Samson

Bible Stories Anthology — Judges 13–16

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The Strongest Man Who Ever Lived

No man in scripture was given more power than Samson. He tore a lion apart with his bare hands. He killed a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey. He carried the gates of a city up a mountain in the middle of the night. His birth was announced by an angel, and he was set apart to God before he was conceived.

And no man in scripture wasted more. He married a Philistine against his parents' pleas. He spent the night with a harlot in an enemy city. He fell in love with a woman who sold him for silver, and he let her do it — not once, but four times — until he told her the one secret he had been charged to keep. He woke up to find that his strength was gone, and he did not even know that the LORD had departed from him.

The last we see of him, he is blind, chained, grinding grain like a slave in a Philistine prison, while thousands gather in the temple of their god to laugh at him. And there, with his hands on two pillars, he prays the only real prayer recorded from his adult life: *remember me … strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once.*

God heard him. The New Testament, which could have left him out, names him in the roll of faith (Hebrews 11:32). His story is a warning about what happens when a man treats God's gift as his own. It is also a witness that God does not forget those who call on Him, even at the very end.

The Setting

When. The last of the judges before Samuel, in the 1100s B.C. by the reckoning most often used, some decades after Gideon. Samson's story is the last of the book's great cycles, and the most tragic.

The enemy. The **Philistines** were a sea-going people who came from the Aegean region — Crete and the islands are named as their homeland (Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4) — and settled on the southern coast of Canaan. Egyptian records of Ramesses III describe fighting them about 1175 B.C. among the "Sea Peoples." They ruled from five cities, each with its own lord: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron (Joshua 13:3). They had iron weapons and kept the secret of iron-working from Israel: **"there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears"** (1 Samuel 13:19). Their chief god was **Dagon**, most likely a god of grain (Hebrew *dagan*, "grain").

The situation. "And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years" (Judges 13:1). As in Gideon's day, "delivered them" is the idiom of permission: God withdrew the protection Israel had thrown away (Deuteronomy 31:17). But something is missing this time. In every earlier cycle Israel "cried unto the LORD." This time the text never says so. Israel had grown used to Philistine rule. When Samson began to fight, the men of his own nation came to hand him over (15:11-13). God raised up a deliverer for a people who had not asked for one.

Where. The **Shephelah**, the low hills between the Judean mountains and the Philistine coastal plain — border country. Samson's home town was **Zorah**, of the tribe of **Dan**, on the ridge above the **valley of Sorek**; nearby was **Eshtaol**. Across the valley stood **Beth-shemesh**, "house of the sun," and down the valley **Timnath** (Timnah), a border town under Philistine control. The Danites had never managed to take the land assigned to them (Judges 1:34), and before long most of the tribe would leave for the far north (Judges 18).

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**. Samson was a **Nazarite** under the law of Numbers 6.

The Story, Told Faithfully

A Barren Woman and an Angel

> **Judges 13:2** *And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bare not.*
>
> **Judges 13:3** *And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.*

"His wife was barren." Scripture never tells us her name. But she stands in a line of barren women to whom God gave sons of promise: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and after her Hannah and Elisabeth. In each case the birth was God's doing, and the son was set apart for His purpose.

> **Judges 13:4** *Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing:*
>
> **Judges 13:5** *For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.*

"A Nazarite unto God." The word comes from *nazar*, to separate or consecrate. The law of the Nazarite is in Numbers 6, and it had three parts:

> **Numbers 6:3** *He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried.*
>
> **Numbers 6:5** *All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the LORD, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.*
>
> **Numbers 6:6** *All the days that he separateth himself unto the LORD he shall come at no dead body.*

- **Nothing from the vine** — no wine, no grapes, not even raisins.
- **No razor** — his uncut hair was the visible sign of his separation. **"The consecration of his God is upon his head"** (Numbers 6:7).
- **No contact with a dead body.**

Ordinarily a man or woman took the vow voluntarily and for a set time. Samson's was different in two ways: God chose it for him before he was conceived, and it was for life. Even his mother had to keep the food laws while she carried him. Only two others in scripture are described as set apart like this from birth: Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11), and, in the New Testament, John the Baptist (Luke 1:15).

"He shall begin to deliver Israel." *Begin*. Samson would not finish the work. Samuel and David would finish it (1 Samuel 7:13; 2 Samuel 5:17-25). It is an honest description from the start.

Manoah's Visitor

> **Judges 13:6** *Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came unto me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible: but I asked him not whence he was, neither told he me his name:*
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> **Judges 13:7** *But he said unto me, Behold, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and now drink no wine nor strong drink, neither eat any unclean thing: for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death.*

"Very terrible." *Awe-inspiring*, frightening in its majesty.

"To the day of his death." The angel had not said those words; the mother added them. She understood it would be a lifelong vow. She did not know how literally her words would come true: the day Samson's separation was fully restored was the day he died.

> **Judges 13:8** *Then Manoah intreated the LORD, and said, O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born.*
>
> **Judges 13:9** *And God hearkened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again unto the woman as she sat in the field: but Manoah her husband was not with her.*

Manoah's prayer is a good one: *teach us what we shall do unto the child*. He wanted to raise the boy rightly. And **"God hearkened."**

The angel came back — to the woman again. She ran to fetch her husband, and Manoah asked what the rule for the boy should be. The angel repeated what he had told the woman: nothing from the vine, no strong drink, nothing unclean (13:10-14).

> **Judges 13:15** *And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee.*
>
> **Judges 13:16** *And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread: and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the LORD. For Manoah knew not that he was an angel of the LORD.*
>
> **Judges 13:17** *And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour?*
>
> **Judges 13:18** *And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?*

"Thou must offer it unto the LORD." The angel refused to be honoured himself and turned the offering to God.

"Seeing it is secret." The Hebrew word is *peli*, from the root *pala*, which means *wonderful*, beyond understanding, extraordinary. It is the same word Isaiah uses of the Messiah: **"his name shall be called Wonderful"** (Isaiah 9:6, *pele*). The angel's name was too wonderful for Manoah to know.

> **Judges 13:19** *So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on.*
>
> **Judges 13:20** *For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground.*

"The angel did wondrously." The same root again, *pala*: the one whose name was Wonderful did a wonder. **"The angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar."** As with Gideon's offering, the messenger's departure was the sign.

> **Judges 13:22** *And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God.*
>
> **Judges 13:23** *But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these.*

"We shall surely die, because we have seen God." Manoah said what Gideon had said. As in those stories, the one they saw was God's messenger, bearing God's name and authority (compare Exodus 23:21), and to meet him was to meet God.

"But his wife said." Her answer is plain good sense and good theology: *God would not accept our offering and promise us a son, just to kill us.* She understood God's heart better than her husband did.

> **Judges 13:24** *And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him.*
>
> **Judges 13:25** *And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.*

"Called his name Samson." *Shimshon*, from *shemesh*, "sun" — perhaps "little sun" or "sunny one." Beth-shemesh, the "house of the sun," stood across the valley. Some have seen in the name a hint of Canaanite sun-worship in the region; others simply the joy of a long-awaited child. The meaning is not certain.

“The Spirit of the LORD began to move him.” The Hebrew verb *pa’am* means to stir, to push, even to strike, like a bell. God’s spirit came upon Samson at particular times, as it did on Othniel and Gideon. His strength was never his own; it came when the spirit of the LORD came upon him.

“She Is Right in My Eyes”

> **Judges 14:1** *And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines.*
>
> **Judges 14:2** *And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife.*
>
> **Judges 14:3** *Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well.*

“Went down … saw.” The first recorded act of Samson’s adult life begins with his eyes. He *saw* a woman; that was enough.

“Get her for me to wife.” In that world parents arranged marriages. Samson did not ask; he demanded.

“Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren?” His parents were right, and the Law was on their side: **“Neither shalt thou make marriages with them … For they will turn away thy son from following me”** (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Marrying into the people who ruled and worshipped Dagon was exactly what God had forbidden.

“She pleaseth me well.” The Hebrew says, literally, *she is right in my eyes*. That phrase is the key to the whole last part of the book of Judges, which ends with these words: **“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes”** (Judges 21:25). Samson was the living picture of his generation. And the eyes that led him would one day be put out.

> **Judges 14:4** *But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.*

This verse has troubled many readers. Did God want Samson to break the Law? As this series understands it, no. The verse does not say the marriage was right; it says God was working through the situation to find an occasion against the oppressors. God did not need Samson’s disobedience, but He would not let it stop His purpose. It is the same truth Joseph spoke to his brothers: **“ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good”** (Genesis 50:20). Scripture elsewhere is plain that Samson’s choices were his own, and it records their cost.

The Lion and the Honey

> **Judges 14:5** *Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him.*
>
> **Judges 14:6** *And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done.*

"The vineyards of Timnath." A Nazarite in a vineyard. Nothing says he ate grapes. But of all places for a man who was forbidden everything from the vine, he was walking through the vineyards on his way to marry a Philistine.

"A young lion." Lions lived in the land in Bible times; David and Benaiah also killed them (1 Samuel 17:34-36; 2 Samuel 23:20).

"The Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him." The Hebrew verb is *tsalach*, to rush, to break through. **"He rent him as he would have rent a kid"** — as easily as tearing a young goat. That is a **simile**. **"He had nothing in his hand."** The strength was plainly not a weapon's, nor, as this series understands it, simply a big man's muscles: it was God's.

"He told not his father or his mother." The first of Samson's secrets.

> **Judges 14:8** *And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion.*
>
> **Judges 14:9** *And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion.*

"He turned aside to see the carcase of the lion." A Nazarite was to **"come at no dead body."** Samson went out of his way to a carcass, put his hands into it, and ate from it. The first part of his vow was broken.

"He gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them." Under the Law, touching the carcass of an animal that goes on its paws made a person unclean (Leviticus 11:27). Samson let his parents eat food taken out of a carcass without telling them where it came from. The man of secrets had a second one.

The Riddle at the Feast

> **Judges 14:10** *So his father went down unto the woman: and Samson made there a feast; for so used the young men to do.*

"A feast." The Hebrew word is *mishteh*, from the verb *to drink*: a drinking feast, which in Philistine country lasted seven days. Scripture does not say Samson drank. But he hosted a seven-day drinking party as a Nazarite.

> **Judges 14:12** *And Samson said unto them, I will now put forth a riddle unto you: if ye can certainly declare it me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments:*
>
> **Judges 14:14** *And he said unto them, Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. And they could not in three days expound the riddle.*

"Thirty sheets and thirty change of garments." Thirty linen under-garments and thirty sets of festive clothing — a costly wager.

"Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness." A **riddle** is a figure of speech in which the meaning is deliberately hidden in a puzzle — in Greek, an *aenigma*. It is perfectly balanced in Hebrew, and impossible to solve unless you had been there. Only Samson knew about the lion.

> **Judges 14:15** *And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they said unto Samson's wife, Entice thy husband, that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire: have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so?*
>
> **Judges 14:16** *And Samson's wife wept before him, and said, Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not: thou hast put forth a riddle unto the children of my people, and hast not told it me. And he said unto her, Behold, I have not told it my father nor my mother, and shall I tell it thee?*
>
> **Judges 14:17** *And she wept before him the seven days, while their feast lasted: and it came to pass on the seventh day, that he told her, because she lay sore upon him: and she told the riddle to the children of her people.*

"Entice thy husband … lest we burn thee." The Philistine guests threatened her life. She was caught between her people and her husband, and she chose her people.

"Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not." Tears, accusation, pressure for seven days. **"He told her, because she lay sore upon him."** The same pattern would destroy him later. Here is the whole of Samson's weakness in a sentence: he could tear a lion apart, but he could not stand up to a woman's tears.

> **Judges 14:18** *And the men of the city said unto him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? and what is stronger than a lion? And he said unto them, If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle.*
>
> **Judges 14:19** *And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of them, and took their spoil, and gave change of garments unto them which expounded the riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house.*
>
> **Judges 14:20** *But Samson's wife was given to his companion, whom he had used as his friend.*

"If ye had not plowed with my heifer." A bitter **metaphor**: *you used my wife like a borrowed farm animal.*

"He went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty men of them." Ashkelon, one of the five Philistine cities, was over twenty miles away on the coast. Samson paid his debt with the clothes of thirty Philistines. **"The Spirit of the LORD came upon him"** — God was using even Samson's anger to strike at the oppressors, as 14:4 had said.

"Samson's wife was given to his companion." He went home in a rage without her, and her father gave her to the best man.

Foxes, Fire and Revenge

> **Judges 15:1** *But it came to pass within a while after, in the time of wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said, I will go in to my wife into the chamber. But her father would not suffer him to go in.*
>
> **Judges 15:2** *And her father said, I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion: is not her younger sister fairer than she? take her, I pray thee, instead of her.*
>
> **Judges 15:3** *And Samson said concerning them, Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure.*

“Visited his wife with a kid.” A young goat was the customary gift. Samson came back as though nothing had happened — and found her married to another man.

> **Judges 15:4** *And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails.*
>
> **Judges 15:5** *And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives.*

“Three hundred foxes.” The Hebrew *shu’al* covers both the fox and the jackal. Jackals run in packs and would have been easier to catch in numbers. Tied in pairs, tail to tail, with a torch between them, they would run in every direction, zigzagging, unable to go to ground. At wheat harvest the fields were dry as tinder. Samson burned the Philistines’ grain, their vineyards and their olive groves — their bread, their wine and their oil.

> **Judges 15:6** *Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire.*

The threat the Philistines had made at the feast (14:15) they now carried out. She had betrayed her husband to save herself from being burned, and she was burned anyway.

> **Judges 15:7** *And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease.*
>
> **Judges 15:8** *And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam.*

“Yet will I be avenged of you.” Revenge answered revenge. Samson’s war with the Philistines was, from his side, personal.

“Hip and thigh.” An **idiom** meaning *completely, without mercy*.

Bound by His Own People

> **Judges 15:9** *Then the Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi.*
>
> **Judges 15:11** *Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us? what is this that thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them.*
>
> **Judges 15:12** *And they said unto him, We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines. And Samson said unto them, Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon me yourselves.*
>
> **Judges 15:13** *And they spake unto him, saying, No; but we will bind thee fast, and deliver thee into their hand: but surely we will not kill thee. And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock.*

This is one of the saddest scenes in the book of Judges.

“Three thousand men of Judah.” Not three thousand men to fight the Philistines — three thousand men to hand over the one man who was fighting them. **“Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers**

over us?" They had accepted their slavery. They did not want a deliverer; they wanted peace with their masters.

"Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon me yourselves." Samson would not fight his own people. He let them tie him up.

> **Judges 15:14** *And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands.*
>
> **Judges 15:15** *And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith.*
>
> **Judges 15:16** *And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.*

"The cords ... became as flax that was burnt with fire." A **simile**: they fell off like charred thread.

"A new jawbone of an ass." *New* means fresh, from a donkey recently dead — heavy and strong, not dry and brittle. And, once again, the Nazarite put his hand on a dead body.

"With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps." In Hebrew this is a wordplay on the word for donkey, *chamor*: *bi-lechi ha-chamor, chamor chamorathayim* — "with the jaw of the donkey, a donkey-heap, two donkey-heaps." The figure is **paronomasia**, words that sound alike set side by side. Samson composed a victory song — and it was about himself. **"Have I slain."**

> **Judges 15:18** *And he was sore athirst, and called on the LORD, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?*
>
> **Judges 15:19** *But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof En-hakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day.*
>
> **Judges 15:20** *And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.*

"Called on the LORD." Samson's first recorded prayer. Exhausted and dying of thirst, he remembered where the victory had come from: **"Thou hast given this great deliverance."**

"God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw." *Lehi* means "jawbone," and it is also the name of the place. Many translators read it, *God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi*, a hollow in the rock where a spring broke out. Either way, God answered at once.

"En-hakkore." *The spring of him who called.* Samson named the place after his prayer. It was still there when Judges was written.

"He judged Israel ... twenty years." For all his failings, God used him to hold back the Philistines for twenty years.

The Gates of Gaza

> **Judges 16:1** *Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her.*
>
> **Judges 16:2** *And it was told the Gazites, saying, Samson is come hither. And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him.*

> **Judges 16:3** *And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron.*

"Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot." *Saw* again. Gaza was the farthest and strongest Philistine city, deep in enemy territory. Samson went there for a prostitute. Scripture states it without comment, and the facts are comment enough.

"Took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts ... bar and all." A city gate was the strongest part of its defences: two heavy wooden doors, the posts they hung on, and the great bar across them. Samson tore the whole thing out. **"An hill that is before Hebron."** Hebron is nearly forty miles from Gaza and about three thousand feet higher. Some read the phrase as *a hill facing toward Hebron*, nearer Gaza. Either way, he left Gaza's gates standing on a hilltop in Judah — a humiliation for the Philistines. And he still had not learned the lesson of the lion, the riddle, or the fire.

Delilah

> **Judges 16:4** *And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.*
>
> **Judges 16:5** *And the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and said unto her, Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may bind him to afflict him: and we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver.*

"He loved a woman." This is the first time scripture says Samson *loved*. The word is the ordinary Hebrew word for love, *ahab*. He loved; there is no word that she did.

"Delilah." Her name's meaning is uncertain; suggestions include *delicate*, *flirtatious*, or *weak*. Scripture does not say whether she was a Philistine or an Israelite. It says only that she lived in the valley of Sorek, on the border, and that she was for sale.

"See wherein his great strength lieth." This is telling. The Philistines could not tell by looking at him. If Samson had been a giant with bulging muscles, the answer would have been obvious. As this series understands it, he may well have looked like an ordinary man, and his enemies knew there was a secret.

"Every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver." There were five lords of the Philistines. Five times eleven hundred is fifty-five hundred pieces of silver. In the very next chapter a Levite is hired as a household priest for **"ten shekels of silver by the year"** (Judges 17:10). Delilah was offered the wages of five centuries.

> **Judges 16:6** *And Delilah said to Samson, Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee.*

She did not even disguise it. *Tell me how you can be tied up and hurt.*

Three times Samson lied to her, and three times she tested the lie with Philistines hidden in the room:

- **Seven fresh bowstrings** (*"green withs,"* sinews or cords not yet dried) — he snapped them **"as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire"** (16:7-9).
- **New ropes never used** — he broke them **"from off his arms like a thread"** (16:11-12).

- **His seven locks woven into the loom** and pinned — he woke and walked off with the loom (16:13-14).

Each time she said, **"The Philistines be upon thee, Samson."** Each time there were men hidden in the chamber. Each time she proved she meant to hand him over. And each time he came back and lay down with his head in her lap again.

With the third lie, notice, he came closer to the truth: *my hair*. He was playing with the one thing he was charged to keep.

> **Judges 16:15** *And she said unto him, How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart is not with me? thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength lieth.*
> **Judges 16:16** *And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death;*
> **Judges 16:17** *That he told her all his heart, and said unto her, There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.*

"How canst thou say, I love thee?" The same weapon his wife had used at Timnath: *if you loved me, you would tell me.*

"His soul was vexed unto death." Literally, *his soul was shortened to death* — worn down until he could bear no more. This is an **idiom** for being wearied beyond endurance.

"He told her all his heart." He knew what she would do with it. She had proven it three times.

"If I be shaven, then my strength will go from me." Samson said this, and it was true — but not because there was power in hair. His hair was the last outward mark of his separation to God. He had already broken the other two parts of his vow. When the hair went, there was nothing left of the vow at all.

"He Wist Not That the LORD Was Departed From Him"

> **Judges 16:18** *And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, Come up this once, for he hath shewed me all his heart. Then the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and brought money in their hand.*
> **Judges 16:19** *And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him.*

"Brought money in their hand." She was paid.

"She called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks." A common misconception, repeated in countless paintings, is that Delilah cut Samson's hair herself. Scripture says she called a man to do it while Samson slept with his head on her knees. The detail matters less than the misunderstanding it usually travels with: that Samson's strength was *in* his hair.

> **Judges 16:20** *And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.*

Here is the answer to the misconception, in scripture's own words. Samson's strength did not go because the hair went. **"The LORD was departed from him."** The strength had always been the LORD's — the spirit of the LORD coming upon him. When Samson gave up the last sign of his separation to God, God withdrew.

"I will go out as at other times before." He assumed the power would be there as it always had been. He had grown so used to God's strength that he treated it as his own.

"He wist not." He *did not know*. That is the most frightening sentence in Samson's story. A man can drift so far from God, a step at a time, that he does not notice when God's power has gone.

Blind, Bound and Grinding

> **Judges 16:21** *But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.*

"Put out his eyes." The eyes that had *seen* the woman at Timnath and the harlot at Gaza, the eyes by which he did what was *right in his eyes*, were gouged out.

"Brought him down to Gaza." The city whose gates he had carried away.

"He did grind in the prison house." Grinding grain at a hand mill was the work of slaves and the lowest servant women (Exodus 11:5; Isaiah 47:2). The strongest man in the world was put to women's work, pushing a millstone round and round in the dark.

> **Judges 16:22** *Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.*

"Howbeit." *But.* One small word of hope. The Philistines did not notice or did not care. As this series understands it, the growing hair was a sign that Samson's separation to God was being renewed — and that God had not finished with him.

Dagon's Feast

> **Judges 16:23** *Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.*
>
> **Judges 16:24** *And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us.*

"Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand." This is what Samson's sin cost. It was no longer a contest between Samson and the Philistines. The Philistines gave the credit to Dagon. The honour of the LORD was at stake.

> **Judges 16:25** *And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars.*
>
> **Judges 16:26** *And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them.*

> **Judges 16:27** *Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.*

"That he may make us sport." They brought him out to be mocked — to make them laugh.

"The lad that held him by the hand." The man who had carried the gates of Gaza now had to be led by a boy.

"The pillars whereupon the house standeth." Archaeologists excavating the Philistine city at Tell Qasile, near modern Tel Aviv, have uncovered a Philistine temple from about this period whose roof was held up by two wooden pillars standing on stone bases close together in the middle of the hall. A man standing between them could have reached both. The find shows the kind of building Judges describes.

"About three thousand men and women" on the flat roof, looking down into the courtyard.

Only This Once

> **Judges 16:28** *And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.*

"Samson called unto the LORD." In the dark, with a boy holding his hand and three thousand people laughing at him, Samson prayed.

"O Lord GOD … O God." Three names of God in one prayer: *Adonai Yehovih … Elohim*. He called on the LORD by every name he knew.

"Remember me, I pray thee." In the Bible, for God to *remember* is not merely to recall; it is to act on someone's behalf (compare **"God remembered Noah,"** Genesis 8:1).

"Only this once." Samson knew he did not deserve it. He asked anyway.

"That I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." Even now his motive was mixed. He prayed for revenge for his eyes. Scripture records it honestly, as it records everything about Samson. And God answered — not because Samson's motives were pure, but because Samson called on Him, and because the honour of God's own name had been mocked in Dagon's house.

> **Judges 16:29** *And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.*
>
> **Judges 16:30** *And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.*

"Let me die with the Philistines." Literally, *let my soul die with the Philistines*. The Hebrew *nephesh*, "soul," here means his life, his very self. Samson died as a soldier dies in battle, giving his life to destroy his nation's enemies.

"He bowed himself with all his might." He pushed the pillars apart, and the roof, loaded with three thousand people, came down.

“The dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.” All the lords of the Philistines died at once. The day of Dagon’s great sacrifice became the day Dagon’s temple fell on his worshippers. Later, when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and set it in Dagon’s temple at Ashdod, Dagon would fall on his face before it (1 Samuel 5:3-4). The LORD would not share His glory with Dagon.

> **Judges 16:31** *Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the buryingplace of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.*

“Buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol.” Samson’s story ends where it began: **“the Spirit of the LORD began to move him … between Zorah and Eshtaol”** (13:25). His family brought him home. He lies there awaiting the resurrection, with all the faithful of the Old Testament who **“received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect”** (Hebrews 11:39-40).

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

Readers have long noticed parallels between Samson and Jesus Christ. As this series understands it, they are real, and they are best read as much for their contrasts as for their likenesses.

Announced by an angel. An angel announced Samson’s birth to his mother, and he was set apart to God from the womb, to **“begin to deliver Israel.”** An angel announced the birth of Jesus to Mary: **“thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS”** (Luke 1:31) — *Jesus*, “the LORD is salvation.” Samson began the deliverance. Jesus Christ finished it.

“Wonderful.” The angel’s name at Samson’s announcement was *peli*, “wonderful.” The Messiah’s name in Isaiah is *pele*, “Wonderful” (Isaiah 9:6).

Handed over by his own. The men of Judah bound Samson and delivered him to the Philistines. The leaders of Judah delivered Jesus to the Romans, and He was betrayed for silver — **“thirty pieces of silver”** (Matthew 26:15), as Samson was betrayed for silver.

Victory in death. Samson’s death with arms outstretched between two pillars destroyed more enemies than his whole life. Jesus Christ, with arms stretched out on the cross, won by His death what no life could win: **“that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”** (Hebrews 2:14-15).

And the contrasts. Samson’s strength was taken from him; no one took Christ’s life — **“No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself”** (John 10:18). Samson died praying for revenge; Christ died praying, **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”** (Luke 23:34). Samson died for his own sins’ consequences; Christ, who had no sin, died for ours. Samson stayed in the grave; Christ was raised from the dead on the third day and ascended to the right hand of God: **“he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him”** (Philippians 2:8-9). Samson only *began* to deliver Israel. Jesus Christ is the Deliverer who never failed.

A Nazarene, not a Nazarite. Matthew says Jesus **"shall be called a Nazarene"** (Matthew 2:23), because He grew up in Nazareth. That is a different word from *Nazarite*. Jesus was not under a Nazarite vow: He drank wine (Luke 7:34) and touched the dead to raise them. His separation to God was not in outward signs but in a perfectly obedient life.

To the Grace Administration

The spirit came upon; now it is within. Samson's strength came when **"the Spirit of the LORD came upon him,"** and it departed from him. David, who saw the same thing happen to Saul (1 Samuel 16:14), prayed, **"take not thy holy spirit from me"** (Psalm 51:11). In the grace administration the gift of holy spirit is given *within* every believer and seals him: **"in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance"** (Ephesians 1:13-14). A believer today will never wake up to find the gift gone. **"For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance"** (Romans 11:29). But a believer can do what Samson did in another sense — live so carelessly that God's power is not seen in his life. **"And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption"** (Ephesians 4:30).

Separated to God. The Nazarite vow was about separation. Believers are not under that vow, but they are called to the same heart: **"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you"** (2 Corinthians 6:17). **"Ye are not your own ... For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's"** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Walking by the eyes. Samson did what was right in his own eyes. **"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh"** (Galatians 5:16).

"He wist not." The quiet danger of drifting. **"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12). **"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life"** (Proverbs 4:23).

It is never too late to call. Samson's hair began to grow again, and he called on the LORD at the very end, and God answered. **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9). **"If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself"** (2 Timothy 2:13).

Vengeance belongs to God. Samson's life was one long cycle of revenge. Believers are told the opposite: **"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord"** (Romans 12:19). Christ is the example: **"when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously"** (1 Peter 2:23).

To the Topic of Gifts and Character

- **Great gifts do not make a great man.** Character does.
- **God's power is God's,** not ours to spend as we please.
- **Compromise is usually gradual:** the vineyard, the carcass, the feast, the harlot, the lap.
- **Playing with temptation** — Samson's third lie came closer and closer to the truth.
- **Those who love God's people will not use tears as a weapon;** those who do are not to be trusted.
- **God's purpose is not defeated by man's failure,** but man still reaps what he sows.
- **God hears a humble prayer,** even the last one.

The Main Takeaway

Samson was set apart to God before his birth, announced by an angel whose name was "Wonderful," and given strength by the spirit of the LORD to begin Israel's deliverance from the Philistines; but he lived by what was "right in his own eyes," breaking his Nazarite separation piece by piece — the carcass, the feast, the harlot, and at last the secret of his hair — until "he wist not that the LORD was departed from him"; blinded and grinding in a Philistine prison, with his hair growing back, he called on the LORD, "remember me … strengthen me, only this once," and God answered, bringing down Dagon's temple and all the lords of the Philistines — a warning that God's gifts are not our own, and a witness that God hears whoever calls on Him.

- **The strength was never in the hair;** it was the LORD's.
- **Gifts without character end in ruin.**
- **Compromise happens a step at a time,** and a man may not notice when God's power has gone.
- **God works His purpose even through human failure.**
- **It is never too late to call on God.**
- **Samson began to deliver; Jesus Christ is the Deliverer who never failed.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Samson.** A Danite of Zorah, a Nazarite from the womb, judge of Israel twenty years; named in Hebrews 11:32.
- **Manoah.** Samson's father, who prayed to know how to raise the child.
- **Manoah's wife.** Unnamed; barren until the angel's promise; wiser in faith than her husband.
- **The angel of the LORD.** Announced Samson's birth, refused worship, and whose name was "secret" (*wonderful*).
- **The woman of Timnath.** Samson's Philistine wife, who betrayed his riddle under threat and was later burned with her father.
- **The thirty companions.** Philistine guests at the wedding feast.
- **The men of Judah.** Three thousand who bound Samson to hand him over.
- **The harlot of Gaza.** Unnamed.
- **Delilah.** A woman of the valley of Sorek who sold Samson to the Philistines for 5,500 pieces of silver.
- **The lords of the Philistines.** The rulers of the five Philistine cities, killed in Dagon's temple.
- **The lad.** The boy who led the blind Samson by the hand.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The Nazarite vow:** no wine or grapes, no razor, no contact with the dead (Numbers 6).
- **Barrenness** as a deep sorrow, and sons of promise born to barren women.
- **Hospitality:** preparing a kid for a guest.

- **Arranged marriage:** a son asking his parents to "get her for me."
- **The seven-day wedding feast** (*mishteh*, a drinking feast), with companions of the groom.
- **Riddles and wagers** at feasts; linen garments and festive clothing as prizes.
- **Visiting a wife with a kid** as a gift.
- **Jackals or foxes** in the land; the dry wheat harvest.
- **Hiding in rock strongholds** (Etam).
- **Binding a prisoner with new cords.**
- **City gates** of wooden doors, posts and bar.
- **Bribes of silver** from the five Philistine lords.
- **Blinding prisoners;** grinding at the mill as slave or women's work.
- **Pagan temples** with flat roofs and central pillars; feasts to celebrate a god's victory.
- **Family burial places.**

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Idiom of permission** — "the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines" (13:1).
- **Idiom** — "she pleaseth me well," literally "she is right in my eyes" (14:3); "hip and thigh" (15:8), completely; "his soul was vexed unto death" (16:16), worn down beyond endurance.
- **Riddle (aenigma)** — "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" (14:14).
- **Simile** — "as he would have rent a kid" (14:6); "as flax that was burnt with fire" (15:14); "as a thread of tow is broken" (16:9).
- **Metaphor** — "If ye had not plowed with my heifer" (14:18).
- **Paronomasia** — "with the jawbone of an ass (*chamor*), heaps upon heaps (*chamor chamorathayim*)" (15:16).
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — "Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren?" (14:3); "How canst thou say, I love thee?" (16:15).
- **Repetition** — "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson" (four times, 16:9, 12, 14, 20).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Israel did not cry out to God** in this cycle; God raised up Samson anyway.
- **Samson was a Nazarite from the womb for life,** by God's choice, not his own.
- **The angel's name was "secret" — *peli*, "wonderful."**
- **Samson's parents rightly objected to his Philistine marriage** (Deuteronomy 7:3).
- **"It was of the LORD" (14:4)** means God used the situation, not that He approved the marriage.
- **Samson touched the dead lion and ate honey from it,** and did not tell his parents.
- **The men of Judah bound Samson** and handed him over.

- **Delilah did not cut Samson's hair herself;** she called a man to shave it.
- **The strength was not in the hair:** "the LORD was departed from him."
- **"He wist not"** — Samson did not know the LORD had left him.
- **Samson's hair began to grow again.**
- **Samson prayed, "remember me … only this once," and God answered.**
- **Samson is named among the faithful in Hebrews 11:32.**

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants His people separated to Him,** not to the gods and ways of the nations.
- **God gives gifts for His purposes,** not for our pleasure or revenge.
- **God is faithful** even to a people who have stopped asking for help.
- **God's purpose is not defeated** by the failures of those He uses.
- **God defends the honour of His name** against false gods.
- **God hears whoever calls on Him,** even at the last.
- **God was preparing the true Deliverer,** Jesus Christ — crucified, raised, and ascended — who finished the work Samson only began.