

The Spiritual Drift of Samson
Judges 16
Bellevue Baptist Church
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Please open your Bible with me to Judges 16. Today marks week four of our study in the book of Judges. We'll be studying the life and downfall of Samson. I was planning to hop into 1 Samuel next week, but the following comment came in on the comments section on our Behind the Scenes podcast:

PLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEASE pray about doing a sermon on Deborah! We can't talk about Judges without talking about Deborah!

I thought this listener raised a good point that the only female judge in the book deserves a look, so I'll finish up Judges next Sunday and then we'll move into 1 Samuel.

So, today we look at chapter 16 and one of this famous man by the name of Samson.

As a boy, this guy fascinated me. I saw in my head, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, but with long hair. And I always wanted to have a body like that. Hasn't happened for me personally. I've never slipped on a tanktop and said, "Now, that looks nice."

Samson was not slender. Scripture says he was very strong, but his story isn't so much about his physical strength but his spiritual weakness. Samson is living proof that Proverbs 3:5-6 is true:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight. Prov. 3:5-6

There's a warning in there, did you catch it? When you insist on doing life your way, pain will result. Samson is one of the Bible's clearest examples of someone who began with extraordinary promise but his life slowly unraveled because he stopped seeking the Lord and started down his own way.

Before we jump into chapter 16, let me give you a few quick facts about this remarkable man.

The Backstory of Samson

- Set aside at birth (chosen from birth, like John the Baptist) for a special role.
- The Spirit of the Lord stirs him in his youth.
- By the power of the Spirit, he slays a lion.
- By the power of the Spirit, he wins miraculous, highly outnumbered battles.

Notice the pattern. Every great victory in Samson's life came because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. His strength was never ultimately in his body. It came from God.

And that points to one of the great dangers facing every believer. None of us wakes up one morning and decides, "I'm done with God." No, we make one decision that disappoints God, then we make a second without seeking Him. Little by little, dependence on God is replaced by confidence in ourselves.

Which is what we see here, with Samson. Let's pick up the story in Judges 16:4.

*Some time later, he fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the Sorek Valley.
5The Philistine leaders went to her and said, "Persuade him to tell you where his great strength comes from, so we can overpower him, tie him up, and make him helpless. Each of us will then give you 1,100 pieces of silver." 6So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me, where does your great strength come from? How could someone tie you up and make you helpless?"*

This will come as no surprise: one of the most common places to wander off the path God has for us is in romantic relationships. When the powerful feelings of romance kick in, the brain struggles to make clear, rational decisions.

Emotions can move faster than reason, which helps explain why even level-headed people can make some of their most regrettable decisions when they're falling in love.

The story of Samson teaches three things about the danger of spiritual drift.

The Danger of Spiritual Drift

1. It begins when you give your heart to the wrong things.

Notice the language of verse 4: "Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah." That description matters because Samson already has a troubling history with women.

In Judges 14, Samson sees a Philistine woman and immediately tells his parents, "Get her for me, because she's the right one for me." His attraction seems driven largely by what he sees.

Then, at the beginning of Judges 16, Samson goes to Gaza, sees a woman he barely knows, and gets romantically involved. In both cases, it was more lust than love.

But with Delilah, the Bible says he loved her. This wasn't merely physical attraction. His heart had become attached. His thoughts were consumed with her. He began imagining a life with Delilah while losing sight of the life God had called him to live.

And that is where spiritual drift becomes especially dangerous. Whatever captures your heart will eventually compete for control of your life. But fellas, I'm certainly no doctor of love, but I think it's safe for me to say: If a woman ever says to you, "Tell me how to take you hostage," you have good reason to question if she's the one for you. She says to Samson, "Let's say someone wanted to tie you up and make you helpless...how would said person go about doing that?"

And for the sake of time, let me summarize the next few verses.

Samson gives Delilah three false answers about how someone might overpower him.

Plan A: "Tie me up with seven fresh bowstrings. That'll do it." So while he's sleeping, she ties him up. Samson wakes up and snaps right through them.

So he gives her Plan B: "It's not bowstrings. You need brand-new ropes." She tries that. Same result. Samson breaks through them.

Then comes Plan C: Samson tells her it has something to do with his hair. "Weave my long hair into braids." She tries that too. It doesn't work.

And here's what makes the whole thing crazy: every time she tries one of his ideas, she has men waiting nearby, ready to overpower him. By now, Samson should know exactly what Delilah is trying to do.

But he stays.

And that's what spiritual drift does. It blinds us to what should be obvious. Everyone around you may be saying, "Why are you staying in this relationship? Can't you see where this is taking you?" But when you let your heart become attached to someone who is pulling you away from God, you become blind to what everyone else can clearly see.

Now, skip ahead with me, to v. 15, where Delilah lays it on thick:

*How can you say, 'I love you', " she told him, "when your heart is not with me? This is the third time you have mocked me and not told me what makes your strength so great!"
¹⁶Because she nagged him day after day and pleaded with him until she wore him out, ¹⁷he told her the whole truth and said to her, "My hair has never been cut, because I am a Nazirite to God from birth. If I am shaved, my strength will leave me, and I will become weak and be like any other man." 16:15-17*

Now, take notice of the language in v.15. She says, "How can you claim to love me, when you are holding back your heart?" Proverbs 3 as I previously read, says we are "to trust the Lord with all of our heart."

The contrast couldn't be clearer. Samson is either going to give his heart to this beautiful but deceptive woman, or he is going to give his heart to God. Both have a plan for him.

This is what I call a Robert Frost moment.

You've probably heard Frost's famous poem, *The Road Not Taken*. He describes coming to a fork in the road and choosing the road less traveled. The image is unforgettable: a moment when you have to choose which direction your life will take.

I believe every person experiences a handful of moments like that. Most of life is made up of ordinary decisions, but every now and then you come to a fork in the road where the stakes are incredibly high. You can trust your own understanding, or you can trust the Lord. You can do it your way, or you can do it God's way. And the decision you make in those defining moments often determines the trajectory of the rest of your life.

Some of you will recognize the name Chuck Colson. Colson was one of the most powerful men in Washington during the presidency of Richard Nixon. He served as Special Counsel to the President and earned a reputation as Nixon's "hatchet man." He was fiercely loyal, politically ruthless, and willing to do almost anything to win. If you had asked him at the height of his career what mattered most, he would have listed success and protecting the President.

Then a scandal involving the president became national news and Colson found himself facing a decision that was much bigger than politics. A friend challenged him to read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis and began talking with him about Jesus Christ.

Colson realized that his greatest problem wasn't that his career was collapsing. His greatest problem was his own heart. One evening, while sitting in his car, he broke down in tears and surrendered his life to Christ. Later he wrote: "the toughest man in the Nixon White House discovered that he wasn't nearly as strong as he thought he was." Real strength began that night, when he stopped trusting himself and started trusting God.

That decision changed the trajectory of his life. Yes, he went to prison for his role in Watergate, but prison became the birthplace of a new calling. Instead of spending the rest of his life building political influence, he spent the next three decades building one of the world's largest prison ministries, serving inmates and proclaiming the gospel through what became Prison Fellowship. Chuck Colson reached a Robert Frost moment in his life—one path was self-preservation, the other was surrender. And he chose the road of surrender, and it made all the difference.

Samson is in a similar place in his own story, but he goes the other way. He chooses to remain in this relationship, rather than run to God. V. 16 says: Because she nagged him—she wore him out day after day, and he finally gave in. Here we see the second sign of spiritual drift. The first sign was when we give our heart to the wrong thing, and then...

2. It deepens when you resist God's will.

Samson finally spills the beans. He tells Delilah about something called the Nazirite vow. In Jewish life, a person could take this vow as a way of setting himself apart for a special season of devotion to the Lord. It was a way of saying, "My life belongs to God. My future is in His hands." And that commitment came with certain outward signs, one of which was allowing the hair to grow without cutting it.

But Samson was different. He didn't choose this calling for himself. God chose it for him. Before Samson was even born, God told his mother that he would be a Nazirite, set apart for God's purposes.

So Samson's hair wasn't magical. This isn't Rapunzel. His strength wasn't stored in his hair. His uncut hair was the outward sign of a life that belonged to God. The Lord, in His mysterious will, had placed extraordinary power on this man through His Spirit. But now Samson was treating casually the very calling that had marked his life from the beginning, handing his heart to a woman who couldn't care less about God.

In essence, Samson was saying, "I don't want what God wants for me anymore. I just want to be like everyone else." Listen to his own words in verse 17:

"If I am shaved, my strength will leave me, and I will become weak and be like any other man." v. 17

That's what Samson wanted: to be like any other man. He was tired of being different. Tired of carrying the weight of God's calling. He wanted ordinary pleasures, ordinary relationships, an ordinary life, without the responsibility that came with being set apart for God.

The tragedy is that Samson began to see his calling not as a privilege to embrace, but as a burden to escape.

There's nothing sinful about wanting a wife, a family, or a peaceful life. Those are beautiful gifts from God. The problem was that Samson wanted those things more than he wanted the life God had called him to live. And that raises a searching question for all of us:

Has God's calling on your life begun to feel more like a burden than a blessing? Maybe it's leading your family. Maybe it's caring for aging parents. Maybe it's serving in ministry. Maybe it's remaining faithful in a difficult season. Sometimes our greatest temptation isn't outright rebellion. It's quietly wishing God had given us someone else's assignment.

Spiritual drift deepens when we resist God's assignments. And if this is you, then I'd challenge you to recommit yourself to what God wants. Today.

Samson rejected his calling. And now, the consequences begin to unfold. Look what happens next.

Then she let him fall asleep on her lap and called a man to shave off the seven braids on his head. In this way, she made him helpless, and his strength left him. ²⁰ Then she cried, "Samson, the Philistines are here!" When he awoke from his sleep, he said, "I will escape as I did before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.

Here we see the third thing about spiritual drift:

3. The drift ends when God gives us what we asked for.

More haunting words have never been spoken: But he did not know that the Lord had left him. Samson did not know that God had removed himself from his life. Samson would get exactly what he wanted—a life on his own, and it would end tragically. If you were to continue to read the narrative, you discover that Samson is now past the point of no return. He will humble himself at the tail end of his life, but it's too late to extend his life. It ends when it all comes crashing down on him.

His life stands as a warning to us all. We are only safe when we are walking in the will of God. When we wander off on our own, we are on our own, without the help of the Good Shepherd.

Are you trusting Him with all your heart? Or have you begun, little by little, to lean on your own understanding?

Now with my time remaining...

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

What role does Christian community play in preventing spiritual drift?

That's an excellent question. One of the greatest gifts God gives us to protect us from spiritual drift is the presence of other Spirit-filled believers who love us enough to watch our backs and point out our blind spots. The New Testament is filled with "one another" commands: encourage one another, pray for one another, bear one another's burdens, confess your sins to one another, and even lovingly warn one another when we see someone wandering from the truth. Sometimes the most loving thing a Christian can do is step into an uncomfortable conversation because they see danger on the horizon for a friend.

I'll give you an example. A man I'll call Jonathan was in his mid-thirties with a wonderful wife and three young children. Life became incredibly difficult when one of their children was diagnosed with a rare sickness. The demands of caring for the boy became exhausting, and somewhere along the way Jonathan began to drift. At first, he stopped attending his Life Group because he said he was tired on Sundays and needed to sleep in. Then he started missing church altogether, using the same rationale. When the guys from his small group reached out to him, he quit returning their calls and texts. He became an island. And once he isolated himself, the wheels came off. Within a year his spiritual life had unraveled, his marriage ended in divorce, and his family was torn apart.

I've watched that pattern repeat itself more times than I can count. Rarely does someone drift while surrounded by healthy Christians. The drift almost always begins when they disconnect from the body of Christ and convince themselves they can follow Jesus on their own. That's why the writer of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing." God isn't trying to burden us with another appointment on the calendar.

He's protecting us from self-destruction. The conversations that happen in these hallways, the prayers going up for you in your Life Group, the texts from church members who check in—these may seem small in the moment, but think of them as the guardrails God uses to keep you from drifting off the road. And don't resist getting into a Life Group. Don't resist getting dressed and filling a seat in the service. Make your commitment to the body of Christ a big part of your life, and you'll find yourself more often in the right, when you face your Robert Frost moments.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

Why does Christianity seem to require giving up things that make people happy?

In other words, is God a fun-hater? Is He against pleasure?

Obviously not. Don't forget, God came up with the idea of taste buds and installed them in your mouth. He didn't have to give you little sensors that light up every time you shove a slice of pizza in there!

God is clearly not against things that make us happy. He created food, marriage, laughter, friendship, music, beauty, and countless other pleasures. God is not against pleasure. He simply wants us to pursue pleasures that please Him, because ultimately, those are the pleasures that are good for us.

The problem with sin is that it never shows you where it's taking you. It only shows you what it's offering you right now. Sin fascinates, then assassinates. It catches your eye, captures your imagination, clouds your judgment, and eventually takes something from you that you never intended to give.

That's exactly what happened to Samson. Delilah made him happy for a season. But God could see where that relationship was headed. Samson saw the pleasure in front of him. God saw the pain waiting down the road.

And you see this principle all through Scripture. God warns us about the love of money because money can consume the heart and leave you lonely. He warns against drunkenness because addiction can take over your life. He commands us to forgive because bitterness sours us as we store it up—it changes us.

Again and again, we see that God's commands are designed to protect us from counterfeit joys that sparkle for a moment but leave us emptier than before. The Christian life is not choosing misery over happiness. It is learning to trust God enough to choose lasting joy over temporary pleasure.

A Student Asks:

How do I know if someone I'm dating is pulling me closer to God or farther away?

Young people, you're smart enough to know that one of the most important decisions you'll ever make is who you choose to date and eventually marry. And when it comes to that decision, there are some things God actually wants you to be picky about.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 6:14:

"Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?"
2 Cor. 6:14

Paul is borrowing an image from farming. A yoke was a wooden contraption that connected two animals as they plowed a field. As long as those animals moved together, same direction, same pace, the yoke worked beautifully. But if you yoked together two animals that moved at different speeds and kept pulling in different directions, the yoke became a constant source of tension. Instead of helping each other move forward, they were constantly pulling against each other.

That's the picture Paul gives us here, and it applies well to a dating relationship. Young people, you can really like someone. You can be attracted to them. You can have chemistry, laugh at the same things, and enjoy being together. But if the two of you are ultimately headed in different spiritual directions, over time that difference will become obvious. Tension will grow in the relationship, and you are not wise to ignore it.

As you start dating another person, these are the obvious questions that emerge:

- Am I attracted to this person?
- Do I admire the way they live?
- Do I leave my time with this person feeling refreshed or drained?
- Do we share a similar vision for marriage and family?

These are good questions, and on the podcast today, Lynley and I are going to unpack this more, but for now, let me just say that the following two questions deserve more attention than they often receive.

- Does this person celebrate my commitment to the church, or quietly make me feel like I need to tone it down?
- Do they inspire greater obedience to Christ, or do they make compromise feel acceptable?

In other words, picture the two of you tied together in a harness. Your feet are moving toward God. You're passionately pursuing Christ and His church. Is this person keeping the same pace and heading in the same direction? Or are you constantly having to drag them along? Are there parts of your faith you avoid talking about because you know it will create tension?

Those are incredibly important questions, because if you get married, the stakes only get higher. Eventually the question becomes, "How are we going to raise our children?" And if you're not headed in the same spiritual direction, the tensions don't disappear. They multiply.

Samson should have stopped long enough to ask, "What is this relationship doing to my relationship with God?" And that's a question every one of us should ask about the things and people closest to our hearts: Is this drawing me toward God's will for my life, or pulling me away from it?