

UNIT 1: JOSHUA AND JUDGES

Lesson 7

Unusual Strength: Samson

Christians should be singularly focused on fulfilling God's purpose for their lives.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

The life of Samson—from his birth announcement, feats of strength, and triumph in death—was unique. Though often driven by sinful appetites and passions, God used Samson as a response to the Philistines' oppression of Israel. God delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines (Judges 13:1), but God also set the boundaries concerning how much any nation could oppress His people. Samson kept the Philistines in check, hindering their ability to expand their control in Israel. Though Samson often took his role and responsibility too casually, eventually costing him his eyes and freedom, he returned to his anointed role in a moment of spiritual clarity, winning a great victory through his death.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Philistines (the "sea peoples") invaded Canaan from the Mediterranean Sea around 1200 B.C. They lived along the coast and established a five-city confederation: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron. Their forty-year oppression of Israel would have spanned Samson's life since he became a judge at around the age of twenty and judged Israel for twenty years (Judges 15:20; 16:31). The lives of Samson and Samuel apparently overlapped because, with God's help, Samuel helped to "*subdue*" the Philistines after Samson died (1 Samuel 7:10-14). However, it was not until David's reign that they were decisively defeated and ceased to be a threat to Israel.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. BORN FOR GOD'S PURPOSE Judges 13:1–14

- A. The Consecrated Child (1–5)
- B. The Consecrated Mother (6–14)

2. ENTICED AWAY FROM GOD Judges 16:4–22

- A. Samson's Weakness Exposed (4–17)
- B. Samson's Weakness Exploited (18–22)

3. ONE FINAL VICTORY Judges 16:23–31

- A. Philistines Worship a False God (23–27)
- B. Samson Calls on the True God (28–31)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. BORN FOR GOD'S PURPOSE *Judges 13:1-14*

A. The Consecrated Child *Judges 13:1-5*

In verse 1, for the seventh time in Judges, the text states, *"Israel did evil ... in the sight of the Lord."* This time, Israel would experience oppression for forty years, which was the longest period of oppression listed in Judges. As was always the case, their *"evil"* included idolatry. Judges 10:6 states in addition to other false gods, Israel *"served ... the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him"* (NKJV). As part of the process of turning the hearts of His people back to Him, God allowed the Philistines to oppress Israel. Unlike other accounts of the cycle of sin—disobedience, punishment, repentance, and deliverance—this time, the text does not state Israel cried out to the Lord. Instead, God sovereignly chose to raise up a judge.

In this case, the judge had not yet been born. God found a childless couple, and the Angel of the Lord appeared to the wife of Manoah with the promise that she would conceive and give birth to a son (v. 3). In that culture, a son was particularly important because he would be responsible for his parents' welfare during their later years. The unique thing about this child was he was to be committed to the Nazarite vow (see Numbers 6:2-6) from birth and keep it throughout his life. Indeed, Samson's mother was not to drink anything prohibited by the vow or eat any unclean food during her pregnancy. Typically, such a vow was made for a specific period of time, but this vow was to be made from Samson's birth throughout his life.

The Nazarite vow was stricter than even the requirements for priests and included a prohibition of alcoholic drinks of any kind, nor anything made from grapes. In addition, a person was not to cut their hair while observing this vow, which, in Samson's case, meant he was never to cut his hair. It was a commitment to a wholly devoted life consecrated to God. The angel went on to tell Manoah's wife that her son *"shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines"* (v. 5). Unlike other judges who won decisive victories over their oppressors, Samson would *"begin"* the process of deliverance that would continue under Samuel, Saul, and David.

B. The Consecrated Mother *Judges 13:6-14*

She described her encounter with the angel to her husband, Manoah, calling the angel *"a man of God."* She added, *"His countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible"* (v. 6). She then repeated the instructions the angel had her given concerning their promised son (v. 7). Hearing the words of his wife, Manoah prayed for the Lord to send the *"man of God"* (v. 8) again to provide further instructions concerning how the child was to be raised. God heard the prayer and sent the angel, but again, the angel appeared only to Manoah's wife when he was not with her (v. 9). Knowing Manoah wanted to hear from the angel as well, she ran to tell her husband, who quickly returned with her to see him.

When Manoah approached the angel, he asked if he was the one who had previously spoken with his wife, and the angel said, *"I am"* (v. 11). Manoah then asked the angel how the child was to be raised, and he essentially said, *"I already told your wife. Do that."* The angel reiterated the need for the woman to observe a form of the Nazarite vow before and during her pregnancy. While still in the womb, Samson was consecrated to the Lord. Manoah did not recognize this *"man"* was an angel, so he offered Middle Eastern hospitality with a meal, but the angel told him to make a sacrifice to the Lord (v. 16). Manoah asked the angel his name, and he said, *"It is a secret"* (v. 18), but the Hebrew word for *secret* also means *"wonderful."*

Manoah killed a young goat and laid it on a rock as a sacrifice; a flame of fire came up from the rock to consume it, and the angel ascended into Heaven in the flame (vv. 19-20). Manoah suddenly realized they had been in the presence of God and feared they would die (v. 22). But his wife wisely observed if God intended to kill them, then He would not have accepted the sacrifice.

2. ENTICED AWAY FROM GOD *Judges 16:4–22*

A. Samson’s Weakness Exposed *Judges 16:4–17*

Manoah and his wife did as they were told, and God used Samson to attack the Philistines on various occasions. Throughout Samson’s life, there were fantastic feats of strength, but the Bible is clear that his exploits were not by his human ability. Only when the Spirit of the Lord moved upon Samson (15:14) could he do such things as kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey (vv. 15-16). When Samson maintained the requirements of the Nazarite vow, especially as it related to not cutting his hair, God was willing to anoint him with the ability to serve as a champion of Israel. Samson had a weakness for women, but God used Samson’s weaknesses to create opportunities for Samson to attack the Philistines.

Samson *“loved a woman”* (probably a Philistine) named *“Delilah”* (16:4). She was at least the third woman with whom Samson had a relationship. The Philistine leaders bribed her with eleven hundred pieces of silver to discover and disclose the source of Samson’s strength. Previously, they tried to trap him in the city of Gaza by closing and locking the gates while he spent the night with a prostitute. But finding the gates locked, he tore them from their hinges and carried them to the top of a hill outside the city (vv. 1-3). They knew his strength was beyond natural human ability, so they employed Delilah to discover his secret.

Delilah repeatedly and relentlessly asked Samson to tell her where his strength came from and how he could be bound and afflicted (vv. 6, 10, 13). This should have been a warning for Samson, but he took the threat lightly and lied to her. Each time the Philistines attempted to bind Samson, he easily broke free. This happened three times, but Samson ignored the obvious threat while Delilah continued to press him for the truth. She was so persistent, urging him to tell her until *“his soul was vexed unto death”* (v. 16). Finally, *“he told her all his heart,”* explaining if his hair were cut, he would *“become weak, and be like any other man”* (v. 17).

B. Samson’s Weakness Exploited *Judges 16:18–22*

Having discovered Samson’s secret, Delilah summoned the leaders of the Philistines, telling them that Samson had told her the truth this time. They brought her the money and were nearby waiting to seize Samson. Delilah waited until he fell asleep on her knees and then called in a Philistine to come and cut the seven thick locks of hair from his head, *“and his strength went from him”* (v. 19).

As she had done before, she told Samson the Philistines were upon him. He awoke from his sleep thinking he would *“go out as before ... and shake myself free”* (v. 20a NKJV), and defeat his attackers. However, he did not realize *“the LORD had departed from him”* (v. 20b). Through his arrogance, Samson had violated his vow, and the Spirit no longer anointed him with supernatural strength. As a result, the Philistines were able to subdue him, put out his eyes, take him to Gaza, and bind him in fetters to a millstone to grind grain in the prison (v. 21). Over time, however, Samson’s hair began to grow back, and therefore, he could renew his Nazarite vow (v. 22).

3. ONE FINAL VICTORY *Judges 16:23–31*

A. Philistines Worship a False God *Judges 16:23–27*

Samson was chained to a mill in prison, where he was used for grinding grain. The Philistines believed they had ended his attacks, but Samson's hair grew as time passed, and he renewed his vow to God. One day, as the Philistines gathered in a great assembly to offer sacrifices to their false god, Dagon, they proclaimed their god had delivered Samson into their hands (v. 23). They brought Samson out of the prison to an area where they chained him between two pillars to humiliate him further (v. 25). Perhaps to prove Dagon had tamed "*the destroyer of [their] country*" (v. 24), they had a young man, perhaps only a preteen, lead him out by the hand to the pillars.

Samson asked the boy to take him to the structure's main pillars, saying he wished to "*lean upon them*" (v. 26). The house was likely a large building containing balconies or terraces that could hold around three thousand spectators. In such structures, pillars sustained the weight of the balconies. If one or two of these pillars failed, there would be a domino effect and a catastrophic failure of all the pillars as the balconies collapsed. Other structures of the period had two main pillars set on a stone base supporting the roof, and if they failed, there would be a total collapse. While Samson leaned upon the posts, the people continued to praise their god and mock Samson.

B. Samson Calls on the True God *Judges 16:28–31*

Samson's hair had grown back, so with his hands on the arena's main pillars, he began to pray. He prayed for God to anoint and strengthen him one more time so he could avenge the loss of his eyes (v. 28). He also knew this would silence the sound of praise to their false god. God heard and honored his prayer, and with his hand on the pillars, Samson said, "*Let me die with the Philistines*" (v. 30), and he pulled or twisted the pillars off their stone base, causing the house to collapse upon all the dignitaries and the people gathered to worship Dagon. The text states that Samson killed more in this single act than all he had killed during his life. When news of this event reached Samson's family, they came and retrieved his body from among the Philistines and buried him at the tomb of his father, Manoah.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Disciples of Jesus are called upon to follow His example faithfully. We should consider His example in every sphere of life and make quality decisions.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Satan will try to tell people that once they make a mistake, they can no longer accomplish anything for God's glory. Samson shows us that redemption is possible for those who repent.

Ancient Israel and the Philistines

When the Philistines Are Mentioned, most Bible readers immediately think of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) or Samson (Judges, chapters 13-16).

The Philistines Were an Ancient People in the land of Canaan when Abraham arrived there (2090 BC). Abraham made a covenant of peace with the Philistines (Genesis 21:22-34), *“and Abraham sojourned in the Philistines’ land many days”* (v. 34). This covenant was renewed by Isaac (26:12-16, 26-31).

The Philistines Were Not Canaanites (see Genesis 10:6, 13-14), and they were not one of the nations God commanded Israel to destroy (see Deuteronomy 7:1). Therefore, while the Israelites at times engaged in war with the Philistines, they never attempted to destroy them, and they never took away their territory (now called “Gaza”) along the coast at the southeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

Samuel and David Led Successful Wars against the Philistines, and David became famous for killing the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17:51). Before David’s time, Samuel led Israel to victory over the Philistines (7:3-13). After David became the king of all the tribes of Israel, he defeated the Philistines three times in wars (2 Samuel 5:17-25; 21:15-22).

Before David Became the King of Israel, he found refuge from King Saul among the Philistines (1 Samuel 27:1-4). After he became the king of Israel, David recruited 600 Gittites (Philistines from Gath) to serve in his army (2 Samuel 15:18). Goliath the giant, whom David killed in his youth, was a Gittite (21:19). All of King David’s personal bodyguards (*“the Cherethites”*), and his couriers who delivered messages throughout his kingdom (*“the Pelethites”*), were Philistines (2 Samuel 15:18; 1 Kings 1:38, 44).

After the Romans Destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, out of spite toward the Jews they changed the name of the province of *Judea* (“land of the Jews”) to *Palestine* (“land of the Philistines”). That name stuck, and has endured to the present.

Samson's Rise and Fall

1. What was God's plan for Samson's life (Judges 13:5, 24-25)?
2. Compare Samson's encounter with a lion (Judges 14:5-6) with the lion encounters of David (1 Samuel 17:34-35) and Benaiah (2 Samuel 23:20). How were these experiences the same, and how were they different?
3. What one question did the Lord ask Gideon (6:14)?

Has the Lord ever asked you a similar question? If so, what happened?

4. What did Gideon name the altar he built, and why (6:23-24)?

Name an important experience you have had at an altar?

5. Who gave Gideon a new name, and why (6:31-32)?
6. Describe the leadership Gideon demonstrated (7:16-18).

What can leaders today learn from this example?