

## FATAL ATTRACTION - JUDGES 16:1-21

### STUDIES IN JUDGES #13 (SAMSON #3)

U.S. Major General John Sedgwick was the commander of the 6th corps of the Union Army during the Civil War. It was May 9, 1864, and General Sedgwick had already positioned his troops to meet the Confederate troops in Virginia. The robust confidence of the General permeated his troops. Sedgwick just knew that he was the best, and that he could not be beaten. As he was sitting under a tree, talking with an aide, the General noticed that some of his troops weren't positioned exactly like he had instructed, so he went up to the front line to readjust them. Just as he arrived, a Confederate sharpshooter started firing from somewhere out of their sight. While his men instinctively began ducking for cover, the confident General just laughed at them. "Come now, men. This will never do. Dodging for single bullets. I tell you, they could not hit an elephant at this distance!"

According to an eye-witness account of one of his soldiers, "Before the smile that accompanied these words had departed from his lips, there was a sharp whistle of a bullet, terminating in a dull, soft sound. General Sedgwick fell slowly and heavily to the earth." The sharpshooter's bullet had struck the General under his left cheekbone, killing him instantly.

Following the war, several of the men from the 6th Army Corps raised money to erect a monument to John Sedgwick on the spot where he fell. That monument remains to this very day. In keeping with the General's brash confidence, they made the statue twice the height of the average human being.

Ironically though, it's just about the height of an elephant.

While a certain amount of confidence is necessary for any successful venture in life, nothing can destroy a person more quickly than a false confidence or overconfidence. History is filled with examples of people who failed, not because they didn't have the ability to succeed, but because they let down their guard in overconfidence. Solomon sums up a Biblical principle very succinctly when he writes in Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

Nowhere is this principle illustrated better than in the sad story of Samson and Delilah. Here was a man with unprecedented abilities. Samson had as many or more natural abilities than any other human being who has lived on the face of this earth. God gave to Samson such strength that he could defeat the Philistines single-handedly. But ultimately, Samson was not defeated by the enemy. Oh, yes, the Philistines bound his arms and gouged out his eyes and forced him to labor like an animal at the millstone. But it was Samson who had actually defeated himself. His pride and overconfidence had lead to his fall.

Let's read the Biblical account of Samson meeting Delilah found in Judges 16:1-21:

JDG 16:1 One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. <sup>2</sup> The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him."

JDG 16:3 But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts,

and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

JDG 16:4 Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. <sup>5</sup> The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."

JDG 16:6 So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

JDG 16:7 Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."

JDG 16:8 Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. <sup>9</sup> With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the thongs as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

JDG 16:10 Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied."

JDG 16:11 He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man."

JDG 16:12 So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

JDG 16:13 Delilah then said to Samson, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied."

He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric <sup>14</sup> and tightened it with the pin.

Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

JDG 16:15 Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." <sup>16</sup> With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

JDG 16:17 So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man."

JDG 16:18 When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. <sup>19</sup> Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.

JDG 16:20 Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"

He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him.

JDG 16:21 Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison.

As we come to Judges 16, we come to the later period of Samson's life. His attempted marriage and later revenge against the Philistines which we studied last time had taken place earlier in Samson's life - in his early 20's. Chapter 16 brings us to the final years of Samson's life. As the last verse in chapter 15 tells us that Samson judged Israel for 20 years, we can assume that he is in his late 30's or early 40's as he meets Delilah, with the scene at Gaza taking place sometime in between.

We cannot help but feel a sense of sorrow, even pity, for Samson as we watch Delilah weasel the source of his strength out of him. But we must

remember that Samson didn't reach this point in his life suddenly, but he rather made a gradual journey to this scene, guided by the habits and patterns that he had accepted into his life. So there are many lessons that we can learn from Samson - a man of such potential who squandered the resources that God had given to him selfishly. I would invite you to look at just 3 lessons which we can learn from this scene in Judges 16 this evening.

#### WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM SAMSON AND DELILAH?

1. We can learn the lesson that no confidence can be placed in the strength of the flesh. Samson showed much more confidence in himself than he had any right to. He toyed with sin. He played a game with temptation. It was almost as if he felt that he was immuned to failure. The scene here with Delilah illustrates that clearly for us.

This chapter really places a 4 part drama before us. Each section brings Samson closer and closer to the brink of disaster. The first scene reveals Delilah initiating a search for the secret source of Samson's strength motivated by her greed for the handsome reward offered to her by the Philistine leaders. That each of the rulers would offer to her about 28 pounds of silver shows how badly the Philistine officials wanted to get rid of their nemesis, Samson. Also, a search for a hidden source of strength reveals the probability that Samson wasn't a muscle-bound hulk, for the source of his strength wasn't readily recognized by the Philistines. The late J. Vernon McGee said that he pictured Samson as a scrawny, puny man. We, of course, can't be dogmatic as to how Samson appeared. Because of his vast strength, most assume that he was

ripped with muscles. But this probably wasn't the case. If Samson would have had ripped muscles, the Philistines would have assumed this to be the source of his strength. But if he were more of a normal looking man, they would have assumed that he must have another source of strength. Had Samson in his overconfidence boasted that he had some secret source of strength giving the Philistines the idea to probe for it? This certainly is a possibility as well.

You would think that Samson would have bristled when Delilah asked for the source of his strength, wouldn't you? You would think that he would have quickly changed the subject, even questioned Delilah critically for bringing it up in the first place. But Samson smugly chooses to play this dangerous game. He shows much more confidence in himself than he had any right to show. Samson doesn't demonstrate a healthy respect for temptation here. And with each succeeding scene, Samson gets closer and closer to the truth. Being tied with fresh thongs, to being tied with new rope, to weaving 7 braids of his hair into fabric actually bringing the true source of his strength into play, and finally into revealing the whole truth of cutting off those braids of hair.

Why would Samson risk so much for so little? Why would Samson choose to play this dangerous game of temptation when his ministry as a judge and his very life were placed in jeopardy?

I think the answer to that question is found in the short story of Samson's exploit in Gaza that begins this chapter. At first we wonder, why is this story included? What does it add to the life of Samson that is not brought out in the other stories? Well, aside from the fact that it shows that Samson's tendency

for promiscuity was not an aberration but a pattern in his life, the story in Gaza also gives us some insight into the amazing successes that Samson had in his life. As far as we can tell, up until the time that he met Delilah, Samson did not know a real defeat in his life. Ironically, it was his continuous successes that eventually lead to his defeat.

The story that occurred at Gaza was simply incredible. Gaza was the Philistine city deepest in enemy territory - the most southern city on the Mediterranean coast. It was the largest and most fortified of the 5 major Philistine strongholds. For Samson to walk into Gaza showed a complete disdain for Philistine power. And the Philistines spotted this quickly. They could not let this pass. They must arrest this renegade Israelite. So the Philistines set up their trap to capture Samson. But not only did Samson escape, he carried the gates of the city away. Now you have to recall what a city gate looked like at this time. A modest estimate of the weight of typical city gates would weight in the tons. And Samson just picked them up and carried them to the top of a hill. The closest hill that they could have been carried to from the coastal city of Gaza would be a half an hour walk away. Tradition claims that the hill was El Muntar meaning the Watchtower which is located 2 miles SE of Gaza. From this hill one can see Hebron. Some commentators feel that Samson carried these gates all the way into Israeli controlled territory - and that is the reason for Hebron being mentioned. This could have been a journey of some 30-40 miles. Here Samson had placed himself into a position where he was right where the Philistines wanted him,

and he still ended up humiliating the enemy. Samson must have felt like he just couldn't lose, whatever he chose to do. He was a man who just didn't know defeat. The closest thing to a defeat he had known was the Philistines answering his riddle, and he had avenged that mercilessly. Samson has proven himself to be in a class by himself - unmatched by anyone. But there is great danger in this type of heralded success. For there comes a sense of invincibility that leads to a dropping of the guard. And that is exactly what happens when Samson meets Delilah.

We all know that a certain amount of successes are important in a person's life. And we all desire success. But what is often overlooked is the importance of failure in a person's life. For failure brings humility, and it brings a greater sense of vulnerability and an awareness of our own weaknesses and temptations. In my files, I have this quote. I don't know who the author of it is or I would give him or her credit. "The unsoundness of a clay vessel is not seen when it is empty, but when it is filled with water; then we shall see whether it will leak or not. It is in our successes that we are most tested. Men are not fully discovered to themselves until they are tried by the fullness of success. Praise finds out the crack of pride, wealth reveals the flaw of selfishness and learning discovers the leak of unbelief. David's besetting sin was little seen in the tracks of the wild goats, but it became conspicuous upon the terraces of his palace. Success is the crucible of character. Hence, the prosperity which some welcome as an unmixed favor may far more rightly be regarded as an intense form of test." Certainly, a person is tested in failure.

But what is often overlooked because we desire success so much is the testing that comes with success.

One of the cardinal rules of warfare or any athletic contest is to never underestimate the enemy. Samson broke this rule. His unbroken string of successes had lured him into an attitude of invincibility. But Samson was not invincible. In fact, he was just like any other man except for the fact that God had given to him a special gift. When Samson felt that he could toy with temptation, he put himself in a very vulnerable position.

Now we must all realize the life-threatening dangers of temptation. If we don't, we are going to end up like Samson. You can't play with temptation. For every step towards sinning gives the enemy another foothold in our lives. We can hold to no confidence in this flesh. With the Apostle Paul we must confess, "In this flesh dwells no good thing."

2. We also see here the critical importance of learning lessons from past mistakes.

Someone has said, "A person who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it." I had an elderly deacon in my former church who put a similar truth in a more earthy way. He would often say, "If the mule kicks you once, its his fault; if he kicks you twice, its your fault."

It is interesting that every story that is given to us in the life of Samson emphasizes the same weakness in the man. In the story at Timnah when Samson was just a young man, his fiancé beguiles the riddle out of him using her feminine charms - she cried and cried until Samson finally broke down and

told her the answer to the riddle. Samson's weakness here cost him a bride and he lost face with the Philistines. You would think that he would have learned something about himself and his weaknesses, wouldn't you? But instead of dealing with his personal problem, he rationalized it away and covered it up with his brute strength. In the story at Gaza, Samson once again was placed in a very vulnerable position because of his fleshly passions. But again, he was able to cover up his weaknesses with his brute strength - and he didn't learn about himself to take steps to correct his weakness. Now when he comes into the Valley of Sorek and sees this Philistine woman named Delilah, Samson is going to find that the stakes are much higher. And he was not prepared to play against Delilah's wiles because he had not learned the lessons about himself from the past. It is interesting that the story of Samson and Delilah is so well known and emphasized - but probably the stories of Samson at Timnah and Gaza are more significant in the course of Samson's life because they determined the outcome of Samson meeting Delilah. If Samson would have learned about his weaknesses from past mistakes, he could have avoided the pitfall that cost him his life.

Some of the greatest people of the past were not those who made no mistakes - rather some of the greatest people of the past were those who made the greatest mistakes. But they were also people who learned from their mistakes. In some ways the success of any individual can be measured in terms of his or her ability to learn from past mistakes that have been made.

The Apostle Paul was an example of a man who had made some great

mistakes. But he learned from them. He was a man who learned from history. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 10 of all of the mistakes that the children of Israel had made in their wilderness wanderings. He then said in verse 11 the "these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us."

Now Paul did not spend his life living in guilt and remorse from past mistakes. Rather he had learned to "forget those things which are behind" (Phil. 3:13). But living in the truth of God's forgiveness didn't mean that Paul didn't learn lessons from past history. And it is interesting to compare Paul with Samson near the end of his life. They both ended their lives imprisoned. But some of the last words that the Apostle Paul wrote were "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." These are words of victory; these are words of satisfaction; these are words confessing a job well done. Samson, on the other hand, spent the latter days of his life imprisoned as a defeated foe; his spirit broken; filled with guilt and remorse.

I believe that one of Satan's greatest weapons that he often uses in defeating Christians is to blind their eyes from learning from past mistakes while constantly throwing up their failures in order to bring guilt and remorse to them. God desires just the opposite. God desires for us to learn from our past mistakes and to glory in his mercy and forgiveness so that we don't live under the burden of guilt. And what is true in our lives personally is also true in the life of a church. It is critically important for a church to learn from mistakes in the past (programs and failures that didn't work) in order to make

effective progress in the future.

It is interesting that it is in Samson's failure as his eyes are physically blinded that his spiritual vision finally becomes sharpened. In his humiliation, Samson begins to realize afresh the mission that God had given for him to accomplish. So when the opportunity comes, Samson is ready to even give his life in an attempt to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

3. A final lesson that we can learn from this story is to never forget where our true source of strength is to be found.

When Delilah finally wore Samson down to the place where he was ready to reveal the source of his strength, Samson told her that his strength was in his long hair. But that was not the real source of his strength, was it? Long hair doesn't make a person's muscles any stronger. The real source of strength in Samson was God, and God's faithfulness to his promise to Manoah and his wife. God was honoring the vow that Samson's parents had made.

I believe that one of the saddest verses in all of the Bible is found in Judges 16:20. After cutting off his hair, Delilah calls to Samson that the Philistines are upon him. And the Bible says that "Samson awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free.' But he did not know that the Lord had left him." What a sad condition to have the Lord's power leave and not to know it. You see, Samson forgot the ultimate source of his strength.

How different from Samson was a young man who lived just one generation later named David. David was not impressive physically as a young

man. But when he saw the Philistine's champion, a giant named Goliath, cursing God and threatening his family and friends, David stepped forward to fight him. And David makes it clear that he is not challenging Goliath in his own power or strength. As we walked down that lonely path to face this Philistine warrior face to face, David says to him, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands." (1 Samuel 17:45-47)

What a contrast! The strongest man who has ever lived, proving himself able to kill thousands single-handedly and lift tons upon his shoulders trusting in his long hair for strength - and being defeated. An unimpressive teenager, facing a giant against incalculable odds, trusting only in the Lord for victory, and not only killing that 9 and a half foot giant, but also sending the entire Philistine army into terrified flight. The difference is that the Lord was with the young teenager, but the Lord had left the strongest man who has ever lived.

We have looked this evening at 3 lessons that we can learn from the story of Samson and Delilah. Let's review these lessons and apply them to our individual lives before we dismiss.

\*Have you had successes in the Past? Good! Praise the Lord for them. Build upon the successes that God has given to you. But don't become complacent in success. And don't allow success to make you become overconfident. Always keep your guard up high against the enemy for he roams this earth as a roaring lion seeking believers to tempt and devour.

\*Have you had failures in the Past? Good! Praise the Lord for them. Learn from the past failures that God has allowed you to have. But don't let failures burden you with remorse and guilt. Realize that God allows failures in our lives to reveal our weaknesses so that we can become stronger people.

\*And whether in success or failure, never forget where your true source of strength is. As the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 46:1,2a - "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear . . ."