

Title: The Tragedy of Potential Without Principle  
Date: July 13-14, 2019

Texts: Judges 13-16  
Curtis Froisland

### **The Tragedy of Potential without Principle**

**[Fallen Condition Focus: Compromise with the World will cause us to waste our Calling]  
[Proposition: Compromise with the World will cause us to waste our calling, therefore we must remain faithful to God.]**

Len Bias was Lebron James before Lebron James. Back to back ACC Basketball player of the year while at Maryland. He could have been the model for the modern NBA forward—intimidating and graceful, a scoring threat inside and out. He was drafted number 2 overall in the 1986 NBA draft, declaring his “Dreams had come true.” Just two days later, he was dead of a cocaine overdose.

Tragedies like these confront and confound us, how can the lives of those who seem called to the greatness end in painful carnage. Sometimes the stories are much closer to home a friend or family member who had so much potential, but was sucked into or overcome by addiction or a toxic relationship or violence. You have probably felt or uttered those three terrible words of resignation and sorrow, “What a waste.” This is a universal problem, even in Ancient Israel there was Samson, so full of not just potential but of real power, and yet he meets a tragic end. Samson vividly illustrates how potential without principle leads to pain. And the story of Samson teaches us is that:

### **Compromise with the World will cause us to waste our Calling.**

Perhaps, because of your background you find it hard to think of Samson as a tragic rather than heroic figure. But when you read the book of Judges what you find, as Larry and Alex both pointed out, is a downward spiral in which Israel and the Judges go from good to bad to worse. Samson is the final judge in the spiral.

#### **I. Samson’s compromise leads him to a tragic end.**

No doubt

***A. Samson has the beginning and calling of a hero.***

In 13:2-3 it says that his mother was barren, and an Angel of the LORD appeared to her and promised her a child. This is a sign of God’s favor, and we would assume a good omen.

The woman learns that child was to be a Nazirite to God. Samson was to be set apart to God for a special purpose, namely v. 5 “he shall *begin* to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”

His “set-apart-ness” was symbolized by the restrictions: no alcohol, no contact with dead bodies (which were unclean), and no cutting the hair. These restrictions were ongoing reminders of the calling to be accomplished and how seriously he should take it.

So, Samson was the product of a miraculous birth, he was given a calling, a mission from God, and he was to be devoted to God in his manner of life. We read with hope 13:24-25:

*24 And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the Lord blessed him. 25 And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.*

But as the story goes on, we learn

***B. Samson's passions and pride lead to compromise with the world.***

The story of Samson after his birth unfolds in a series of two episodes. All the action revolves around Samson's desire for three Philistine women.

*1. The first woman.*

First, we learn that he wants to marry a Philistine woman in Timnah—intermarriage was forbidden by God not for ethnic reasons but religious ones. Intermarriage almost always leads to Israel being seduced away from their faith in the LORD to the worship of false gods. But Samson is willing to make the compromise, because she seems “right” to him.

God does not endorse Samson's desire to intermarry—in fact, in the end, Samson doesn't actually marry the woman—but God does use that desire to initiate the conflict between Samson and the Philistines. Through many twists and turns Samson is provoked against the Philistines, destroys their crops, and kills 1000 of them. But, along the way we see Samson break the law of God, and two of his Nazirite vows as he eats honey from the carcass of a lion (unclean) and the feast he prepared was really like a seven day tailgate leading up to the wedding. The Spirit of the LORD delivers Samson, but the arrogance of Samson already swells. One commentator sums up this first section:

Samson is disrespectful of his parents, callous toward his Nazirite calling, without any loyalty to his own people, compromising in his ethic, rude to his wife, flippant with his tongue, and driven by lust, eroticism, and appetite. The only way in which good can come from this man is by Yahweh overpowering him with his Spirit and driving him to the task of delivering his people, something he is not naturally inclined to do.<sup>1</sup>

Application/Apologetics:

This passage is a great example of how important it is to read the Bible for what it actually says not what we want it to say. Both Christians and non-Christians fall into this. For Christians, one tendency perhaps is to turn every important person in the Bible into a hero—even if all the signs point the other direction. Another tendency would be the sort of pearl clutching reaction to movies and books that include cursing, sex, and violence. I'm not saying all things are beneficial—but I am saying the Breaking Bad and Game of Thrones ain't got nothing on the second half of the book of Judges.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The New American Commentary: Volume 6 - Judges-Ruth*, (B&H Publishing), pp. 437-438, Kindle Edition.

That's important because that attitude often betrays a heart that readily sees the sin of others in these external behaviors—but doesn't recognize the sinful attitudes of our own hearts. We are all broken and sinful and need the forgiveness Jesus purchased in the cross.

Non-Christians have to watch out too—because as you see the Bible describing what God's people did, you might think that means Christianity promotes violence or sexism. But just because something is described in the Bible doesn't mean it is endorsed by God. The Bible is incredibly forthright about the effects of sin and the havoc it wreaks.

### 2. *The second woman.*

The second episode begins in the Philistine town of Gaza as Samson goes to see another woman, a prostitute. While there the Gazites set an ambush for him. He escapes their ambush and uses his superhuman strength to carry off the gate of the city leaving Gaza exposed and vulnerable. In this feat of strength there is no mention of the Spirit of the LORD, and we clearly see that Samson's mind is not on the calling to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Rather, libido and pride are what guides Samson's life.

### 3. *The third woman.*

When we meet the third woman, Delilah, in the rest of chapter 16, we see Samson's descent is nearly complete. He has gone from a Philistine woman who only betrayed him out of fear, to a prostitute, to a woman who plays the lover but plots his destruction for silver. It takes her four tries, with Samson outwitting her and overpowering his Philistine attackers the first three times, but finally he succumbs to her pleading and he tells her the secret of his strength as he sees it, that he has never cut his hair. Throughout the story he has not taken any of his Nazirite vows seriously, and now he breaks the last vow. His whole life Samson has made his bed in Philistia, and now he is going to lie in it. Delilah shaves Samson's head as he sleeps and the narrator delivers the knock out blow to the reader in Judges 16:20:

*20 And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.*

The passions and pride of Samson led him into a life of compromise, repeatedly forsaking the Nazirite vow and presuming on the LORD, never taking seriously his calling, forsaking the LORD. And now, the LORD had left him.

### Application/Illustration:

Are you ever tempted to follow your passions and act on your pride, to ignore God's word and just go on what seems right to you? What led to Samson's compromise and ultimately his failure? He did not take to heart the word of God concerning his calling. He did not see his power was supposed to serve the purpose God gave him. I believe a lot of our disappointment in life is rooted our tendency to ignore God's word concerning our calling.

What does God's word say is the calling of marriage? We want it to be about personal happiness and fulfillment, my own personal happily ever after. But God said it is to be a living picture of the sacrificial love of Jesus who died on the cross to cleanse his bride the church, of two people growing in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does God's word say is the calling for every human being? We think it is for our name to be famous, to receive the praise of men, to enjoying life as much as you can. The Lord Jesus said it is to love God with all you are, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Parenting, Work, Sex, Music, the body, the mind, sickness, sorrow, anything you can think of—you need to ask the question “What does God's word call me to?” And if the answer comes back—it's about you, your passions and pride—be warned by the story of Samson.

### ***C. Samson's compromise leads him to a tragic end.***

The Philistines captured Samson and gouged out his eyes—an ironic punishment for one who lived his whole life by seeing what he wanted and taking it. He is carried back to Gaza to work a mill in prison, and he becomes a trophy of the Philistines and their god Dagon.

Judges 16:23-27 tell us that the leaders of the Philistines and many of the people of Gaza gathered to celebrate the victory of Dagon over Samson. They offered sacrifices, chanting and singing the praise of Dagon. Finally they call out for Samson, that he might “entertain them.”

Samson cries out to the LORD for help, and kills more Philistines in his death than in his life. It is here where some folks see in Samson the heroic ending—vindication in the last scene of his life. Perhaps we may say that at this stage at least he has enough faith (however feeble and misshapen it may be) to call out to the LORD.

But it is clear the narrator wants us to view Samson negatively, as ultimately someone who wasted his potential and calling. For, even in Samson's final prayer he is not concerned for the glory of God or the safety of Israel. No, Samson thinks only of vengeance, of his pride. In Hebrew the prayer is 18 words, 5 times he uses the first person pronoun. It's all about “me.” He explicitly asks God's help to be v. 28 “avenged for my two eyes,” and his last words (v. 30), “Let me die among the Philistines,” are fulfilled. He dies where he lived, among the Philistines.

Illustration:

In his book, *North! or Be Eaten*, Andrew Peterson tells the story of a boy who has been carried off to a factory where children are used as forced labor to make weapons for the evil army that oppresses them. Desperate to escape and find his family, the boy hatches a plan, but the longer he stays in the factory, the more he begins to waiver. The Overseer offers him a bed that isn't so lumpy, some bread to go with his gruel, and a job using his wits to keep the other children in check instead of trying to escape. Maybe he should stay a bit longer in the factory to recover from his beatings, to get his strength back, to perhaps find a better way out...

The longer you compromise, the longer you make your bed in Philistia, the more you are in danger of a tragic ending like Samson’s.

But it isn’t just tragic because Samson died the way he did—he it’s tragic because he didn’t become what he could have been.

***D. Samson’s death leaves us wondering, “What might have been?”***

At the very end of our passage, the narrator tells us in v. 31:

*31 Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had judged Israel twenty years.*

Something is conspicuously absent from the final statement of Samson’s judgeship. The stories of all the other major judges in the book: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah/Barak, and Gideon, end with the statement “So the land had rest for forty years” (or eighty after Ehud). But the story of Samson (and Jephthah too) ends with silence. Samson was a failure, he did not deliver his people, or bring rest to the land. His character was so compromised, not only did he die tragically, but he did not achieve his calling.

But Samson isn’t just an example of what not to do—to the author of Judges, there is a sense in which

**II. The story of Samson is the story of Israel**

***A. The story of Samson warns against the failure of the church’s calling.***

Think with me for a moment and compare the story of Samson with the story of God’s people Israel as we’ve covered it so far in this sermon series:

Samson’s mother was barren	Sarah, the wife of Abraham—Israel’s forefather, was barren
Samson’s birth foretold by the Angel of the LORD	The birth of Isaac was foretold by the Angel of the LORD
Samson set apart and given a strict way of life	Israel set apart and given the Law
Samson given the calling to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines	Israel called to be a kingdom of priests, and holy nation

But there are other connections from within the book of Judges as well:

Samson desires intermarriage	The first sin of Israel in the book of Judges is intermarriage which led to idolatry (3:6)
Samson wants the woman of Timnah “because she is ‘right’ in my eyes”	Everyone in Israel does whatever is right in his own eyes (Judges 17-21)
Samson cries out for deliverance from the Philistines	Israel cries out from her oppressors repeatedly

It seems to me the author of Judges is being deliberate about helping us see that Samson is indistinguishable from any other Israelite and from the community as a whole. Virtually all have forsaken the LORD, they have forgotten their calling to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We could sum it up like this:

The book of Joshua is the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan—the book of Judges is the story of Canaan's conquest of Israel.

The danger Samson's story warns us against is not just of individuals compromising the word of God and missing out on their individual calling—but also a larger danger with wider ramifications. If the people of God compromise with the world and fail in their calling, then God's Kingdom justice and peace won't be known in the world, the power to love our neighbor (including our enemy) will disappear, people will perish without hearing the preaching of the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through Jesus's life death and resurrection, and Jesus's Great Commission will be left undone.

And if the church compromises on that, the LORD will remove their lampstand and leave them as he left Samson.

But here's where I think Samson can really challenge us,

***B. The story of Samson shows that what we need to fulfill our calling is not more power/capacity but more principle/character.***

In other words, when God calls you to do something, your character matters more than your capacity. Samson was the strongest man in the world—his failure had nothing to do with his strength, and everything to do with his lack of faith and repentance.

Our natural way of thinking believes that so many of our problems might be solved by more power, more ability, more freedom—but this passage challenges us to face the tragedy, and see that so often the disappointments and disaster we face are rooted not in a lack of capacity but underdeveloped character.

Like Samson the church can be easily compromised because we most often think of what we desire, what looks “right” to us, and not on the calling God has put on our lives. We look with the eyes of the flesh and think that more power, more money, more freedom will accomplish the mission—but really what we need is more character, more Christ-likeness, and trust in God's word..

Samson is a vivid case of what happens when you have power without principle, and he is therefore a warning to each of us to seek after growth in principle over growth in power.

How would your life change if you began to see every situation that you face not through the lens of power, passion, or pride—but through the lens of God using this situation to mold you to be more like Christ?

## **Conclusion:**

That leaves us wondering, if Samson failed, and Israel failed, how could we ever do it? The author of Judges tells us in the final chapters of the book.

When Samson saw the first woman, he said she was “right” in his eyes. And the narrator used the same phrase to describe the failure of Israel in chapters 17-21. But in his diagnosis he also gives us the cure: Judges 21:25

*In those days there was no king in Israel.  
Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

The answer to the failure of Samson, the failure of Israel, our failures, is that we need a King.

Many years after Samson there was a King whose birth was foretold by an angel. He was given a calling to deliver his people. He did not compromise with the world, but perfectly obeyed his Father in heaven. He laid his life down—not out of vengeance, but out of love. He bore the crushing weight of our sin and God’s wrath on the cross, and by the power of his indestructible life was raised again and delivered us from our enemies.

Jesus Christ is King we need, and he offers himself to anyone who would repent of their sins and receive him by faith. And in relationship with him as we repent of our passions and pride, he transforms our character, and enables us to fulfill our calling. Amen