

Compromise

SAMSON'S PHYSICAL STRENGTH COULD NOT SAVE HIM FROM
THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS WEAK MORAL CHARACTER.

Lance Armstrong was the top athlete in cycling from 1999 until 2005, winning seven consecutive Tour de France titles. His ability and hard work made him a hero to many. In addition to his victories and trophies, Lance was an inspiration to those who were struggling with cancer. He had been diagnosed with the disease himself and managed to overcome—a recovery which gave hope to many. Armstrong founded an organization called the Livestrong Foundation, which raised millions of dollars for cancer research and support. He seemed to embody everything that people thought was good and noble.

Sadly, there was a darker, hidden side to the story. Lance had compromised his integrity and character that so many admired by using performance-enhancing drugs. When proof of his cheating was finally made available, the revelation shattered Armstrong's reputation, along with the hearts of those who had looked up to him. What made the revelations worse was the fact that he had faced accusations of illicit drug use several times and had repeatedly denied the charges. The truth now became clear: not only had Armstrong used the drugs, but he had consistently lied about it and had encouraged many to believe him. In this way, Lance added insult to injury among his fans.

In 2012, the United States Anti-Doping Agency exposed Lance's systematic use of the drugs that helped him reach the top. The results of Armstrong's compromise were significant. He was stripped of all seven of the Tour de France titles and was banned from the Olympic sport of cycling for life. His legacy was left in tatters. The good that he had done disappeared like so much dust in the wind. The endorsements he had won and the income he had generated for good causes dried up. Armstrong had compromised his character for success.

This session will focus on a biblical figure who, like Lance Armstrong, was willing to do whatever it took to get what he wanted. As with Lance, the biblical judge Samson could have been a great hero who helped many of his fellow Israelites. Instead, Samson left a legacy largely tarnished by his selfish desires and lack of commitment to God.

Judges 13:1–21:25

The context of the story of Samson is familiar: the people of Israel were again doing evil in the sight of the Lord, and as a result, God subjected Israel to the Philistines. The tribe of Dan was the most affected by the neighboring Philistines (see Judg. 18), and God raised up a deliverer from that tribe. Samson was unique among the judges of Israel in that his selection was prophesied before his conception. His barren mother was visited by the angel of the LORD, who told her she would have a child who would be a Nazirite, meaning that he could not touch any dead thing, cut his hair, or drink anything made from grapes (Judg. 13; see Num. 6). These outward signs showed a person was dedicated to the Lord.

In Samson’s adult years, there are only two points at which he spoke to God, and in both cases, God granted his request without a verbal response (Judg. 15:18-19; 16:28). Samson didn’t appear to have much of a relationship with God apart from those two instances, and this played out in some of his choices. In addition to the episode at his death, the “Spirit of the LORD” came upon Samson four times. The first instance was at some point in Samson’s early life when the Spirit of the Lord began to “stir” Samson (13:25). In the next episode involving the Spirit and Samson, a lion attacked him (14:5-6). The Spirit came upon Samson so that he killed the lion with his bare hands. The third episode in which Samson was empowered by the Spirit was when he killed thirty Philistine men from Ashkelon and took their cloaks to pay off a gambling debt (14:19). The final episode was when the Philistines attacked Judah. The Spirit came upon Samson, and he slew a thousand Philistine men with the jawbone of a donkey (15:14). After the battle, Samson cried out to God—the first recorded time he did so in the story—asking for water because he was thirsty. God provided a spring of water to satisfy his thirst (vv. 18-19).

Chapter 16 opens the well-known story of Delilah. Giving further insight into Samson’s character, the story starts by noting Samson visited a prostitute. Samson was largely self-serving throughout his life and demonstrated a willingness to compromise his Nazirite vow to get what he wanted. His love for Delilah followed the same pattern. The text states Samson loved Delilah, but this “love” was likely purely desire. There is no indication that Delilah shared Samson’s feelings, and when she was offered a large amount of money to betray him, she didn’t hesitate. Her own selfish ambition matched Samson’s and was his downfall.

After Samson's capture and death, the rest of the book of Judges is a continued downward spiral that illustrates the Israelites' continued choice to compromise their character and their relationship with the Lord.



Strength Departed (Judg. 16:16-20)

Delilah coaxed Samson into telling her the secret of his strength—his long hair. He explained that his hair had never been cut because of his Nazirite vow. If it were cut, his strength would be gone. So while he slept in her lap, she called a Philistine to cut Samson's hair, and his strength left him.

VERSES 16-17

Because she nagged him day after day and pleaded with him until she wore him out, he 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.”

Samson's downfall stemmed from the many compromises he made in his life, one of which was his relationship with the ungodly and untrustworthy Delilah. Bribed to find out the source of Samson's strength (vv. 4-5), she was unrelenting in pressuring him for the answer. After he lied to her three times (vv. 6-14), Samson eventually gave in and told her the truth: namely because she **nagged him** and **wore him out**.

Samson explained that his **hair has never been cut** because he was a **Nazirite**. The implication for Samson was that cutting his hair would be a complete rejection of his Nazirite vow—and, by extension, a complete rejection of his commitment to God. By telling Delilah that cutting his hair would cause his **strength to leave** him, Samson chose her over God. We can only speculate what Samson was thinking. Ultimately, whatever his thought process, Samson was foolish to trust Delilah yet again.

VERSE 18

When Delilah realized that he had told her the whole truth, she sent this message to the Philistine leaders: “Come one

more time, for he has told me the whole truth.” The Philistine leaders came to her and brought the silver with them.

As with the previous times (vv. 6-14), Delilah set up the betrayal of Samson to the Philistines. This time she knew that Samson **had told her the whole truth**. There was an intimacy to his trust of Delilah this time around. She called **the Philistine leaders**, assuring them that this time she had him. They came, bringing along **the silver** that they had promised her for delivering Samson into their hands (v. 5).

VERSE 19

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.

Delilah **let him fall asleep on her lap** before calling someone over to cut Samson’s hair. The picture of the intimate trust that Samson had for Delilah at this point and her utter betrayal in spite of it is a powerful one. After her accomplice cut off Samson’s hair, she effectively **made him helpless**. Samson’s **strength left him**. Samson’s trust in Delilah despite her past attempts to betray him finally brought about his downfall.

VERSE 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.

This verse repeats a pattern we’ve seen with Delilah’s previous attempts to betray Samson: she wakes him up by crying out that the Philistines are there. Samson, coming out of an apparently deep sleep did not seem to notice his new haircut. He stated, **“I will escape as I did before and shake myself free.”** Samson expected to go out from the house and brush off any attempts to restrain him just as he had before. He had the confidence of experience. And yet, one has to wonder about Samson’s thought process. Did he think that even if Delilah did cut his hair, he wouldn’t pay a price? Did he expect that Delilah would not betray him? If either of these is true, it only shows how foolish Samson was.

At this moment, the pattern is broken. The last sentence is pregnant with meaning: **“But he did not know that the LORD had left him.”** The word translated as *left* is the same one describing his strength

leaving him in verse 19. It is based on the Hebrew verb which means “to turn away.” This use of the same verb underlines the parallel: Samson’s strength had left him because *the LORD* had left him. Whenever Samson performed a great act of strength, it was because “the Spirit of the LORD” came upon him. His amazing strength was always tied to God working through him. In this way, Samson was a representative of the whole nation of Israel. Like Samson, the Israelites in the book of Judges were only nominally loyal to God when they were loyal at all. They were driven by their own desires rather than any desire to please God. When they had victory over their oppressors, it was because of God’s intercession. In some ways, both Samson and the Israelites came to view the Lord almost like a genie in a bottle; they only sought Him out when they needed something. In all other situations, they did what was right in their own eyes. These attitudes led to self-destruction for both Israel and Samson.



Explore Further

Read “Nazirite” on page 1149 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In addition to Samson, both Samuel and John the Baptist were life long Nazirites. How successful were Samuel and John the Baptist in keeping their vows in comparison to Samson? What was the core principle that made the difference? How can you apply this core principle to your own relationship with God?

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Samson Defeated (Judg. 16:21-25)

The Philistines seized Samson, gouged out his eyes, bound him, and put him in prison. While in prison, Samson’s hair began to grow back. Samson’s captors celebrated his capture by praising their god Dagon, believing he had handed Samson over to them. For their entertainment, they brought Samson out of prison and stood him between two pillars.

VERSES 21-22

The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles, and he was forced to grind grain in the prison. But his hair began to grow back after it had been shaved.

In the end, Samson was defeated by his appetites, especially his love for beautiful but ungodly women. The Philistines seize Samson and **gouged out his eyes**. Pragmatically, by blinding him, the Philistines had incapacitated Samson so that even if he had his strength, he could be easily controlled. However, the Philistines also removed a major source of Samson's sin. The lust of his eyes was what led him into most of his conflicts and, indeed, what put him into the situation that allowed his capture.

The Philistines brought Samson to **Gaza**, which likely foreshadowed bad news for that city. After all, it was in Gaza where Samson escaped a Philistine ambush and ripped out the city gates, depositing them in Hebron (vv. 1-3). The author may have been hinting that Samson would be the undoing of the city once again. The section ends with a forewarning: Samson's **hair began to grow back**.

VERSES 23-24

Now the Philistine leaders gathered together to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon. They rejoiced and said: "Our god has handed over our enemy Samson to us." When the people saw him, they praised their god and said: "Our god has handed over to us our enemy who destroyed our land and who multiplied our dead."

The Philistines celebrated their victory. Following the custom for a victory celebration in the ancient Near East, the Philistines worshiped and thanked their god for the victory. The primary Philistine god was called **Dagon**. He was most likely a storm god, which would have made him roughly equivalent to the Canaanite god Baal or a fertility god in charge of the harvest. Whatever his exact role in their pantheon, we see the Philistines credited him with the victory: **"Our god has handed over our enemy Samson to us."** In the ancient world, when one people group defeated another in battle, it was assumed that their god had defeated the god of the enemy. It was par for the course, then, for the victors to make offerings and even to bring in plunder from the enemy's temples to put in the temple of their own god. (See Dan. 1:1-2 for an example.) In the case of Samson, he himself was the main war trophy, and so he was their focus. Interestingly, this praise to Dagon for handing over Samson is stated twice (16:23-24). The second time, the Philistines do not mention Samson by name but refer to him as **"our enemy who destroyed our land and who multiplied our dead."** Samson's career was summarized in this statement. He had killed many Philistines. Now they had final victory over this troublesome Israelite . . . or so they thought.

VERSE 25

When they were in good spirits, they said, “Bring Samson here to entertain us.” So they brought Samson from prison, and he entertained them. They had him stand between the pillars.

When the Philistines **were in good spirits**, they ordered **Samson** to be brought into the temple for “entertainment.” *In good spirits* (literally “good of heart”) could refer to a drunken state or may just indicate that the group was in a very good mood after their victory. Either way, the Philistine leaders wanted to continue the celebration by mocking their once mighty foe. It is unclear what the “entertainment” by Samson involved, but the idea is that his very existence, blind and broken, was the source of joy. The proverbial lion that had once inspired fear stood before them without its teeth and powerless. The people enjoyed the sight. Samson would have needed help to find his way around or he would have stumbled and run into things. Thus, the Philistines placed him **between the pillars**. This would have given him something to lean on and would also have kept him visible but out of the way. The Philistines felt secure in their victory.



Explore Further

Samson consistently relied on the power and abilities God gave him (rather than God Himself) to get what he wanted and to help him get out of trouble. Only when his strength failed him did he then call out to God. Throughout the book of Judges, Israel operated in much the same way. Are there strengths or qualities that you have that you find yourself leaning on instead of relying on God first? How does Samson’s story

- challenge you to change that behavior?

Philistines Destroyed (Judg. 16:26-31)

When Samson called on God to strengthen him once again, the Lord heard and answered his prayer. Samson pushed against the pillars of the Philistine temple with all his strength. The temple collapsed, killing many Philistines as well as Samson. His family came, carried his body home, and buried him in the tomb of his father.

VERSE 26

Samson said to the young man who was leading him by the hand, “Lead me where I can feel the pillars supporting the temple, so I can lean against them.”

Samson asked to be **“where I can feel the pillars supporting the temple.”** Many ancient temples had pillars both around the outer perimeter and within the central area of the structure. Samson appears to have been near some of the inner pillars of the temple of Dagon. The word *supporting* is key here. These pillars were load bearing, and if they shifted or broke the whole structure would collapse inward.

Samson told the young man that he wished to **lean against them.** It seems likely that Samson had a plan in mind. After all, he had faced off with the people of Gaza before, when they had plotted to kill him and he escaped by ripping the gate from the city walls (vv. 2-3). Samson’s encounter with Gaza would be even more destructive this time.

VERSE 27

The temple was full of men and women; all the leaders of the Philistines were there, and about three thousand men and women were on the roof watching Samson entertain them.

The temple was full of men and women and all the leaders of the Philistines. The Philistines’ social system was hierarchical and feudal; the gathered leaders were equivalent to dukes, earls, counts, and princes. The Philistines had five largely independent cities in the coastal area of Canaan. These cities sometimes worked together due to their common ethnic identity. That the verse mentions both *men* and *women* indicates this event was celebration of the important people in the community. While the celebration may just have included nobles from the city of Gaza, it’s very possible that at least a few dignitaries from these other cities were present as well. In addition, the verse states that there were **three thousand men and women on the roof** watching Samson. The large amount of people on the roof, which was most likely flat, meant that a very large crowd must have been present on the ground floor as well.

VERSE 28

He called out to the LORD, “Lord God, please remember me. Strengthen me, God, just once more. With one act of vengeance, let me pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.”

This is Samson's first genuinely humble prayer to God; he shows a dependence on God's power that we have not seen before. Samson requested three things. First, he asked God to **remember** him. Samson was asking God to act on his behalf. Second, he asked God to **strengthen** him. Samson acknowledged that any strength he had came from God. This is quite a change as well. Prior to his downfall, Samson operated as if the strength was his and his alone. Third, he asked God to let him **pay back the Philistines** for blinding him. In this last request, we see that Samson still didn't understand his role before God. He seeks **vengeance** more than justice and payback more than serving God. His focus was on the wrong done to him rather than on delivering the Israelites from the Philistines' oppression. While we see some growth, then, Samson's flawed character remained.

VERSES 29-30

Samson took hold of the two middle pillars supporting the temple and leaned against them, one on his right hand and the other on his left. Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the leaders and all the people in it. And those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life.

Verses 29-31 detail the sad end of Samson's life and the death of many Philistines. Indeed, death, more than victory, is the theme of the end of Samson's life. This emphasis is seen in the fact that the Hebrew word for **death** occurs five times in verse 30. There is no happy ending in this story, and in that, Samson's story reflects the book of Judges as a whole.

God granted Samson's request; the prisoner put all his strength into pushing on the load-bearing pillars of the temple. Samson wished to **die with the Philistines**. This last wish may sound somewhat noble, and modern audiences might see Samson as the self-sacrificial hero, delivering his people. However, it is important to remember that this heroic image does not fit with Samson's overall character as we have seen it in Judges 13-16. Samson was used to doing whatever he pleased. A life lived as a blind man, dependent on others, would not have been something he would have wanted. In fact, there is no indication that Samson was bringing down the temple for anyone else but himself. God used the event for other purposes, but He did so despite Samson. The verse concludes by noting that those Samson **killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life**. This was his legacy: he was a killer of Philistines.

VERSE 31

Then his brothers and his father's whole family came down, carried him back, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. So he judged Israel twenty years.

Samson's family **buried** the mighty warrior. The place names serve as bookends for Samson's story, since they hearken back to the beginning of his tale in 13:2. Samson **judged Israel twenty years**. Unfortunately, his time as a judge cannot be deemed a success. The angel forecasted this outcome when he said that Samson would only begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (13:5).

The story of Samson is a fascinating, albeit sad, tale. God provided a judge to help fight the Philistines even though the Israelites had not yet cried out for deliverance from their oppression. God raised up a judge from a barren woman who had not asked to be relieved of her barrenness. Samson did punish the Philistines to a limited extent, but did so because of his own selfish desires, not because he wished to honor God. He did not live up to his role as a deliverer. In this, Samson accurately reflected the character of Israel at the time of the judges: both did what was right in their own eyes (see 17:6; 21:25; ESV, KJV, NASB). Thankfully, God was still working. He accomplished His purposes in spite of the deeply flawed nature of Samson and His people.



Explore Further

Read the article "Humility" on page 777 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The only time we really see Samson practice humility is in his prayer to God before he destroys the temple of Dagon. It took Samson having no options left to be truly dependent on God. In Hebrew, the word for *humility* carries the idea of being afflicted. Was there a time in which you were forced to be totally dependent on God and therefore humble yourself before Him? What can you do to cultivate a consistent attitude of humility, trust, and faithfulness before God in your daily life?
