

## RUF Bible Study – Judges

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### Judges 15-16 – Samson 2 – Where Is My Strength?

*Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.” 29 And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. 30 And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it.*

#### *Judges 16:28-30*

I was there when Mark McGwire hit his 70<sup>th</sup> homerun in September 1997. It was awesome, the greatest sporting event I’ve ever been to. I had gone to almost every Cardinals home game that month, since my friend Brad and I bought tickets hoping to see McGwire break Roger Maris’ records. We saw him hit 61, then 62, and followed it all the way until the last day of the season, when he hit two home runs in one game. There was pandemonium in the stands.

And pandemonium in my heart. I was crazy about Mark McGwire. I couldn’t get enough news about him. I wanted to name my son after him (but didn’t). I bought his rookie baseball cards. His chest and biceps were enormous. His strength legendary.

So it was with anguish in that same heart that I watched him squirm and dodge before Congress in 2005. When asked about his involvement with steroids, he stated, “I’m not here to discuss the past,” or, “I’m here to be positive about this subject.” In the minds of the public and the voters of the Hall of Fame, and in the recesses of my own heart, that amounted to an admission of guilt. Except that a real admission and an apology would have been accepted. Not this obfuscation.

His strength, as so many others in this baseball Steroids Era, was fraudulent. It was from a drug. Sure, they still worked hard and worked out, but the strength and recovery gained came from means other than their own.

I put away my McGwire baseball card, and covered up my poster of him that said “Power” on it. So it goes in this era of unnatural gains. No one questions the records of Hank Aaron, Roger Maris or Babe Ruth. But now our track stars, cycling icons and Olympians are all suspect. Who is honest? Who is really strong?

Our text in this chapter deals with strength. Let’s look at the Philistines’ strength, Samson’s strength and finally in the strength of the Lord.

#### ***The Philistines’ Strength – Undone***

The whole Samson narrative follows a reversal theme. Just when the Philistines think they have won, Samson thwarts them and they find out they lose.

This first comes up in chapter 14 with the wedding riddle. Samson has them trapped, but they pressure his fiancée into a solution and they win! But then – Samson goes and gets their fancy suits from 30 men in Ashkelon. So they lose.

We see our next episode in chapter 15 when Samson goes to visit his “wife.” It appears he hadn’t yet realized what had happened – after the whole Ashkelon debacle, his wife had been given to another man, to the best man. Oops. But hey, the father in law says, here’s her younger sister, and she’s hot right? So why don’t you take her instead?

Samson freaks out, and he does what anyone would do in that situation – he ties together 300 foxes in pairs of two and then puts a torch between their tails and lets them loose. The countryside is ravaged.

The Philistines strike back, and they do so ruthlessly. They burn the sister and her father, which were their own people. Lesson learned, Samson. Don’t mess with us.

Samson killed them. Reversal again.

The Philistines are getting really tired of Samson. He’s a one-man wrecking crew and needs to be stopped. Unfortunately, Samson’s own people feel the same way. The Israelite tribe of Judah comes and speaks with Samson, pleading with him to stop the madness. They want peace. They ask if they can hand him over.

Sure, he says. Just don’t kill me when you tie me up. They agree. They tie him with two measly ropes, but they think this will hold him as it would any normal man. The Philistines finally have him.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block, Wilcock, Redeemer Pres, Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan, and listened to sermons from Brandon Barrett, Shaynor Newseome, and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

No they don't. Samson opens up a can on the Philistines when he gets near them. He breaks off the ropes like they were spider webs, and he grabs the nearest implement of destruction he can find – the jawbone of a donkey. With this jawbone, he kills 1000 men. He is the original Russell Crowe Gladiator. No one can stop him.

It's another reversal for the Philistines – another abysmal defeat. Samson rubs it in with some extra Hebrew poetry. In the Hebrew the words “donkey” and “thousands” rhyme, so the poem could go like this:

*With the jawbone of an ass // I have killed them en masse.*

They think they have him one more time. At the beginning of chapter 16, he is in Gaza with a prostitute. Perfect. They surround the place with guards for an ambush in the middle of the night. The city is locked tight, and they've got him this time.

But Samson sniffs it out somehow and tears down the wall. He not only escapes through the wall, but he takes the wall with him, the whole thing, carrying it over 35 miles up hills and down valleys to Hebron. Not only did Samson get away, but he ruined the city walls of Gaza, and in doing so, showed another feat of derring do.

We'll leave the final reversal for the end, but we should stop here to think of what the original reader might have thought. He or she would have laughed. It's okay for you to chuckle too.

Samson is a larger-than-life hero. His escapades are humorous even as they are macabre. Nothing the Philistines did went right. These are the people who would later give us Goliath, so they knew warfare. They were a strong and powerful people who had Israel under its thumb, but they couldn't handle one man.

So we marvel at the Philistinian blundering, but all the more so at Samson's strength. This man ripped apart a lion! Killed thirty and dozens and then 1000 men. He somehow managed to round up, tie together and then release 300 foxes, and he carried the gates of a city wall on some sort of maniacal 50K trekker race.

The writer of Judges is making a point to show us how the strength of the Philistines is folly compared to that of Samson. The whole nation could not stand up to the might of one man.

I recently returned from spending a week in Peru with a church planting mission there. One of our projects called upon the destruction of some unneeded church buildings so we could clear the area to build some newer ones.<sup>2</sup> Several of our college students prided themselves in their work ethic and their strength. One of our students didn't hesitate to flex his biceps whenever possible.

But that strength was shown to be weakness when we discovered we would be working without any power tools. We hammered huge slabs of concrete with 20-pound sledges. Not only that, but it was the Peruvian workers who did the bulk of the heavy work. What might take one of us 20 to 30 strikes, would fall under only a few blows from a Peruvian. Whereas we might work for an hour or two without a water break, they would never take rest.

Our strength was laughable compared to theirs. You might have guessed that pasty, college boys couldn't have held up. But it wasn't until you saw it with your own eyes that you really understood how truly weak we were. We kept trying, but we just couldn't last. We were undone.

### ***Samson's Strength – Subdued and Stripped***

Samson's strength is shown in the relief of the Philistines' weakness. He has proven himself time and time again to be up for the task, though perhaps in some unsavory tactics. We are rooting for him. He comes to us in chapter 13 as the promised deliverer for his people. Do you remember 13:5: “*He shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistine*”? Our hopes are high for Samson.

However, there are chinks in his armor. We're needing to overlook some things.

Samson has a woman problem, or really a *lust* problem.. He can't seem to control himself or his libido. He seems to think with his penis. We saw this first when he wanted a wife in chapter 14. I saw a woman. She was amazing. He had to have her. That led to the disaster of the first riddle and the subsequent 30 killer suits. His pledged wife enticed him to give away the secret. “*And Samson's wife wept over him and said, ‘You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.’*” (14:16) So the manipulation began.

Samson doesn't get that wife, and doesn't want her sister, but he's not through. In chapter 16, he's with a prostitute in Gaza. We cannot make any excuses for this. He's got his urges, and he has to take care of them. That's what he's thinking.

The beginning of this story is a set up for the rest of chapter 16. It shows us Samson's incredible strength when he carries the gate so far. But it shows his amazing weakness for why he's there in the first place. With a whore.

Friends, we often think our sexuality is only our own. We don't think what we do matters to anyone else. But the Bible says we are a community of believers, and that our sin does affect each other. What you do in private will eventually come around to me. What we do in our bedrooms and our bathrooms changes our community. God calls us to chastity and fidelity. His sex ethic is we should only have sex with our spouses. Not with ourselves. Not with someone who isn't your wife or husband. Not with consenting adults. Not with the internet. Only with your spouse in marriage.

To break this is to sin. To sin is to experience guilt and shame. I am convinced there is a large percentage of people out there who are not being effective for God because they cannot break the cycle of guilt and shame. But there is repentance

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<sup>2</sup> It was ironic to be “destroying the church.”

and freedom. You need to come clean and live according to God's ways so you can live a life of basking in God's pleasure. So you can honestly love other people and give away your true heart instead of hiding it.

Pornography, masturbation, sex before marriage, sex outside of marriage – these are soul killers. There is forgiveness, if you seek it. Please talk to someone and confess your sins. Please seek out repentance and restoration. For my sake, for the church's sake, but most of all for Jesus' sake.

Samson's sexuality wasn't his own either. It's writ large for all of us to see. He's been on this path for some time and it comes to fruition with Delilah.

Delilah is a Hebrew name, but since by this time the communities had become so intermingled we don't know how much names can tell us about nationalities. Regardless, she is going to use Samson's lust against him.

In this story, we certainly see lust as the backdrop but mostly we see the subduing and stripping of Samson's strength. You see, Samson has been slowly growing in his trust of his strength. Surely he knew of his heritage and the blessings that had been pronounced over him. But he has repeatedly shown disdain of the Nazirite vow. The only part of it he's kept has been the razor from his head. He thinks *he's* the strong one. He hasn't given God any glory along the way. He hasn't acknowledged any of his successes to be anything but his alone.

That means he's in trouble. And Delilah does him in. She uses his arrogance, lust and strength against him. She's operating in her own paradigm of strength, too.

Delilah wants power. The Philistines are desperate. They have got to rid themselves of Samson. So they send in the ultimate spy – a woman. Movies are littered with this tactic. If manpower won't get the job done, use womanpower. The offer is straightforward. Seduce him, Delilah. If you do, we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver. Whoa! If Delilah can get this done, she will be rich and powerful. She will rule the city.

Friends, this is a dysfunctional relationship. I hope I don't have to explain that. Delilah is using her "powers" to get control over Samson. But Samson is using his power over her as well. He sort of seems like a dupe here, but his foolishness is one of arrogance. He knows he can get out. He loves the thrill of the game, of the danger. Each time he gets away, thereby furthering his hubris. He's using her to provide a certain sexual tension as he dominates her just like he has all the other women and all the other Philistines in his life.

This time Samson goes too far. He breaks. Maybe it was Delilah's manipulative pleading, "*How can you say 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?*" Wow. That is cold-blooded. Samson seems to believe her. He didn't learn the last time he told his secret under similar circumstances.

The game is up. He finally tells Delilah about his hair but she cuts it. It's a tragic scene as he lays his head on her lap and she deviously cuts his hair.

Samson heard the words he'd heard before – They Philistines are coming! He woke up. Surely he noticed he was bald now. He'd never, ever had a hair cut so it must have been super noticeable. Yet he *still* thought he could be strong. He didn't really believe the Nazirite vow had anything to do with his strength.

But the Lord had left him. It wasn't the hair that was his strength. His hair had been a sign of the Lord. Samson had been holding on by a thread, but now it was done. God left him there with Delilah. All by himself. In his own strength.

Samson prepares himself for his inevitable victory when the Philistines enter. The Philistines must have been quite tired of the charade and probably don't believe Delilah's plan will succeed this time. But they try again. And this time it works. They finally get him, and they're ready to make him pay. They gouge out his eyes, and set Samson at work grinding at the mill in the prison. Humiliated, Samson is now a slave. Delilah has done her work, so she now sits in a mansion somewhere, the woman who was stronger than Samson.

The Philistines have won.

What can we learn from this? First we need to see how such lust and power bring us down. We've already mentioned this, but it's important. It's true that God forgives sin and uses messed up people, but don't presume upon God's grace by continuing in your rebellion. Samson's story is a sad tale of how the lust of the heart manifests itself to bring our destruction.

It's a picture then of Samson's shallow ignorance to the real things of God. As commentator Wilcock writes, "He has no idea of his calling to be judge and savior, nor of the real nature of his Nazirite vow. He cannot see how his relation with his Philistine 'wife' is the complete opposite of the marriage relationship of the first judge Othniel. He is quite unaware that his fraternizing with the Philistines generally, from which the entire story springs, runs counter to everything his predecessors stood for."<sup>3</sup>

The lack of understanding cannot continue in matters of God or in matters of the heart. Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-30 that lust must be dealt with in strong and costly ways. I know you don't believe that, but it is true and this truth will bring freedom to you. The forgiveness of your past wrongs – of true godly sorrow – brings a present and future search after new obedience because you love the Father so much.

But we also learn that our successes can be dangerous to our souls. Samson was a successful man. He was powerful and strong. He was a ladies' man. He had it all. He was what many of us aspire to be.

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<sup>3</sup> Wilcock, 138

Sure, in our fantastical version, we're may be wearing Tommy Hilfiger business casual. We're not long-haired Nazirites like Samson. We're executives. Lawyers. Driving a Suburban. Living in the suburbs with a membership at the country club. Taking vacations to Vail. Maybe your vision of success and power is having a PhD on the wall and leading a department in research or publications. Perhaps your version shows you starting a new business and making your first million before you're 30. Maybe your version entails your perfect marriage at 27, your three years without kids, then the average 2.1 children all achieving higher than national standards.

One of the things we have to be most wary of is when God gives us all these successes. I think about planting a church someday, and I fantasize about its success. I want to have a racially diverse church of 400-500 people who love God and love others. I want it to be a church that welcomes the lost and stranger among us. That reaches out to the losers of society and embraces them, bringing them into our family. I want it to be a theological church that hungers for good preaching (that I weekly give), good teaching, and never compromises on the truth. I want it to be a missional church, sending people overseas, training up pastors, reaching the city for Christ and allowing people to use their gifts in ministry as God leads without restraint. I want it to be a generous church, giving away its people and its money for the kingdom of God, even so far as to regularly plant new churches with its people in nearby communities. I want it to be a beautiful church, honoring and glorifying God with its architecture. I want it to be a church that speaks to the hearts of people through pastoring, counseling, small groups and friendships.

Wow. That's a lot of wants. That's a pretty big vision. What if God gives that to me someday? What if that were really to happen? It might be an awesome thing.

And it might be a terrible thing. It would be awesome if God got all the glory, but if I were to get proud and think of how great a pastor and leader I was, then it would be the beginning of my destruction. I've seen it happen. You have too. Pride comes before the fall. We start to think *I have done this*. And we forget God. We mouth respect and admiration to God, but we trust in ourselves.

One pastor has summed it up this way, "Outward gains are ordinarily attended with inward losses."<sup>4</sup> We so often grow in wisdom, humility, self-control, compassion and faith when we go through financial, vocational and relational failure. James talks of just this very thing when he writes in 1:2-4: "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*"

These trials in our lives are bringing good to us. God gives success, but we must not trust in our own strength. We must give God the glory along the way, asking him to keep our hearts humble and pure.

How have you seen God in your successes? How have you seen your heart drift away from God? Where have you been unfaithful to the one who has granted your strength?

### ***The Lord's Strength – Revealed Redeemer***

This is a scary Bible verse: *But he did not know the Lord had left him*. That is not the verse you want to read about yourself, about your life.

It's one of the things we wonder about when things go wrong. What if God leaves us? What will we do then? So often we don't care about God at all, if we're honest. We're like Samson, going along, thinking only of ourselves and our own strengths.

And we have to admit, sometimes it sure does seem like God is absent. But it could be because God is just giving us what we want. Samson wanted his own strength and he wanted danger, and God gave it to him. It resulted in eyes gouged out slavery. We shouldn't be surprised.

Samson's life shows us two pictures. The first picture is that of Israel. They are just alike. Both have been given so much, have been promised the world. Both are blessed by God and strengthened by him.

But Samson and Israel squander it by whoring around with other gods and lovers. They give themselves away for little in return. They lose themselves.

We see this in chapter fifteen when Samson is offered up to the Philistines by *his own people*. It's Judah that binds their savior and gives him over to their enemies. They don't want to fight the enemies of God's people any longer. They want peace.

Things have gotten this bad. Didn't God tell them in chapter 3 that he was teaching them to wage war against his enemies? (3:2) We've seen great warriors along the way, calling Israel to battle. We've even seen Judah in the thick of things. But now here we are, and they've settled.

It's a sad thing when God's people settle. When we stop living rightly and stop resisting wrong. When we cozy up to our culture so much that we cannot tell right from wrong any more. What is the last movie you stopped watching because it was too foul for you? When was the last time you left a situation or conversation that was ungodly? Where in your life have you made peace with sin? Do you think it's still worth fighting any more or have you handed over that ground? Judah said to

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<sup>4</sup> Found in Keller, 93

Samson, “Do you not know the Philistines are rulers over us?” What is the ruler over you? What might that sentence entail for you if “Philistines” were replaced with X?

As Ralph Davis writes, “We are near hopeless when we begin to adopt Judah’s slogan: it has always been this way – how can we expect to change anything?”<sup>5</sup> In what areas of your life have you taken that attitude?

Samson then is a picture of how far Israel has fallen. So far that God has left him and them. Their savior has been captured by the enemy. Davis puts it this way: “Samson is a paradigm of Israel: one raised up out of nothing, richly gifted, who panders around with other loves and yet, apparently, always expects to ‘have’ Yahweh. So Israel received grace on top of grace but persistently carries on her affairs with Baal, utterly ignorant of her true condition, blithely assuming that all is well and that Yahweh is always at her disposal. She is a people who does not know that Yahweh may depart from her.”<sup>6</sup>

Where then is their hope?

Ah, but there is hope yet. Because Samson isn’t only a picture of Israel’s judgment, but of Israel’s redeemer.

When all hope is lost, God is there. Right after the Philistines enslave and maim Samson, the author of the book gives a little detail, “*But the hair of his head began to grow after it had been shaved.*” Of course. What could be more obvious? That’s what hair does. Samson’s hair starts growing, but it’s only like a buzz cut. He doesn’t get his flowing locks back. God gives him strength out of comparison with the length of his hair, showing God’s grace to him.

Something is happening to Samson. He can feel his head, his hair growing back. He can think of what happened. He has time to reflect on his relationship with God and how he has hit the absolute bottom. “Here Yahweh’s answer comes not only in the midst of desperate need but in the wake of miserable failure. This is the Samson who would rather play around with Delilah than protect Yahweh’s gift. This is the Samson who faithlessly bartered away Yahweh’s strength in order to court a treacherous lover. It is this Samson – this faithless, foolish, fallen Samson – whom Yahweh hears.”<sup>7</sup>

It’s often in the bottom where God works. We saw God working with the bottom of the barrel in Samson to begin with. He was from a barren woman, from nowhere. But he’d gotten big. He’d gotten strong and proud. No longer. And his hair grows.

We see the seeds of the reversal of the Philistines’ victory again. They’ve gathered to worship their God, Dagon. Everyone is there. It’s a huge party. They want to revel in their victory to proclaim, “*Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand... Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.*” (16:23, 24) So in their drunken frivolity, they bring out Samson to laugh at. The blind, the pitiful Samson for all to see.

They place his hands on the two pillars supporting the temple building. Then Samson prays to God. He’d prayed one before in chapter 15 when he’d been so weak he thought he’d die. But that was a prayer of desperation, a cry to God from someone who needs help for his body.

This is different. This is a cry from someone who needs everything because he has nothing. All has been stripped away. All has been laid bare.

In this prayer, all Samson wants is God. He wants God to be glorified. He wants his enemies to be brought low so that the Lord – and not Samson – would be brought high. He wants his life to count for God. He wants to fulfill his purpose and be a savior for the people. “*Oh Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.*” Brought out to perform, he wants to literally bring the house down.

And God hears him. I think Samson rubs his head first. He feels his stubble hair and smiles a rueful grin. Samson grabs the two pillars that support the temple, and with a great heave of the last ounce of his strength from God, destroys the temple, the false god and all the Philistine leaders who were there.

Israel is saved once again! Saved by the deliverer of God’s people. Saved by the death of the savior of God’s people. Saved by the substitutionary death of the savior of God’s people.

Do you see the gospel in this? Do you hear the good news? God doesn’t leave his people to die alone in their sins. He hears his people even in their darkest moments, and he delivers them with a redeemer.

In this way, Samson is a dim but true picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was strong where Samson was weak. He was faithful where Samson was unchaste. He was committed where Samson flagged. And he too died for his people. Willingly, under the pain and torture of death.

Do you remember in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when mighty King Aslan has been slain? The White Witch and her minions can scarcely contain their glee. Their wildest dreams have been fulfilled. Aslan is dead. Really, really dead. It’s sure to bring a tear to the eye for those who loved Aslan. How could this happen?

But it’s in death where the greatest triumph lies. It’s in the darkness when the light shines forth the brightest. In the end, for Aslan as for Jesus, death does not win at all, but is swallowed up by the power of the gospel.

Though we might wonder at God’s plan, and his plan for Samson, we must be confident that God did not after all abandon Samson even though he certainly deserved it. Instead, he used him to accomplish a great purpose achieved at a great price. So it is with our redeemers. In the midst of darkness of our own hearts, our own faithlessness, our own depravity, and our

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, 182

<sup>6</sup> Davis, 189

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 192

own weakness, may we call upon the name of the only Redeemer of God's elect, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is to him that Samson points us after all.

***Come Ye Sinners, Joseph Hart***

*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
Jesus, ready, stands to save you Full of pity, joined with power.  
He is able, He is able; He is willing; doubt no more.*

*Come ye needy, come, and welcome, God's free bounty glorify;  
True belief and true repentance, Every grace that brings you nigh.  
Without money, without money Come to Jesus Christ and buy.*

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden, Bruised and broken by the fall;  
If you tarry 'til you're better, You will never come at all.  
Not the righteous, not the righteous; Sinners Jesus came to call.*

*Let not conscience make you linger, Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness He requires Is to feel your need of Him.  
This He gives you, this He gives you, 'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.*

*Lo! The Incarnate God, ascended; Pleads the merit of His blood.  
Venture on Him; venture wholly, Let no other trust intrude.  
None but Jesus, none but Jesus Can do helpless sinners good.*

*none but Jesus Can do helpless sinners good.*