

Immediate Context

Chapter 15 and 16 end with the same fact: Samson judged Israel twenty years. Recall that Samson's judgeship was inaugurated by the Battle of Jawbone Hill, God humbling him through thirst, and Samson crying out to God for deliverance. Samson began his term humbled and leaning upon the Lord and will end his term in the same manner. However, at least some of that time between the glorious beginning and ending was not so glorious. Fundamentally, Samson has not changed and that failure to grow and learn from past lessons will cost him his life. Because of this failure, the climactic event of Chapters 14-15 (Samson's deliverance) and Chapter 16 (Samson's captivity) are the opposite. As commentator Dale Davis described it, "*Yahweh sustains a seeking Samson versus Yahweh abandons a self-sufficient Samson.*"¹

Judges 16:1-3 – The Gates of Gaza

Though just three verses, this passage is difficult to understand without the greater context of what lies ahead for Samson. Read *Judges 15:20-16:31* before proceeding with the questions and discussion below.

Gaza was the prominent Philistine city near the Mediterranean coast of Israel. Even today, the name "Gaza" remains in common usage in Israel (the Gaza strip). It was an important trade hub because of the roadways along the coast and was a fertile area for agriculture. It was the location of the temple of Dagon, a chief Philistine god.

What do we learn from the fact that Samson went to visit Gaza? *Despite the events of the previous chapters, apparently travel between Israel and the Philistine strongholds remained unrestricted. Samson traveled there of his own volition as an Israelite. We don't know why he went, but he apparently felt safe in doing so. We also see that he was not content in Israel and traveled outside of the land he judged for some purpose.*

What else do we learn about Samson from the first verse? *Samson is still attracted to Philistine women. He doesn't even seek a woman's hand in marriage now; he is content to go and pay for a visit to a prostitute. His moral corruption has increased. Though he was humbled, had seen God work through him and been blessed with a purpose and ministry, fundamentally Samson has not changed.*

What do we learn from the Gazite response to Samson's presence in Gaza? *Samson's shameful activities were exposed and they knew where he was and what he was doing. The fact that they set an ambush in Gaza and his previous exploits had been many miles north in Timnah and Ashkelon indicates that Samson had become a national pariah to the Philistines.*

As we read about Samson's miraculous feat in verse three, what is missing from this account compared to his prior exploits? What is different? See *Judges 14:6, 14:19, and 15:14*. *There is no mention of the*

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges, Such a Great Salvation*. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2000. Page 184.

Spirit of the Lord rushing upon Samson in this event. Although, there is no mention of it in Judges 15:4 and 15:8 either. What seems different here is that his strength seems more permanent than transient. What had come as a surprise to him earlier appears to now be commonplace.

Why would the Spirit of God empower Samson to save himself when he is committing a sinful act of fornication? To some small degree, Samson remained faithful to the Nazirite vow that was upon him from birth. He had never cut his hair. This was the requirement the Lord had laid upon him and his parents and the Lord was being faithful despite Samson's limited faithfulness.

Removing and carrying the Gaza gates to Hebron was a miraculous feat of strength and endurance. These city gates were large and heavy, intended to serve as protection from an invading army. They were probably ornate, as the city gates were a prominent place of business, government, and social activity. Why carry the Gaza gates to Hebron? Removing the gates of Gaza would be another blow to Philistine pride that would be noticed throughout the land. One man of Israel is able to remove the heart and protection of their beloved city. Also by carrying them to Hebron, a prominent Israelite city, his accomplishment would be known to the rest of Israel.

We must now pause to consider what is happening in the broader scope of the Samson narratives. We have four chapters devoted to Samson. This is more than ANY other judge of Israel. By comparison, Shamgar the third judge of Israel only receives one verse (see *Judges 3:31*) despite having achieved a similar supernatural victory. Samson is obviously not a consistent example of spirituality. Why is so much time spent on Samson? As commentator Michael Wilcock said, "... *when he is not saving Israel, he is being Israel, and that is most of the time.*"² **Samson's problem was Israel's problem... unbridled sinful desires, failing to take care of business, and continuing to fall for the same trap over and over.** By personalizing Israel's failures in one man, the Lord is helping us to see the bigger picture of where this nation is at as a whole.

One of the primary points of application from this chapter is the importance of spiritual growth in a Christian. An overarching lesson in Judges is that failing to learn and grow will have devastating and enduring effects. *Judges 2:1-3* makes this abundantly clear. The Lord told them what to do, gave them the resources and time to do it but they became complacent and their complacency killed them.

Samson was a man controlled by his sinful desires. He thought he was just having fun, that his sin wouldn't be known because he was far from home, and that it wouldn't negatively affect anyone else. He went to Gaza by his own choice looking for some fun. He didn't realize how this sin was affecting his heart and the condition that he was really in (see *Revelation 3:15-20*). Samson even took the gates of Gaza with him and thought he had control over the situation. But in one way, he never could leave Gaza behind. **This chapter begins with Samson taking a voluntary trip to Gaza and ends with an involuntary return to Gaza. However when he returns, he is blind and shackled, a physical representation of what was already spiritually true on his first visit.**

² Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Judges*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 1992. Page 146.

Sin will take you farther than you want to go and cost you more than you want to pay!

As evidenced from the passage we read in *Revelation 3:15-20*, this is not just an Old Testament Israel problem; it is a New Testament Christian danger too. Read *Romans 8:12-17* and discuss the hope Christians have through Christ.

How does Jesus suggest we “mortify” or “put to death” the deeds of the flesh? Read *Matthew 5:27-30*. **If your eye or your hand tempt you to sin, cut them off.** Jesus isn’t suggesting physical amputation but rather radical spiritual amputation. In real life, this looks like giving up things, activities, opportunities, and relationships that can tempt you to sin. We are all different and are often uniquely tempted. One who is tempted by pornography needs a heavily filtered and secure internet or they need to be off it altogether. One who is tempted to engage in promiscuous activities needs to limit their ability to be alone with the opposite sex. One who is tempted to “party” with a certain set of friends or by being in certain locations needs to stay away from those situations. Often, even after you are saved and delivered from a set of sins by God, the temptations will remain to some degree. That was Samson’s downfall. Though he was delivered by God time after time, he kept going back.

God allowed Samson to escape the Gazites who were lying in wait to kill him as he cavorted with a prostitute. **Don’t confuse God’s patience with His permission.** You will reap what you sow!

Judges 16:4-6 – The Offer

The first thing we learn about Samson and Delilah is that he loved her. Nothing we read in this passage will contradict that fact. She was a woman who lived in the Valley of Sorek and was almost certainly a Philistine. The meaning of her name is uncertain but it is possibly derived from the Arabic words, “to flirt” and “of the night,” which give an allusion to her role in Samson’s life story. **Samson’s problem was not that he loved, but who he loved.**

Delilah is offered 1,100 shekels of silver from each of the Philistine lords (see *Judges 3:3* – there were five of them). Compare this price (5,500 shekels of silver) to other biblical exchanges of money to get a sense of its magnitude. See *Genesis 23:3-4 & 15*; *2 Samuel 24:24*; and *Exodus 21:32*. **This is a MUCH larger sum of money than Abraham paid for a burial plot (400 shekels), David paid for the temple site (50 shekels), or the price of a slave that died (30 shekels).**

Why was such an outrageous price offered for Samson? **This was clearly of great national importance to the Philistines, who believed subduing Samson was necessary to maintaining their grip on Israel.** It also implies that Delilah may have had affection for Samson and it took a great price to buy her loyalty.

What does this offer teach us about Samson and the source of his strength? **Samson did not look strong.** If he looked like a power lifter or a Navy Seal they would not have been so much confusion about the source of his strength. **In this way, he was meant to be a testimony of God’s power to both the Philistines and the Israelites (2 Corinthians 12:9).**

What does this offer teach us about the Philistines and the progress they had made in handling their Samson problem? They had given up on overpowering him. However, they had identified his moral weakness and were willing to bet that it was the way to found out how to make him physically weak. They noticed a pattern of opportunity from their past failures. **Satan probably cannot read your mind but he will observe your behavior and he knows where your weakness lies.**

The demand of the Philistine judges was for Delilah to seduce him, discover the source of his strength, determine how to subdue him, ensnare him, and shame him. They never said they would kill him (and they never tried to) but they would make him desire death. Perhaps this was how Delilah rationalized her decision because the next thing we know she is directly asking him where his strength lies and how he could be bound and subdued.

Judges 16:7-14 – Playing with Fire

The first three times Delilah questions Samson he lies to her. Why did Samson lie? Samson has been deceived by a woman he loved before and may be a bit gun-shy. He probably also knows that by setting his affections on a non-Israelite woman, he is putting his life in the hands of one who will not share his devotion to the Lord. Samson's strength was the source of his greatness. It was likely his strength that even made this relationship with Delilah possible. Revealing the source of his strength to anyone was dangerous.

What is the significance of the seven fresh (undried) bowstrings? Bowstrings were typically made of animal parts. Fresh and undried bowstrings were considered unclean (parts of a corpse) and forbidden for a Nazirite to touch. At this point, Samson doesn't know that she is going to actually acquire those bowstrings and tie him up.

What is the significance of the unused new ropes? This was the same method the Judahites used to bind Samson and it had no effect on him (see *Judges 15:13*).

What is the significance of weaving his hair into a loom? It was an odd idea and hard to discern where this came from. However he is now including his hair in his lie, which we recognize as the last vestige of his Nazirite vow. He has begun to play with fire.

Judges 16:15-22 – Getting Burned

Having been deceived by Samson three times, Delilah ups the ante by questioning his professed love for her and pressing the issue relentlessly. The one thing that was sincere about Samson was his love for Delilah (even though misplaced).

What is the irony of Delilah's accusation that Samson does not truly love her? Delilah does not truly love him. Delilah is an excellent illustration of the "forbidden woman" David warns of in Proverbs 5. She isn't one of a kind and she isn't always a woman. Her lips drip honey but in the end she is bitter as wormwood. **A commitment to honor God no matter what would have saved Samson a lot of pain.**

What do we learn about Samson and Delilah from the way he explains the source of his strength to her? Samson knew his strength was from the Lord and he maintained this part of his vow. Samson explained it to Delilah as being a “Nazirite to God.” This is significant language. He doesn’t say “the Lord” (Jehovah), the personal name of Israel’s God. He referred to “God,” (Elohim) which was used as a generic term for a deity. Delilah doesn’t know the Lord and Samson refers to Him as “a god” to Delilah. Samson’s love for Delilah did not include trying to tell her about the Lord.

What is particularly remarkable about Samson finally telling Delilah the source of his strength? **Three times she had pressed him and then actually tried to bind him. Each time he escaped. Why would he believe that she wouldn’t cut his hair while he slept? Samson’s spiritual blindness has fallen to a new level of darkness. His love for Delilah was greater than any reverence for the Lord or his ministry.**

How did Samson sleep through this haircut? He has slept through being bound by bowstrings, ropes, and having his hair woven in a loom. Having his head “shaved” by a man while sleeping is another level of slumber. It wouldn’t be a stretch to state that God allowed this deep sleep to fall on Samson because of his continued sin. **Spiritual slumber is a great danger (see Romans 13:11).**

What was Samson’s presumption upon waking? He had become accustomed to being delivered by the Lord from every mess that he put himself into. However, God would not allow Himself to be consistently dishonored by Samson. Samson couldn’t even sense the lack of God’s presence. **There is nothing worse than being abandoned/given over by God.**

Samson’s plight is a perfect illustration of Galatians 6:7, “*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*” **The man who loved his eyes and his freedom to roam above all else was now blind and bound.**

What is the significant about the statement that “the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.”? **Samson’s strength was never in his hair, it was from the Lord. This verse implies that the Lord was working on Samson’s heart to humble him and restore him during this time of blindness and bondage. His connection to the Lord was being restored.**

Judges 16:23-27 – The Great Abomination

What was the result of Samson’s folly? **Dagon was glorified and worshipped for giving the Philistines victory over Samson. Commentator Dale Davis rightly observes, “We know it was the absence of Yahweh, not the power of Dagon, that accounts for Samson’s shame.”³ Of all the misdeeds of Samson, this one causes the greatest harm. God’s plan for Israel was not to exalt a nation but to make His name great upon the earth, to draw men to Himself. Samson (and Israel) had failed horribly. **Christian, you bear the name of Christ. Hold His banner high in your life and don’t drag it through the mud.****

³ Davis, Dale Ralph. Judges, Such a Great Salvation. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2000. Page 188

The heathen sang a song (verse 24) about their capture of Samson, which is poetic retribution against a man who mocked them with riddle and poetry about his victories.

Judges 16:28-31 – Saving the Best for Last

Fortunately, Samson's life (and this narrative) doesn't end on this travesty. God is zealous for His name. He would not allow Samson to continue to mock his calling, but neither would He leave one of His men behind. He would also not allow the Philistines to continue in their delusional worship to Dagon. This is another beautiful picture of how God's love for His own and the zeal for His name are intertwined. Whatever your circumstances and your story, through Christ, your life can be redeemed. **He is the original "re-purposer" of what is considered old, worn, and worthless to the rest of this world (see Matthew 12:20).**

Samson's judgeship began after he called upon the Lord at Jawbone Hill to quench his thirst. His time as a judge will also end with a cry to God for help to destroy the house within which the Philistines worshiped Dagon and mocked God's man. What was the motivation for Samson's cry? **He wanted vengeance for his eyes. He was obviously upset over his situation and his anger was directed towards the Philistines. No doubt, some self-reflection had occurred and he realized his errors as well. He wanted vengeance, but he knew he would need God's help to perform an act of physical strength surpassing anything he had ever done.**

Did Samson commit suicide? **No, I don't believe this was suicide. Samson's motives were at least tinged by selfishness (which is consistent with suicide). However, he wasn't walking out in front of a bus or jumping off a building. There was NO WAY he could knock over those pillars without God's help. Samson couldn't take his own life. He was asking God for strength to destroy the building and if God would allow, he would like to die as well. This was a request; not a demand. God could have easily spared him and had him burst forth from the debris. This would be no more miraculous than any of Samson's past miracles or the new miracle God would perform. Samson wanted to die, but his death was not in his hands but the Lord's. This was not suicide in the traditional (sinful) sense.**

Samson was a wordsmith par excellence. In my opinion, Samson's greatest prose was not the riddle he crafted at his wedding, the sarcastic comment he made about his wife, or the poem he wrote after the Battle of Jawbone Hill. His last words are the most beautiful and meaningful, *"Let me die with the Philistines."* Though tainted by a desire for vengeance and sorrow over the loss of his sight, they foreshadow the love of Jesus Christ, who would offer Himself for the sins of the world.

In John 12:24 Jesus says, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."*