do. Jot notes on your impressions. Then write a prayer of response to God.

