

The Dumbest People in the Bible

2. Samson

Judges 16:4-31

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on August 7, 2016]

I

What good is brawn without brains?

What good is muscle without a mind?

What good is super strength without a solid soul?
Samson was strong.

How strong?

So strong, he could rip apart a lion as easily as you or I might tear a piece of paper.

So strong, he once killed a thousand Philistine soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey.

So strong, he could lift a city gate and carry it on his back five miles uphill.

So strong, he once caught 300 foxes,
tied them together by their tails,
attached lighted torches,
and sent 300 "flaming fox fire-brands" into the Philistine fields.
(Try saying that three times fast!)

Little wonder that whole armies trembled at the name of Samson.

He was a mighty fighting machine—
like Mohammed Ali, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman all rolled into one.

Unfortunately, he was not a mighty thinking machine.

He had superior strength,
but he also had a stupid strategy.

In the end, the Philistines captured Samson not because they out-fought him,
but because they out-thought him.

So Samson is a logical choice for a series of sermons on the dumbest people in the Bible.

II

The story of Samson—
his birth, his life, and his death—
is told in the Book of Judges, chapters 13-16—
the longest narrative in the Book of Judges.

From the beginning it was obvious that Samson would be special.

His birth was announced by an angel—in the Bible always a sign of great things to come.

His mother was told that she would bear a son,
and that the boy was to be consecrated to the Lord from birth.

He was to be a Nazarite,
which means a person whose life was set apart to serve God.

There were three special restrictions for persons who would be Nazarites, according to Numbers 6:

they must abstain from wine and other alcohol;
they must not have contact with a dead body;
they must never cut their hair.

Samson's parents were devout people.

They wanted to please God,
they were diligent in prayer,
and they wanted to obey God's will.

How disappointed they must have been when their boy Samson decided to visit Philistine territory.

At that time the enemies of Israel were the Philistines.

They had been enemies for 100 years,
 and they would be enemies for 200 years more--
 until the time when a shepherd boy named David defeated a Philistine warrior named Goliath,
 and the Philistine threat ceased to trouble the people of Israel.

For Samson to cross over into Philistine territory was unpatriotic,
 disloyal,
 subversive--
 even sinful.

III

But here was the young man Samson—
 accepting invitations to Philistine parties,
 going out with Philistine women,
 drinking Philistine wine in violation of his Nazarite vows.

Why would he do it?

Maybe he felt the way a lot of young people feel, that he was invincible and nothing could harm him.

Maybe he did it as some kind of adolescent rebellion against his strict childhood upbringing.

Maybe he thought the Philistine women were better looking,
 the Philistine lifestyle more exciting.

Whatever his reasons, Samson "went down" to the Philistine city of Timnah.

Judges 14:1 says it exactly that way: "Samson **went down** to Timnah."

And that is exactly what happens:

Married people need to stay out of Philistine territory.

Church people need to stay out of Philistine territory.

Never forget that God loves you and calls you to stand on God's side.

God's will may sometimes feel tight,
but it is always right.

There is nothing but trouble ahead for those who go down to Philistine territory.

V

Now I'll take a lesson from the movies and skip ahead to the most interesting part of Samson's life.....the love scene.

Our scripture lesson tells the story of Samson falling head-over-heels for a Philistine woman named Delilah,
whose name in Hebrew, interestingly, means “flirtatious.”

The story doesn't tell us about her side of the relationship,
how she felt about Samson.

It does reveal that her loyalty was not to Samson,
but to the Philistine cause.

So while Samson was flexing his muscles,
the Philistines were working their minds—
they came up with "The Delilah Plan."

They bribed Delilah to find out the secret of Samson's great strength.

They said: "*Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to subdue him, and we will each give you 1100 pieces of silver.*"

So Delilah began to wear Samson down gradually.

One evening when the fire was burning low and the mood was mellow, she

cuddled up next to him and said,

"You know, Darling, I've never asked you for much of anything. I've never tried to pry into your personal life, but there is one thing I want to know."

Samson said, "Sure, anything."

She said, "Tell me the secret of your strength."

Samson hesitated, because he didn't want to tell her the truth.

"If you tie me up with 7 fresh bowstrings which have not been dried, then I'll be weak like any other man."

Delilah said, "Fine, Sweetie, now lay back and rest yourself for a few minutes."

She then sent for the seven bowstrings and tied them around Samson while he slept.

She was so sure of herself that she had some soldiers hiding in the next room.

The men jumped out and she yelled,
"The Philistines are attacking you."

Samson immediately jumped up and snapped off the bowstrings.

A few days later Delilah said to Samson,

"Darling, you ought to trust me and not make fun of me by telling me lies. Please tell me how you become as weak as other men."

Samson was still leery and said, "Someone would have to tie me up with new ropes."

So Delilah rocked him to sleep and tied him with new ropes.

The would-be captors were hidden away and she yells,
"Look out, Samson! It's the Philistines!"

Samson woke up and snapped the ropes like they were thread.

A couple of weeks went by, and as they finished eating a meal of his favorite food, Delilah said to Samson,

"Why do you keep lying to me? You just make fun of me. I'm starting to think you don't really love. Now tell me the secret of your strength."

Samson finished his drink and said to her: "If you were to weave the seven locks of my hair, that would do it."

She told him to rest on the couch while she cleared the table. He fell asleep waiting for her to join him. She used the opportunity to weave his hair the way he had described.

She yelled about the Philistines attacking—
and again Samson jumped up, his strength intact.

VI

Now at this point in the story you can't help but wonder what kind of dim bulb this Samson is.

We might say he's two suits short of a full deck,
or the elevator doesn't go all the way to the top floor.

Did Samson ever suspect Delilah's motives in wanting to discover the source of his strength?

He'd been attacked three times--
each time tied up by whatever secret he had revealed to Delilah.

Once might be a mistake.

Twice might be a coincidence.

Three times has to be deliberate.

So Samson easily qualifies for the "dumb person" hall of fame.

Being brain-dead will do that to a person.

Remember the old saying: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

Samson is so big a fool he can't even see straight.

He was so involved with Delilah that he couldn't see the truth staring him in the face.

He had allowed a penny's worth of excitement with Delilah to block out the sunlight of his faith,
 his heritage,
 his values,
 his common sense.

And that's what sin will do—it will make a fool of you every time.

VII

Delilah had tried a direct question...
 she had tried seduction and caressing...
 she had tried cooking and pampering.

Now she tried the ultimate weapon: **tears and pouting.**

Day after day she whined:

"How can you tell me you love me when you don't trust me? You know true lovers don't keep secrets from each other. You don't really love me like I love you--if you did you would tell me what makes you so strong."

After two weeks of incessant whining and pouting, Samson caves in.

"All right, Delilah, have it your way. I'll tell you what you want to know. A razor has never come near my head. I am a Nazarite to God from birth. If I would be shaved, then my strength would leave me and

I'd be as weak as any other man."

D.R. Benson's delightful book of *Biblical Limericks* expresses it this way:

*When Samson was courting Delilah,
She asked with insouciant guile, "Ah,
What makes you so strong?"
"My hair (when it's long)."
--What happened could not have been viler.*

Exhausted from his confession, Samson fell asleep with his head on Delilah's lap.

She signaled for the barber to come and shave off his hair.

Then she cried out as before: "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!"

He woke up, thinking he would shake himself free like he had done before.

Verse 20 says "Samson did not know the Lord [the source of his strength] had left him."

There are addictive habits and there are sinful pleasures.

They lull us to sleep with wonderful promises,
and we end up losing our strength from God and our power to resist.

"So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes...and bound him with bronze chains, and put him to work grinding at the mill in the prison." (16:21)

Oh, how the mighty had fallen!

VIII

Poor Samson...

there he was grinding in the mill of Gaza,
only the shell of the man he had been.

But that isn't the end of the story.

Samson asked the boy who was leading him to place him between the two pillars that held up the house.

Then Samson prayed:

"O Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes."

*Blinded Samson knew that his plight was a
Dire one as captive in Gaza,
But return of his power
Brightened up his last hour,
Decimating the crowd in the plaza. (D.R. Benson)*

Samson grasped the two pillars and said, "Let me die with the Philistines," and, in a final act of suicidal revenge, he pulled the house down upon them and himself.

IX

Samson was dumb.

He was one of the dumbest people in the Bible.

But his dumbness didn't just happen at once.

It wasn't just one decision,
but a series of choices made over the course of his life.

It began with his first reckless decision to go down to a place where he wasn't supposed to be.

It continued with his misplaced trust in an unworthy companion.

It ended with his death—a final act of revenge brought upon his enemies.

In the Bible a favorite image of the wayward sinner is the lost sheep.

Sheep don't get lost all at once.

The sheep sees a tuft of grass and goes over to it,
 and then, without lifting its head, sees another and goes to it,
 and then to another, and another—
 and when it looks up, the sheep finds itself completely lost.

Samson didn't see what was happening to him until he had lost his eyes.

He was a Judge of Israel for 20 years,
 but his life,
 rather than a model,
 serves as a warning to us.

In Sunday school many of us learned a little song, a song so simple that even dumb old Samson should be able to comprehend it:

*Oh, be careful little hands what you do,
 Oh, be careful little hands what you do,
 For the Father up above is looking down in love,
 So be careful little hands what you do.*

The other verses have these words:

*Oh, be careful little feet where you go.
 Oh, be careful little mouth what you say.
 Oh, be careful little mind what you think.*

To paraphrase best-selling author Robert Fulgham:

"All Samson ever needed to know he learned in Sunday school."

You too.

And me.

Amen.