

The Secret of Strength

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 16:1-31

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The Challenger

As a staff, we've been studying personality types, in an effort to get to know ourselves better, as well as those on our team and in the congregation. But ultimately, we've been studying personality types to get to know God better. Augustine once prayed, "Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee." Calvin said something similar. He said we can't know God fully until we come to know ourselves.

The first personality type that we've learned about is called the challenger. To prepare you for my sermon this morning, I want to describe this personality type in some detail. As I describe the challenger, ask yourself if you know anyone like this.

Challengers are aggressive. They don't do anything halfway. They make decisions fast, from the gut. They welcome opposition. In fact, they like fighting just to see what others are made of. Their motto is "a good offense is better than a good defense." They never beat around the bush. When they walk into a room, energy permeates from them. They know they're respected, but they also want to be loved. Under their tough exterior is a tender heart.

When they're healthy, challengers are great friends. They're exceptional leaders. And champions of those who can't fight for themselves. They have courage and stamina to do what others can't. They know how to use their strength in the right measure and at the right time. And they understand vulnerability, and can even exercise it sometimes.

But when they're unhealthy, challengers are preoccupied with the idea that they're going to be betrayed. So they're slow to trust others. And resort to revenge when they're wronged. They believe they can change reality, and so they make their own rules. They approach life the way the Goths approached Rome—they sack it! They can destroy as much as they create. They often believe that the world is a place where people are objects to be used.

The sin they struggle with most is lust. But not just a sexual lust. They mainly struggle with a lust for intensity. They're high voltage human dynamos who want to be where the action is. They're full-throttle people who drink life down to the dregs and then slam down their glass and order another round for everybody.

Great men like Martin Luther King Jr. were challengers. But so was Joseph Stalin. They have great potential to do good, when they're healthy. But also have potential for destruction, when they're not.¹

Why do I share this particular personality type? I believe that Samson is a prime example of a challenger. And I think a basic knowledge of challengers will help you to understand Samson.

¹ All of this description of challengers comes from Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile. Cron, Ian Morgan, and Suzanne Stabile. *The Road Back to You*. Downer's Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2016.

The reason it was easy for me to identify Samson as a challenger is because I too am a challenger. Our study in Judges has been very sobering for me. It has revealed my own unique propensities toward sin. And it scares me at times. But it also encourages me as I meditate on the fact that God uses people like Samson through his sovereign grace. Samson makes me want to fall on my knees before my gracious God and ask him to use me for good and to help me avoid the pitfalls of Samson.

Samson had great potential to be a great leader and to help those who couldn't help themselves. But his life was a steady stream of disappointments, because he was an unhealthy challenger. His life serves as a mirror for us. It gives us an opportunity to look into our own hearts, regardless of our personality type. And it gives us an opportunity to ask God to be merciful to us, to transform us, and to use us in spite of our weaknesses.

Please turn in your Bibles to Judges 16. We're not going to read through the passage this morning. But as we walk through this passage, listen for Samson's unhealthy challenger qualities.

The title of my sermon this morning is "The Secret of Strength." Samson's certainly strong, both in his personality and physically. But he's morally weak. What I want to do this morning is simply answer three questions.

1. What makes Samson so strong?
2. What makes Samson so weak?
3. How does God save through Samson's strength and weakness?

SAMSON'S STRENGTH

Let's begin by answering the question "What makes Samson so strong?" The answer is God's presence gives us strength.

The Philistines are fed up with Samson's strength. It's causing them all kinds of problems. And so, when Samson falls in love with Delilah (v. 4), they go to her and bribe her. In verse 5 they say to her, "Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver."² They want to know the secret of Samson's strength so badly that they're willing to pay her the equivalent of millions of dollars to find out.³

Exploiting Weakness

And Delilah is perfectly willing to give it her best shot. And her methods exploit the weakness of unhealthy challengers. She exploits his lust for sex and danger. Samson has already shown a weakness for women. In verse 1, he saw a prostitute in Gaza and went and had his way with her. This isn't the first time he's been driven by lust for sex. And the Philistines know this and so use Delilah to capitalize on this weakness.

But Delilah also capitalizes on his lust for intensity or danger. Samson obviously thinks he's invincible. Otherwise he wouldn't have walked into a city that was full of his enemies just to sleep with a prostitute. And he certainly wouldn't have engaged in the dangerous game Delilah is playing with him.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³ Younger, K. Lawson. *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002.

Delilah asks him four times what the secret of his strength is. Three times, he lies to her, because he struggles to trust her. It doesn't make sense to us why Samson is playing with fire. But remember he has a lust for danger. But that's not Samson's only weakness.

When she pushes him the fourth time, she really gets at his weakness. In verse 15, she says, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" Samson wants to flaunt his strength, but he also wants to be loved. And so he finally tells her more of the true story. In verse 17, he tells her that if his hair is shaved, then his strength will leave him, and he'll become like any other man.

The Secret of Strength

So let's return to our original question. What makes Samson so strong? What's the secret of his strength? The Philistines think that his strength is bound up in some kind of magic. They believe it's like a good luck charm.⁴ This comes out in his first three answers, in verses 7-13. He says that if he's bound with seven fresh bowstrings then he'll become like any other man (v. 7). He says that if he's bound with new ropes then he'll be like any other man (v. 11). Then he says that if his hair is tied up in a loom he'll become weak like other men (v. 13).

All of Samson's answers are lies. So why does he use them? Apparently these three things were associated with pagan magic.⁵ And that's why the Philistines and Delilah believe him. Magic power is something that can be manipulated. Tim Keller says it's like a love potion. "If a love potion requires three pinches of ground newt's eye, then two pinches won't do. But when you get it 'right,' the magic just happens."

But friends, God's power is not something that can be magically manipulated. The Philistines didn't understand the secret of Samson's strength. But neither did Samson. He thinks his strength is merely physical; it's something innate in him. That's why, in verse 20, when his hair was shaved, he thought he would go out as at other times and still be strong.

God's strength, however, is not bound up in mechanical rules or manipulation. And it's not something that we simply have on our own. God's strength depends on God's grace. More specifically, it depends on God's presence. Verse 20 tells us explicitly that Samson's strength left him when the LORD left him (cf. v. 19). That's the secret of Samson's strength. The same is true for us. Jesus told the apostles in Acts 1:8 that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." Jesus told the apostles in Matthew 28:20 that he would "be with them to the end of the age." This means that our strength comes from God's presence.

In verse 17, we learn that Samson was a Nazirite to the LORD. The whole point of Samson's Nazirite vow was that he was supposed to be set apart for God. And being set apart for God should indicate that Samson was in relationship with God.⁶ For Samson his set apart status was signified by not cutting his hair. His long hair indicated that he was in relationship with God. And that relationship is where God's power and strength came from. The external sign of long hair was meant to point to an internal reality—a life of relational devotion to God.⁷ When his hair was cut, that was a sign that the relationship was severed. And when the relationship was severed, God's Spirit, and thus God's strength left him. For us, the sign of our relationship with God is seen in

⁴ Jackman, David. *Judges, Ruth*. Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1993.

⁵ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

⁶ Keller

⁷ Jackman

baptism. It too is meant to be an external sign of an internal reality. Our baptism shows that we're in relationship with God.

So often, we're prone to think that our strength and abilities reside squarely with us, with our effort, or our innate abilities. Or we can come to think that our strength comes from following the rules. If you just whip up the right religious recipe, then voila, presto, the right things will happen. Just read a verse a day to keep the devil away. Just pray more to be healed. Just go to church and God will bless you. This type of thinking is mechanical, not relational. It's an attempt to manipulate God with modern day magic.⁸

But the secret of our strength is our relationship with the triune God. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).⁹

Sure, we're called to cultivate our relationship with God through the Word and prayer, and corporate worship. But these things aren't magical. They're meant to be relational—to flow out of the relationship we have with God in Christ. And our relationship with God is the secret of our strength.

SAMSON'S WEAKNESS

Let's now turn to our second question. Why was Samson so weak? A lack of God's presence makes us weak.

Disregarding Rules and Relationship

It's ironic. Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, physically speaking. But he was a moral weakling.¹⁰ In the end, his lust for women and danger proved more powerful than his physical strength.

Samson was supposed to live his life in a set-apart relationship with God. One way people would know that he was set apart for a special relationship with God was through fulfilling his Nazarite vow. In Numbers 6, we learn that this involved three things. Samson should have no contact with dead bodies or dead animals. He should not drink alcohol. And he should never cut his hair.

But Samson disregarded these three things. He made his own rules. Early on in his life, he disregarded his call to stay away from dead bodies. He strangled a lion and then went back to eat honey out of the carcass (14:8-9). He also disregarded his call to stay away from alcohol. At his wedding, he throws a seven day party (14:10). This certainly was full of alcohol.¹¹ It was an all-out kegger. Samson was on a seven day bender.

Why did Samson disregard his Nazirite vow? Because he disregarded his relationship with God. He was not satisfied with God's love and with God's presence. So he ran after the love of women and danger. And these things ensnared him. He became a sex addict and a first rate narcissist. And like all addiction, the cycle increased throughout his life, more sex, more danger.¹² John Piper has said

⁸ Cf. Jackman

⁹ Jackman

¹⁰ Jackman

¹¹ Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. New international commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

¹² Keller

that sin is what we do when our hearts are not satisfied with God. That's what Samson's life was marked by.

Sharing His Heart

Then at the end of his life, he takes the final step of walking out of relationship with God. He engages in a reckless game that leads to him breaking the third part of his Nazirite vow—his hair is cut.

In verse 15, when Delilah asks him a fourth time what the secret of his strength is, the whole narrative slows down. And now, we're told that Samson shares his heart with Delilah. We learned earlier that challengers understand vulnerability and can even be vulnerable at times. Samson's being vulnerable here. But his vulnerability reveals that he doesn't want to be in relationship with God. When he shares from his heart of hearts, this is what he says in verse 17; "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man."

Being like every other man

Samson never chose to be a Nazirite. It was put on him by God before he was even born. And Samson has never really wanted what God wanted for him. All of Samson's life has pointed to the fact that he didn't want to be set apart for God, and from the world. He wanted to be just like the world. That's why he's wine and dined with Philistines and shackled up with them.

When he shares his heart with Delilah, it's as if he's saying, "I don't want to be a Nazirite anymore! Being set apart has brought me nothing but misery. I want to be free. I want to be like every other man. Just cut my hair!"¹³

This is like Ariel in the Little Mermaid. Maybe you saw the show this weekend too. She doesn't want to be a mermaid. She sings:

*I wanna be where the people are
I wanna see, wanna see them dancin'
Walkin' around on those—what do you call 'em?
Oh—feet!
Flippin' your fins, you don't get too far
Legs are required for jumping, dancing...
Up where they walk, up where they run
Up where they stay all day in the sun
Wanderin' free—wish I could be
Part of that world.*

She's wants to be done with her fins. And she's willing to trade in her immortality for a pair of legs. She's ready to stand. She wants to be a part of the world.

That's what Samson wants. He's willing to sacrifice his relationship with God, to be a part of the world.

¹³ Webb, Barry G. *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015.

Now that doesn't mean that he wants to be weak physically. But he does want what every other *worldly* man wants, regardless of personality. He wants sex, love, and freedom—he wants to be “wanderin’ free” from the confines of authority and the confines of his upbringing.¹⁴

But his desire for these things makes him weak spiritually. And his desire to be like the world means that he doesn't value his relationship with God. And without God's presence, we are weak.

As we saw last week, Samson is a placeholder for Israel. He represents them in his sin. They were also called to be holy and set apart for the LORD, and from the world. But instead they wanted to be just like the Canaanites. Samson slept with Philistine women. Israel committed adultery with Canaanite idols.

In the same way, Samson is a mirror for the church. The church is also called to be holy, set apart for God, and from the world (cf. 1 Pt. 2:9). But too often, we're also tempted to assimilate with the world, to blend in. What about you? Do you love God? Is your set-apart relationship with Christ enough? Or do you look for satisfaction in the things of the world?

GOD'S SALVATION

God will have none of this for us. And he wouldn't have it for Israel. And he wouldn't have it for Samson either.

Even though Samson's heart was to be like all other men. And even though he did become like them for a time when his hair was cut, we're told in verse 22, that “the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.” The author wants us to know that even though Samson's down, he's not quite out.¹⁵ Samson still has a role to play.

It reminds me of all of the pro wrestling I watched as a child. I remember when the Macho Man Randy Savage knocked Hulk Hogan down. And the Macho Man started gloating and celebrating. But then the Hulk's hand starts to shake. Then he gets up on a knee. Then while the Macho Man is still gloating, Hogan climbs up on the top turnbuckle and jumps on top of him with an elbow to the face and pins him.

The Philistines start to gloat over Samson in verse 23. They start rejoicing because they believe their god, Dagon, had saved them from Samson. But God's not done with Samson. He's going to use Samson to begin to save Israel. Samson certainly serves as a mirror for us to look into. He points to our sin. But he also points to God's means of saving us from our sin.

So let's now turn to our last question. How does God save? Here's the answer. Through the death of our Savior, God defeats sin and Satan.

Even though Samson had wasted his potential and been such a disappointment, God used him to save his people. In verse 21, we're told that the Philistines gouge out his eyes and relegate him to forced labor. Then in verse 25, they bring him out to mock him; they bring him out to entertain them. He had truly been humbled (cf. v. 5). And for the first time in this scene we see his humility.

¹⁴ Webb, *Judges and Ruth*

¹⁵ Jackman

In verse 28, Samson cries out to God to strengthen him once more. Now, his prayer is a prayer for revenge.¹⁶ But at least it acknowledges that his strength only comes from God. It *is* a prayer of faith.

And God answers him. God strengthens him. In verses 29-30, Samson pushes on the center pillars on the temple of Dagon and the roof comes down and kills 3000 Philistines (cf. v. 27). It also kills Samson in the process. And so we're told in verse 30 that "the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life."

Samson sin led him into slavery. But God was using all of that to bring about salvation for his people. As we saw last week, God works *through* sin to bring salvation to his people. This pattern of salvation is seen most clearly in Jesus. Samson points to our sin. But he also points to Jesus. There are many similarities between Samson's life and Jesus.

Both of their births were announced by angels. And were born to bring salvation. Both were betrayed by someone who acted as a friend. Both were handed over to the Gentile oppressors. Both were tortured and chained, and put on public display to be mocked. Both were completely struck down by their enemies, but through their death they destroyed their enemies. Samson defeated the Philistines and Dagon. Jesus defeated sin and Satan.¹⁷

Samson is no Jesus. But he points to Jesus. On the cross, Jesus brought the power of Satan to nothing (Col. 2:15). The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus destroyed the one who has power the power of death, that is, the devil. And he delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

If we want to be saved from our bondage to sin and Satan, we have to look to the cross of Christ in faith. That's how we come into relationship with God. And if we're in a relationship with God, we're now called, as our baptism represents, to die to sin, and the world, and the devil, and to live set apart lives, with our hearts fixed on the resurrected Christ.

So Samson points to the sin in our hearts. He provides us for an opportunity to repent. But he also points to the Savior of our sin. He provides us with an opportunity to believe. And that's how we should respond today.

¹⁶ Younger

¹⁷ Most commentators make these same observations, but these come directly from Tim Keller.