

## Heroes of the Faith

*Samson and the Gift of Strength* (Judges 16:1-31)  
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 11, 2021

### Introduction

- ❖ Recently I've been listening to a podcast on *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. It takes a fascinating deep dive into the story of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. The church was planted by Mark Driscoll in 1996, grew into a multi-site megachurch with 15 campuses in five states, but dramatically imploded in 2014. The podcast explores the perils of power, conflict, and celebrity culture within churches and within the larger evangelical world.
  - **One of the arguments made is that so many of these dramatic falls are a result of the tendency among churches to elevate leaders whose charisma outpaces their character.** Their giftedness exceeds their godliness. That's what is presented as one of the contributing factors to Mars Hill's fall. If you've ever heard a Mark Driscoll sermon, you can tell he's an extremely charismatic and gifted speaker. He can yell at you in his sermon and at the same time, make you laugh. He's got this comedic timing. He'll keep you engaged and entertained through an hour-long sermon.
    - But apparently his charisma outpaced his character. His giftedness exceeded his godliness. He had extraordinary gifts and an extraordinarily high calling to influence over ten thousand congregants on a weekly basis. Which made his eventual fall that much more devastating and disappointing.
  
- ❖ **The rise and fall of Driscoll and Mars Hill Church is a modern parable that conveys an ancient truth.** The same truth found in this morning's text – **in the rise and fall of Samson.** An extraordinarily gifted man. Who was given an extraordinarily high calling to be Israel's deliverer. But his giftedness exceeded his godliness. His charisma outpaced his character. And great was his fall. **But, at the same time, great was the grace of God to still accomplish some mighty things through a fallen man.**
  
- ❖ This summer we've been going through a series called *Heroes of the Faith*. We've been selecting Old Testament heroes and preaching on the most prominent, well-known moment in their story. **Now compared to the other characters we'll cover, Samson is more of an anti-hero.** He's not presented as a biblical example that you ought to emulate. He's more like a biblical warning you ought to heed. But even still, you'll find him in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11 alongside the other heroes of the faith we're covering in this series.
  - What we'll see this morning is a man gifted with superhuman strength and called to be Israel's deliverer. But he didn't take it seriously. He took it for granted. **He treated his strength as a given, as an inalienable right that was innate to him.** He saw it as something he was born with and something he'd never lose.
    - His enemies, as well, assumed Samson was the source of his own strength. But they assumed he could lose his power. They didn't think his strength was innate. **They figured he had done something to obtain his power. So they figured he could lose that power if they could do something to solve the riddle or break the spell.**

- ❖ **But what both Samson and his enemies failed to recognize is the grace of God as the true source of his extraordinary gifts.** They didn't understand that God's gifts can be freely given or taken away. They're not innate, and they're not earned. They are gifts of grace.
  - At first glance, you might conclude that this story – especially the part with Delilah – is about toxic relationships and how love (or lust) can blind you from the obvious. And yes, there are certainly elements of that in this story. But there is far more. **This final vignette in Samson's story is ultimately teaching us about the grace of God.**
    - This morning I want to show you three portraits presented within our text. We're going to see (1) A man carelessly toying with his gifts and calling, (2) A people superstitiously trying to turn God's hand, and (3) A God graciously achieving victory through defeat.

### **A Man Carelessly Toying with His Gifts and Calling**

- ❖ Samson's story began back in Judges 13, and in those preceding chapters, the impression we're given is that **Samson is a man carelessly toying with his gifts and calling.** Chapter 13 recounts his birth narrative, and there we're told that he was set apart for a high calling. The angel of the LORD who appeared to his mother – who had been barren and childless – told her that this child who grow up to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines (13:5).
  - Recall how in the book of Judges, there is a cyclical pattern repeated in Israel's history – a pattern of **rebellion** by God's people; which leads to **repression** under a foreign power; which leads to **repentance** and crying out for help; which leads to **redemption** through a God-appointed deliverer or judge; but the peace is short-lived and Israel falls back into rebellion; and the cycle continues.
  
- ❖ Well, in this cycle, the foreign power are the Philistines, and Samson is the set apart deliverer and judge of Israel. Even while in utero, he was placed under a special vow of consecration and service to the LORD. **It was called a Nazirite vow.** The idea comes from Numbers 6. The term Nazirite means “set apart or consecrated”.
  - If an Israelite wants to make a special vow to consecrate himself in service to the LORD, he would take on a Nazirite vow, which requires three things. You must **(a)** refrain from drinking wine or anything from the grapevine, **(b)** refrain from cutting their hair for duration of the vow, and **(c)** refrain from any contact with a dead body (Num 6:1-8). If you violate any of these stipulations, you break the vow, and you're no longer consecrated in God's service.
    - **Now what's unique in this case is that normally Nazirite vows are voluntary, but Samson is placed under this vow from a prenatal state.** While she's carrying him in her womb, his mother is to refrain from wine since he'll be affected by whatever she eats or drinks. And while most Nazirite vows are only temporary until the duty or time period is complete, Samson's vow is intended for the entirety of his life.

- ❖ **So the point is that this is a Nazirite like none other. He is set apart and consecrated to the LORD to a degree greater than any other before him.** As readers, we're supposed to be impressed. We're supposed to have high hopes for this baby boy. Surely, he's going to do some amazing things for the LORD.
  - **And in chapters 14-15, as he grows up, he is portrayed as a young man with extraordinary gifts, specifically the gift of strength.** In chapter 14:6, he tore apart a lion with his bare hands. In chapter 15:14, he struck down a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. And here in chapter 16:1-3, he averts an ambush. Look at v2, *"The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him." 3But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron."*
    - From Gaza to Hebron is a forty-mile hike. He pulled the posts of the gate right out of the ground and carried it on his shoulders – for forty-miles and up hill at the last leg. This is a portrait of an extraordinarily gifted man with extraordinary strength, called to a noble task as a deliverer of his people.
  
- ❖ **But what did he do with those gifts and with that calling? He toys with them. He doesn't take any of it seriously.** We just have to ask: What was he doing in Gaza, a major Philistine city, in the first place? V1 tells us that he was visiting a prostitute, which is an unfortunate pattern throughout his story. **His life calling was to deliver his people by driving the Philistines away. But in tragic irony, throughout his story, Samson is a drawn towards Philistine life and Philistine women.**
  - Which leads us to Delilah, the woman introduced in v4. He apparently fell in love (or lust) with her. In v5 the lords of the Philistines come to Delilah and make a proposition. They seek her help in discovering the secret of Samson's strength. They want to overpower him, bind him, and humble him. And they'll make it worth her while. They offer a hefty bribe.
  
- ❖ So starting in v6 and stretching all the way to v22, we read this back and forth narrative where Delilah is trying to get Samson to reveal the secret to his great strength, so that she can pass it along to the Philistines who are waiting outside their door each night. **And it's not like Samson is fooled and has no idea what she's trying to do. She tells him her plan directly without equivocation.** Look at v6, *"So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you."*
  - Look at that. No sugarcoating. No subterfuge. Delilah tells you exactly what she wants to do to you. She wants to subdue you. And Samson plays along. Why? Some have theorized that it's because he's lovesick. He's blinded by love. But I disagree. **I think Samson is well aware of what she's trying to do. He just doesn't care. He's not threatened by her.** After all he's accomplished, he feels invincible. What's a little woman like her going to do? How's she going to bind him?

- ❖ So he plays with her. It's all joke to Samson. The bowstrings are an absurd suggestion. He's toying with his enemies. After tying him up, Delilah calls for the Philistines hiding in ambush. But Samson snaps the bowstrings like they were thread and escapes capture.
  - **This same scenario plays out two more times with the same results.** Next, Samson suggests using new ropes, which sound more reasonable than bowstrings. In v13, he suggests for Delilah to weave the seven locks of his hair together with fabric using a loom and to fastened it with a pin. It's getting ridiculous. Are we to imagine him falling asleep next to a loom as she tries to weave his hair together. Are you serious?
    - Samson certainly isn't. **He's playing around. And he's playing with fire.** In his third suggestion, he draws attention to his hair. He doesn't give it away yet, but he's clearly playing with fire. But he doesn't care.
  
- ❖ In v15, Delilah accuses him of not truly loving her. In v16 it says, *“she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.”* Finally, he caves in and tells her *“all his heart”*. He bares his soul. Look at v17, *“A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”*
  
- ❖ So Samson clearly knows where his superhuman strength comes from. It's from God. It's because he's been a Nazirite *to God* from birth. And remember, one of the stipulations of the vow is to not cut your hair. But at this point, Samson is willing to reveal this secret because he no longer cares about the vow. He doesn't take his gifts or calling seriously.
  - **Being a Nazirite is no longer a calling meant for serving God and others. Being a Nazirite is a joke meant for toying with others.** He says losing his hair will mean losing his strength, but I don't think he really believes that to be true. Even after his hair is cut, he thinks he can simply shake himself free (v20).
  
- ❖ **He assumes his strength will be there, even after breaking his vow.** He's violated other aspects of his vow in the past without any repercussions. He strolled through a vineyard (14:5) and came in contact with the corpse of a lion (14:9) and picked up that donkey's jawbone (15:15) – and yet he never lost his strength. So he thought the same would be true this time. **You could say he took God's grace for granted.** All his life, no one ever stopped him from doing what he wanted. No one could bind him or restrain him. So he thought things would work out the same. God would overlook these minor infractions.
  - But it was not just his strength that left him at the end of v19. **It was the LORD who left him at the end of v20.** The LORD was the source of his strength, not the hair. So without God, Samson is easily subdued. In v21, his eyes are gouged out, and he's brought to Gaza to work at the prison mill. **What tragic irony! Samson lived his life doing whatever was right in his eyes, but now his eyes are gouged out and he's doing the will of others.**
    - He lived his life making a mockery of his gifts. But now he's being mocked and humiliated. He was given the highest calling to be Israel's mighty deliverer, but now he's just a lowly Philistine mill worker in prison.

- ❖ Samson’s story is a microcosm of Israel’s story. **Samson serves as a mirror for Israel to see themselves in his life.** Israel was set apart, gifted, and called. And yet time and time again, she failed to fulfill her calling. The Israelites just did whatever was right in their own eyes. Like Samson, the Israelites wasted their gifts and mocked their calling.
  - **Like Samson, they took God for granted and assumed he’d be on their side no matter how they were living.** They treated his blessing and power as an inalienable right. They never imagined he might take it away. But like Samson, one day God would take his glory away (Ezek 10). And like Samson, Israel would eventually be seized, humiliated, and exiled in Babylon. His story is a mirror image of theirs.
  
- ❖ Friends, we need to take this warning seriously as well. **Beware, lest Samson’s story becomes a microcosm of your own.** Don’t be like Samson and take God for granted. Assuming his gifts, his blessings, his power is simply yours by right. That it should just be there at your disposal whenever you need it – regardless of how you’re living your life.
  - We must not misuse God’s grace as a license to sin. **Grace doesn’t mean you can go on and do whatever is right in your own eyes.** Bonhoeffer would call that *cheap grace*. A kind of grace that doesn’t require repentance or grace that does not produce obedience. That’s cheap grace. It’s certainly not saving grace.
    - The grace that saves you – not only gifts with spiritual gifts and calls you to serve Christ – it transforms you and continues to conform your character into the image of Christ.
  
- ❖ **Let Samson and his rise and fall serve as a warning.** Of what *not* to do. **To not depend so much on giftedness and charisma to the neglect of godliness and Christian character.** And to not presume that those gifts or God’s power will always be there at your disposal. Let’s learn to cultivate a heart of thankfulness for the gifts and calling we’ve received.

### **A People Superstitiously Trying to Turn God’s Hand**

- ❖ So Samson is portrayed as a man who carelessly toys with his God-given gifts and calling. Next, we see **the Philistines portrayed as a superstitious people trying to turn God’s hand** and manipulate outcomes. And they do so by appealing to magic.
  - **The Philistine leaders were convinced that Samson must be wielding some sort of magic in order to make himself so strong.** If we can solve the riddle, if we can break the spell, then we can break the man.
    - This, by the way, would suggest that Samson didn’t look like a bodybuilder. If that were true, then there would be no secret to his strength. So he must’ve looked like an ordinary man of ordinary strength.
  
- ❖ Which is why the Philistines thought magic must be behind this. That’s why they readily believed something as silly as fresh bowstrings or a loom would do the trick. Maybe these items would work like a charm and magically cancel out his super strength.

- ❖ **That's how magic works in the mindset of ancient peoples.** You have to apply the right incantations or the right charms or amulets. Say these magic words. Perform these rituals. And if you do it right, you can turn divine hands. You can make whatever god you worship to work on your behalf. The key is – *you* are doing something to make it work. **Samson must be doing something to keep himself so strong.**
- ❖ So when they hear that the secret is his hair, it makes perfect sense to them. Oh, that's why he's so strong. He has magical hair like Rapunzel. Cut off his hair and all the magic is gone. He goes back to being just an ordinary guy.
  - **But their mistake is thinking the hair is what makes him so strong, and sadly many readers draw the same conclusion.** We think it's all about the hair. As if there were magical qualities to it. But it's just hair.
    - In the end, Samson didn't lose his strength because he lost his hair. **Shaving his head didn't break a spell and force God to retract his gift of strength. But it did break a vow, and God had every right and prerogative to take back his gift.** An undeserved gift in the first place.
- ❖ Now by the end of v21, Samson has lost his eyes and lost his freedom. Imprisoned and bound with shackles. He's at the lowest of lows. But in v22, there is a glimmer of hope. *"But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved."* Again, there's nothing magical about the hair. **But his growing hair is a sign – signaling that God's not through with him.** That his strength may yet return, if God so wills.
  - You might be wondering why the Philistines let it grow back. If they were that superstitious, why didn't they give him a clean shave once a week? **I think they let it grow back because they don't understand grace.** They assumed a vow breaker could never be forgiven. They assumed God must be through with Samson. They didn't understand the freeness of God's grace.
- ❖ Let's be careful not to fall into the same line of thinking. **Where we assume we have to do something to get God's blessing and power in our lives and to keep it.** We treat spiritual practices like prayer, bible reading, and church attendance like magic. Thinking you can call down God's blessing or power by performing the right rituals or saying the right incantations. But you might incur his curse or lose his power if you fail to keep up these practices.
  - **Ancient people would've called that magic. Nowadays, it's called legalism.** They're the same thing. Ancient magicians are today's legalists. Both assume if you follow these steps, if you keep these rules, then you'll have God on your side.
    - But if you're unfaithful, if you break your vows to God – then he'll be done with you. There's no way he's going to use you again to do anything significant for his kingdom. **It's assumed that you have to do something to obtain God's blessing and power, and you have to keep doing something to prevent losing it.**

- ❖ Do you see the contrast between Samson and the Philistines? **Samson saw his strength as an inalienable right.** Something he'll always have regardless of what he does or doesn't do. **The Philistines saw his strength as something magical, something he's doing to keep himself strong.** And they're trying to do something to cancel it out.
  - But both sides misunderstand grace. **Ancient and modern Samsons don't realize that grace means God doesn't owe you anything.** He doesn't have to bless you with gifts and high callings. He could strip you bare. **But ancient and modern legalists don't realize how gracious God is.** How willing he is to redeem us, change us, and still use us – in spite of our frequent failures and constant vow-breaking.
- ❖ **Many of us are too quick to jump to the same conclusions as the Philistines.** Particularly when we assess the poor state of our own spiritual lives. We know we've broken our vows to God. We've failed him countless times. We're tempted to think we might never be forgiven. Or even if he were to forgive, we'll never be restored to full status. We'll never be entrusted with precious gifts or given a high calling to serve God again. That's a fear many of us have.

### **A God Graciously Achieving Victory Through Defeat**

- ❖ But this is where the grace of God is such sweet news. **And that grace is on full display in the final moments of Samson's story and Samson's life.** Here in vv23-31, God is defying all expectations. He achieves victory in a way no one would've predicted. Which contributes to magnifying the freeness and richness of his grace. In this final section, we're given a portrait of **a God who graciously achieves victory through defeat.**
- ❖ No one expected the LORD to graciously gift and call Samson one more time. It starts in v23. The Philistines throw a feast in honor of Dagon their patron deity. And the dinner guests want Samson to entertain them. He's no longer the feared ravager of their country. He's the evening entertainment.
  - He's led out by the hand, and he asks to be propped up next to the pillars on which the entire building rested. And in v28, Samson lets out a last cry for help. For the first time, he addresses God by his covenantal name, Yahweh, and asks to be remembered and strengthened one last time.
- ❖ **Now I'm not suggesting that Samson is some godly martyr laying down his life for his faith.** He's no saint. You could argue that he mainly wants revenge for his gouged out eyes. **But at least, in this prayer, he finally acknowledges his weakness.** He finally realizes that his strength is not a given but a gift of grace. He no longer presumes that God will be at his side to do his bidding, regardless of how he's living.
  - He's starting to understand the concept of grace. **If he needs strength, then he needs to trust God for it and ask him to supply it.** And that's what he does. And the LORD listens. Samson is given that strength, and so we read in v30, *"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. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life."*

- ❖ God could've been done with Samson. He should've left him to rot in a Philistine prison. **But by grace, he gave Samson one more chance to have one more victory.** God used Samson's defeat as the means to defeat the enemy. **God used Samson at his weakest to accomplish his greatest victory over the Philistines.** It was a victorious defeat.
  - That, my friends, is a work of grace. **Which telescopes us forward to another work of grace, to another sacrifice, to another victorious defeat.** I'm talking, of course, about the sacrifice and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.
  
- ❖ **Now there are big differences between Samson and Christ, which is why I wouldn't call Samson a Christ-figure.** He's not a type of Christ. Think about it. Samson died because of his consistent disobedience; while Christ died because of his consistent obedience. Samson sacrifices himself and kills his enemies along with himself; while Christ sacrifices himself and delivers his enemies instead of himself. And Samson's death only began the salvation of God's people; while Christ's death fully accomplished that salvation.
  - **But there are enough similarities to warrant a comparison.** Think about it. Both Samson and Christ are betrayed by someone close. Both are betrayed into the hands of Gentiles. Both end up delivering God's people by themselves – all alone. And as we've mentioned, in defeat, both end up defeating their enemy.
  
- ❖ The cross of Christ was certainly a victorious defeat. **It's where the grace of God was gloriously displayed.** God owed us nothing. We owed him everything. He could've been done with us. He should've left us to rot in our sins.
  - **But God, being rich in mercy and full of grace, sent his Son to die for our sins.** God used Christ's defeat to defeat our sins. God used Christ at his weakest to accomplish his greatest victory, to secure our redemption.
  
- ❖ But there is one last crucial difference between Samson and Christ. **After Samson achieved victory through defeat, he stayed dead and his judgeship was over. His rule ended.**
  - But Christ didn't stay dead. His story continues on with resurrection hope. So his judgeship continues. **His loving rule goes on and on. That endless cycle that keeps coming back to rebellion can finally be broken in Christ.**
  
- ❖ **Maybe, up to this point, you've wasted the gifts he's entrusted to you.** You've been carelessly toying with them. Using them to serve yourself. Maybe, up to this point, you haven't taken your calling as a Christian seriously. You've broken your vows. You can identify a whole lot with Samson.
  - **But unlike Samson, your story doesn't have to end in the grave.** If you trust in Christ, if you find your truest identity in Christ, then, with him, your story will end in new life and new hope. Some of you need to trust in him for the first time. The rest of you need to renew that trust and renew your vows. **Make this the day you rededicate yourself to the high calling of serving Christ with the extraordinary gifts he's entrusted to you.**