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Judges 16:18–21, ESV.

Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. ¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. ²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him. ²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles.

A metaphor.

Before Israel had kings, like David and Solomon, they had charismatic leaders who are called *Judges* in the Bible. The word that is translated as “Judge” is the Hebrew word “*Shofet*” and a better translation is “Ruler” or “Military Leader”. Samson is considered to be the 15th Judge and he served for twenty years. We’re going to look at Samson and his famous hair – and look at how the author of Judges uses Samson’s hair as a metaphor. But first, I want to talk briefly about my father. He had to figure out on his own how to be a father, as he never knew his dad. His father served in the trenches in World War I and came back in poor psychological shape. My grandfather committed crimes, violent ones, and shortly after the war,

when my father was two years-old, his father ran off, abandoning his wife and son - and my father never again saw him. After my dad served in the Marines as a Sargent in World War II, he married my mother, settled down working as a mechanic and a tire salesman, and started looking for his father. He knew that his father was somewhere in Quebec, and my dad began writing letters to police chiefs and other city officials throughout Quebec. He never found his dad. But when I was about eleven years-old, one of his letters got a positive response, sort of. His father was dead in an old gold mining town called Valle d'Or. My grandfather had been living on the street and he had died on the street. Interestingly, although my father had never had any contact with his dad, my father's current mailing address, at our home in Oxnard, California, was found on my grandfather's body.

Let's talk about Samson. He is a biblical hero with extremely low morals. His story fills the 13th through 16th chapters of the Book of Judges. We all know about Samson's hair and the tradition that his hair was somehow a metaphor for his physical strength. This isn't true, however. The story of Samson is excellent ancient Hebrew scriptural storytelling, and as a result, the metaphor runs far deeper than this. During the time of Samson, Israel was battling the vicious Philistine empire. A woman who has been having trouble becoming pregnant is told by an angel that she will soon bear a son. And this son will one day save Israel. The angel tells the

mother-to-be that her son will be a Nazirite. These are people who are dedicated, often for their entire lifetime, to the service of God. They must follow three rules. They must not touch unclean or dead animals. They must not drink alcohol. And they must never cut their hair.

As Samson grows up, he becomes very headstrong. At that time, Israelite parents typically chose wives for their sons. But Samson finds a woman he wants to marry, and he demands the right to marry her – and she's a Philistine! On the way to see her, to arrange a wedding, Samson comes across a lion and tears it apart with his bare hands. Later, he finds honey in the carcass – and he eats it. But this breaks his vow of not handling dead animals. Then, at the seven day-long wedding feast that takes place before the wedding itself, we assume that Samson drinks alcohol, another violation of his vows. Samson makes a bet with his guests – all of whom are Philistines. Samson bets that his guests cannot answer a riddle. The riddle involves the honey and the lion. The guests become frustrated by the riddle, and they talk Samson's Philistine fiancé into telling them the answer. Samson loses the bet because she has deceived him. Samson is unable to pay up. He ends up killing thirty Philistines to get what he needs to pay off the bet. In the confusion, the bride's parents marry her off to the best man! The father of the bride offers Samson his younger daughter, but Samson apparently turns him down.

A series of retaliatory strikes between Samson and the Philistines begin. Again, using his superhuman strength, Samson attacks. He uses the jawbone of a donkey to kill a thousand Philistines. He then he falls in love with a woman named Delilah. Philistine men get Delilah to get the secret of Samson's strength from him. Yet another Philistine woman betrays him. His incredible Nazarite powers come from his hair. With Delilah's help, the Philistine men cut off his hair. Powerless, Samson is asleep in Delilah's lap. He is taken prisoner. They gouge his eyes out, bind him with chains, and humiliate him by putting him to work grinding grain in the prison mill. Here is what we read in Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges:

Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. ¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. ²⁰ And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. ²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles.

But slowly, Samson's hair begins to grow back. Then one day, the Philistines gather to celebrate getting control of Samson. Samson is taken from the prison and brought before all the gathered Philistines, thousands of them. They put him on display between two pillars of a great building. Samson talks one of the guards

into putting him between the main pillars of the building. Samson, who has up to now betrayed his vows as a Nazarite over and over, now prays these words: *“Lord, Eternal One, remember me and fill me with strength this one last time. O True God, so that with this last act of revenge I can pay back the Philistines for the loss of my sight.”* Samson then breaks down the two huge pillars of the giant building. It collapses, killing thousands, including the rulers of the Philistines. Samson is killed too. Then, the Israelites bury him in great honor.

There are two lessons here. First, Samson’s hair isn’t a metaphor for his physical strength. It’s a metaphor for his vows as a Nazarite, a man who is supposed to dedicate his life to God. Only at the end does he finally honor his duty to God. To redeem himself, he must be blinded and humiliated, and he has to die. But he saves his people from the Philistines. Up until the final act, he has treated his vows with complete disrespect, living a corrupt life among the enemies of his people. Only when he has learned his lesson and come back to God, is he allowed to regrow his hair – in other words renew his vow – as a blind slave. Then he does what he was supposed to have done all his life and that is to protect the People of God.

The way my father saw it, all people are like Samson. We must maintain our honor, our connection to God, or it will become apparent in our lives. And the longer we live a corrupt life, the bigger the price we will pay when we finally find

our way back to a life of grace. In truth, my grandfather was certainly mentally ill - and I cannot judge him for abandoning his family. My father dedicated his life to proving to himself that he was not like his father. He volunteered early in World War II. He started out in the Army Air Corps and was stationed in England, but they needed sharpshooters in the Pacific, so he moved to the Marine Corps and made a Sargent. He was badly wounded. For the rest of his life, he would grimace every time he climbed in behind the wheel of a car. He worked six days a week to provide for his family. He made sure that we had everything we needed, and he died broke. He didn't talk that much, but he showed me by example how a man behaves. It was critical to him that my brother and I not live like his father lived.

I told the following story when I first came to Pierce. I'm going to retell it because it had such a huge impact on me. We went to church every Sunday. One Sunday, as we were leaving church, a storm broke out. We dashed to the car and barely made it into our '67 Chrysler Fury III before a huge downpour happened. We were all dressed in our best clothes, of course, with my father wearing his one and only suit. As my father started the car, my mother was sitting next to him, and I was in the back seat, between my older brother and my older sister. Just as my dad put the car in reverse, a teenaged girl started backing out of a space next to us. I was fourteen. She was sixteen and had just gotten her driver's license.

She couldn't see in the heavy rainfall. She slowly backed up – into the right rear fender of our car. I felt the bump and my brother opened the window. She rolled hers down. She started crying that she didn't mean it, she was sorry. She sobbed. My father got out of the car – in an extremely heavy rainfall – and walked around the back of our car and up to her window. I listened as he stood there calming her down, telling her that everything would be okay, that it was just an accident. He said he would call her father and explain that she wasn't being reckless. Then he told her that he worked on cars, and he had a buddy who ran a body shop. His buddy would fix both cars. It would all be okay. The girl calmed down. My father told her to drive home safely. My father watched as she pulled onto the road and drove away. My father got back into our car soaking wet. We drove away.

I don't personally blame my grandfather for the way he lived. I didn't survive two years in deep mud in the trenches, watching the men to my right and left get killed over and over. My father was of a different generation, and he just couldn't forgive his father. He saw his dad as having died after living on the street for many years - and never redeeming himself. Although he was misdirected, my father's view of his father did have a positive impact on him. It made him decide that he would never break his vow. He would always live the way his father should have lived – and he did his best to ensure that his sons would do the same.

Samson's hair isn't a metaphor for his physical strength. It's a metaphor for his spiritual strength. The longer he lives in corruption, the greater his debt. God gives him his physical strength back one last time, as a way of symbolizing Samson's last opportunity to regain his spiritual strength. By our standards, it might seem odd that Samson does this by killing thousands of people, but these were the leaders the Philistines, the enemy people whom he had befriended. Samson does not ask God to cure his blindness. Samson does not ask God to give him a chance to start over and marry an Israelite woman and honor his vow as a Nazarite. Instead, he offers himself up in one last act of redemption.

There are seven letters in the New Testament what we are confident that Paul did personally write. One is the letter to the Philippians. Near the end of this letter, he turns to one of the main purposes of the letter, and that is to thank them for all they have done for him. In particular, he is thankful for the efforts of Epaphroditus, the man who delivered this letter to the Philippians. Paul writes:

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Paul is saying that his spiritual strength doesn't come from being well fed or from having the conveniences of a settled life. In fact, Paul was homeless; he was often imprisoned and beaten. If a modern man like Paul were to walk up to one

of us today, we would look at his rags, his wild eyes, and we would perhaps take a couple steps back. Many people would refuse to look at him. There are people who would call the cops. But Paul was as strong as Samson. He knew that he could do whatever was necessary, and by this he means necessary to serve God, simply by drawing on the strength given to him by God.

Remember that Samson was on Earth for a short time, dying as a younger man, and most of it was spent living a degenerate life. He racked up a great debt. In the end, he was a major factor in the delivery of Israel from the hands of a brutal enemy. Now, we might, as modern people, assume that Samson was a myth, a folk character created by the author or authors of Judges as a way of teaching us about the importance of keeping our promise to follow the ways of God. But without going into it, there is some archeological evidence that, at least in some peoples' eyes, shows that he was a true historical figure. God might have indeed given a man superhuman physical strength. He's not going to do that with any of us. But God will certainly give any of us superhuman spiritual strength. It's ours for the asking. The hard part is how we live after we have that power, what we choose to do with the gift that God gives us. Please pray briefly with me.

God, thank you for the strength you give us. Without it, we are helpless in a corrupt world. May we use that strength only to serve you. Amen.