

SAMSON

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PREFACE

When people refer to Samson, we often hear the name Delilah mentioned in the same breath, much like Bathsheba is often associated with David. Although many are aware that the biblical record of David is not limited to his affair with Bathsheba, and that in the final analysis, he was "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), the same cannot be said concerning Samson. In many people's thinking, Samson is inseparably connected to Delilah, and the impression is that the entirety of his life as recorded in Scripture has to do with his moral weaknesses and sexual lusts. He is the classic case of one who has "charisma without character."

However, that is not an accurate portrayal of his life and ministry. The Scripture's own commentary on Samson's life is that he was a man of faith, one of whom "the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38). Given this biblical perspective, one is bound to misunderstand the significance of Samson if he were to read the biblical record concerning him with the presupposition that his life had consisted of nothing more than his sinful lusts and ultimate downfall.

In this book, we will begin not with the usual distorted view, but with the Scripture's own perspective toward Samson – that is, no matter what flaws he had, he had "gained approval" (Hebrews 11:2, NASB) from God through faith. Therefore, instead of seeing Delilah in every verse, we will read the passages concerning Samson with the intention of searching for his faith. When we read his life's story with this scriptural, and thus more accurate, presupposition, the biblical record concerning him will be better understood, and what the story of his life has to teach us will be more apparent.

1. SAMSON AND HIS FAITH

In our study of Samson, we will not begin from Judges 13, where the biblical narrative concerning his life actually starts. Rather, since most people read his story with false presuppositions already in mind, we shall first correct them through examining the Bible's own commentary on the life of Samson. Having done that, we will be able to study him from the correct perspective.

Hebrews 11:1-2, 6, 32-38 says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for...And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him...And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them."

According to verses 1-2, the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 were commended for their faith. The NASB says in verse 2 that they had "gained approval" from God by their faith. Note the inclusion of Samson in this list.

Many people have done things for which they think they should get credit for, while God does not grant his approval based on them. God does not approve or disapprove of us based on our race, gender, or social standing, nor does he accept us due to our good works. He cares about whether we have faith or not.

Jesus asks in Luke 18:8, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" This is what God is looking for. When Jesus comes, is he going to find faith in your heart, or is he going to find unbelief and rebellion?

Then, Hebrews 11:6 tells us that, "without faith it is impossible to please God." The verse explains that those who approach God must believe that he exists, and that he "rewards those who earnestly seek him." None of the people listed in Hebrews 11 was perfect. They did not please God by their good works, but by their faith. God was satisfied with them because of their faith.

If you will look through the list of people included here, you will see great men such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and so forth. These were not weak believers; yet, they were people who had committed sins.

Moses sinned by disobeying God in the wilderness. As God says to him in Deuteronomy 32:49-52, "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel."

David certainly had sinned. He first committed adultery with Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, David indirectly, yet intentionally and with premeditation, murdered her husband. God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, saying, "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:9).

So, these were by no means perfect people, and yet they are included here in Hebrews 11. This is because God gave them his approval based on their faith, and not on their works. As Psalm 130:3-4 says, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared."

We come now to verses 32-38. After citing a number of examples of how various characters were justified before God by faith, verse 38 says that "the world was not worthy of them." The world, in all its rebelliousness and wickedness, is not worthy of those who have faith in God. One who has faith is so precious to God that the Scripture declares that this planet is not even worthy to have someone like him in it.

Relatively speaking, the world does not contain that many people who have true faith. Of course, there are numerous professing Christians on this earth, but do they, as Moses did, regard "disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:26)? Even with those who truly profess Christ, is their faith limited to their initial conversion, or do they overcome this world with it (1 John 5:4-5)?

These who are listed in Hebrews 11 are people who believed God and "saw him who is invisible" (v. 27) "They were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (v. 16).

Given the popular attitude toward Samson, many may be surprised to find his name listed along with the great fathers of the faith such as Abraham and Moses. They may protest, saying, "What about Delilah?" Well, what about her? The story of Samson is not about

Delilah. Sorely misinformed are those who think that Samson's story is about his immorality and lack of self-control. Here in Hebrews 11, he is commended for his *faith*.

Thus, when we study the life of Samson, we should not be trying to find Delilah in there, nor should we be hunting for indications of sexual addiction. We should try to find his faith – that is, what made him so great? What did he believe in so strongly that delighted the heart of God?

Although all of God's people are required to believe certain propositions that are identical in essence (e.g. Hebrews 11:6; Romans 10:9; 1 John 4:2), God's specific plans for us demand that each believer accept certain unique propositions. For example, God required Abraham to believe "A son coming from your own body will be your heir...Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:4-5). Noah had to believe when God said, "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you" (Genesis 6:17-18).

In addition, although each believer is obligated to believe all the biblical propositions that are applicable to all of God's people, one may believe certain propositions more strongly than others. One may have unshakable faith in God's power, while another possesses a great understanding concerning his justice. Nevertheless, we should all be developing greater understanding and confidence in every proposition revealed to us by God.

How about Samson? What did he believe? What made his faith so great? His faith was such that it was recorded in Hebrews 11 along with the likes of Abraham, which means that he had the same type of faith as the others; yet, he led a different life. What did he believe about God that made him great? It is through looking into the nature of his faith that we will truly understand the story of Samson as told in the Bible.

Again, the story of Samson has no direct relationship with Delilah. If you will read Judges 16:4-20, where Delilah appears, and then also read Judges 14:12-18, you will see Samson facing two very similar situations. In each instance, a piece of information was coerced out of him through psychological manipulation by a female – that is, through crying, nagging, and words such as, "You don't really love me." Although sexual issues may have had something to do with it, ultimately the direct cause for Samson's downfall was not sexually related, but was due to his vulnerability to manipulation by women.

So, Samson has been misjudged. The problem with misunderstanding the significance of his story is that since everything in the Bible serves a purpose, and that it is written for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16), any misinterpretation would therefore cause us to miss the important lessons the passages were originally written to teach us.

Not many books and commentaries portray Samson in a positive light, contrary to the Bible's own perspective in Hebrews 11. But his life indeed has more to teach us than to warn us from sexual sins. Our concern should be to discover his faith, and imitate any positive and relevant aspects of it. Rarely do we find Christians nowadays who have his kind of faith – that is, what he believed and the extent to which he believed it. Part of this book is concerned with recovering it for the reader.

Make no mistake about it – Samson had his weaknesses, and ultimately they even cost him his life. But the point is that his problems were not what most people think they were. And overall, the Scripture describes him as a person of faith.

2. HIS ANCESTORS

The Book of Judges records a recurring cycle of sin and idolatry in Israel's history. It seems that whenever a godly leader died, the people would plunge themselves far into idolatrous worship. God would then allow them to be conquered by their enemies. After a time, when they began to groan in repentance, God would send them a deliverer to release them from bondage. Yet it seems that Israel refused to learn their lesson – they would return to sin and idolatry after the deliverer died. And the whole cycle would begin once again.

The story of Samson as recorded in the Bible begins at the outset of such a cycle: "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years" (Judges 13:1).

In this chapter, instead of going straight into the story of Samson, we will briefly study this recurring pattern, as this will provide us with some background on his life and the circumstances surrounding his birth and ministry. In addition, modern-day Christians can learn some valuable lessons from this destructive cycle in which the Israelites had allowed themselves to remain.

So, we will deal with Judges 13 later. For now, let us turn to Judges 2 to see how this entire cycle started. The Bible says in Judges 2:7-9, "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash."

Joshua, a close follower of Moses, became the leader of Israel after the latter's death. He led the people well. Verse 7 indicates that, "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel."

Obviously, many miracles happened when Moses led the people of Israel. The nation witnessed the Ten Plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, and other spectacular wonders.

God also demonstrated his power during Joshua's leadership. During one battle, in response to Joshua's words, God's power was so evident such that even "the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jasher. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day" (Joshua 10:13). This and the fall of the wall of Jericho are only two examples of the great victories God granted to Israel under Joshua's leadership.

The Scripture says that while Joshua and the elders of his generation were alive, the people of Israel served God. However, "after that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel" (Joshua 2:10). This new generation, unlike the previous one, "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel."

Although not explicitly stated here, the implication is that the previous generation had failed to pass on their national history, and in particular, teaching their children about God's mercy and power toward them in delivering the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt, and securing for them the land of Canaan. However, when God gave his laws to Israel and worked wonders among them, he intended for his revelation and the record of his miracles to be transmitted to future generations so that they, too, may learn to fear and worship him.

For example, when God instituted the Passover, he said, "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians'" (Exodus 12:24-27). If the previous generation had faithfully observed the Passover and gave the explanation to the same for the next generation, how was it that the latter "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel"?

After parting the river of Jordan, as he did to the Red Sea, so that the people of Israel may cross over to the land of Canaan, God commanded a monument to be constructed out of stones "to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever" (Joshua 4:6-7).

To press the point even further, I quote from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates...In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?' tell him: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders – great and terrible – upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has

commanded us, that will be our righteousness." God's instructions concerning what they were to do with his laws and the command to pass them on to future generations could hardly be more explicit and straightforward.

So, the question remains as to how it was that the next generation "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel," when God had given explicit instructions to teach the future generations concerning him and his works? The answer, at least partly, must rest in that the generation led by Joshua had not faithfully passed on their knowledge concerning God, his works, and their nation's providential history to their children.

Most parents in our modern generation are no better – they do not teach their children to worship God and study his word. They say, "Let them decide what they want to believe." What kind of idiotic parenting is that? We tell them not to accept candy from strangers, not to touch a hot stove, to look when crossing the streets, to study hard at school, to choose their friends carefully, and yet we think that we should let them "decide" on the most important issue of their lives by withholding from them information and arguments in favor of the only truth on the subject.

Why not "let them decide" on whether they will attend school or not? Why not "let them decide" on whether they will use drugs? But when it comes to spiritual matters, we let our children choose from the hundreds of options, of which only one leads to life, while the rest lead to eternal damnation? And then, we have the audacity to say that we love our children!

Sure, we may not be able to force our children to accept the Christian faith, but if we are truly convinced that our God is the only true God, that Jesus Christ is the only savior of mankind, and that the Bible is the only divine verbal revelation, then should we not at least "train a child in the way he should go" (Proverbs 22:6)? What kind of parent will do otherwise?

When parents neglect their responsibilities of teaching the children God's word with the excuse that they should decide for themselves, what happens many times is that the media ends up deciding for them. If you do not tell your children what to believe and why, somebody else who does not know God may tell them.

Of course, many people whose parents never instilled Christian truths in them come to know God later in life – but with no help from their parents. How much better it would be, if the parents had told them about God, Jesus Christ, and the infallibility of the Bible early in life.

If you are a parent whose child is already grown, you may still do something about the situation. You may talk to your child about the Christian faith, and you may still pray for his or her salvation.

But if your child is still young and lives under your roof, do not accept Satan's deception and think that you should "let them decide." No, tell them about Christianity, and explain

to them why this is the only rational system of belief. Take them to church, read the Scripture to them, and train them in theology and apologetics. Concerning the commandments of God, the Scripture instructs us to, "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

In addition, inform your children about the other systems of thoughts that they will encounter at school, from friends, and through the media – and explain to them why their non-Christians ideas are untrue. Demonstrate to them how atheism, humanism, and the likes can be conclusively refuted even before they encounter them. To do anything less is to neglect *the* most important part of your parental responsibilities.

Like many believers of our present time, Joshua's generation also neglected the spiritual development of their children, and an entire generation grew up that did not know the ways and works of God.

"Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths" (Judges 2:11-13). When parents do not tell their children to fear God, they may not decide to serve him for themselves. They may be influenced by other sources, and end up serving another god, or simply serving Mammon.

Verse 12 above says that this new generation began to follow the "various gods of the peoples around them." Those who have not been influenced by strong Christian ideas may end up adopting the thoughts and priorities of those around them, such as their friends and teachers. This is what happened to the people of Israel. They were not influenced or taught by their parents to serve the God who brought them out of Egypt, so they were influenced by those who were around them, and eventually began to serve their gods. If you do not influence your children, somebody else probably will. There are many people who are eager to tell your children what to do and what to believe.

As a result, "In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress" (Judges 2:14-15). The next generation was "in great distress," just as our present non-Christian generation suffers miserably.

You can see how each cycle of sin and idolatry would begin. When a strong leader was presiding over the affairs of Israel, the people would serve God faithfully. But then, when the leader died and the people had failed to instruct their children regarding their faith, the next generation would grow up not knowing anything about God or his mighty deeds.

They lacked godly influence from their parents, and thus were influenced to serve false gods by the nations surrounding them. As a result, they "provoked the Lord to anger," and God would give them up to their enemies.

We see this all around us in our society. When parents fail to instill Christian ideas into their children's minds, they may end up being influenced by others with whom they will come into contact – teachers, students, the media, the printed press, and other sources of ideas will constantly seek to change them, and to mold their thinking in a way as to oppose the mind of God.

They end up committing the sin of idolatry, worshiping singers, movie stars, and money, instead of Jesus Christ. So comes judgment and captivity, and they are subjected to the bondage of sin. They become entangled in a web of filth, sickness, debt, and every other type of bondage one may imagine.

But God, in his mercy, did not leave the people of Israel in such a condition: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders" (Judges 2:16). Likewise, God has raised up a number of ministers who are knowledgeable in the word of God and bold in their speech. They are as deliverers who would lead the people of God out of spiritual blindness and captivity, and back into the true worship of God. Those who listen and respond will be empowered by God's Spirit to escape this destructive cycle of sin. Of course, there will also be those who refuse to listen, and they will continue in that destructive cycle. Their lives will continue to be meaningless, and their minds full of darkness.

These deliverers were called "judges," and thus the name of the book. At that time, although the judges were sent from God and provided temporary relief for Israel from their enemies, the scriptural record is that, "They did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the Lord; they did not do as their fathers. When the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways" (Judges 2:17-19).

God was merciful to them. Although the people did not render to him the worship he deserved, and although his justice demanded that they be punished, he would send them strong leaders to rescue them out of captivity and destruction.

The hearts of the people had never been totally devoted to God, and "it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them." This happened generation

after generation – that when a strong leader passed from the scene, the people would return to idolatry.

Parents may not be judges, deliverers, or preachers, but they have the power and responsibility to prevent the entire cycle of sin and idolatry from taking place. They must teach their children the ways and works of God. It may be too late when they are gone to boarding school for college or even married. At that time, you will no longer have immediate influence over them. If they have not been taught the right ways of the Lord, and if they do not have a personal conviction and commitment toward the Christian faith, then it is possible that what little Christian influence they had may be lost.

The people of Israel "did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways" (v. 19), and "Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, 'Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did.' The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua" (Judges 2:20-23).

Israel sinned against God repeatedly, even though he had shown them mercy by sending them deliverers, and so God finally said that because they had repeatedly violated the covenant he had made with their ancestors, he would not completely destroy their enemies. Thus, the surrounding nations would become a bothersome reminder to them, and they will persecute Israel whenever they fail in their spiritual commitments. And Israel never seemed to be able to fully overcome their adversaries in battle. Occasionally, when their sin became great, God even allowed them to be captured by their enemies.

The by-product of this cycle of sin and idolatry was a prolonged conflict with their enemies, and so it is in the modern life of the people of God. Many people never experience complete victory over their problems because of recurring sinful patterns.

Now, let us return to Judges 13, where the record of Samson's life begins. It starts with the words, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years" (v. 1). The story of Samson begins as another cycle of Israel's sin and their captivity. He would be a deliverer that God raised up for the deliverance of his people.

The words in the Book of Judges, as well as the rest of the Old Testament, were written for our instruction. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10:11, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." Therefore, when understood correctly, the biblical account of the life of Samson carries great potential in teaching us how to live for God more properly. For example, we have already explained at some length how negligence by parents in the area of transmitting their spiritual heritage may result in great idolatry in next generation.

We have also observed that the pattern here described in the Book of Judges has been occurring in the Church at large. Much of the Church has been stuck in a cycle of sin, captivity, repentance, and deliverance. And some time after God sent relief, the cycle would begin all over again.

Although God is faithful to deliver us when we repent, it is important for Christians not to take his mercy for granted. We must learn to live as spiritual adults, that is, with understanding and in holiness. Also, we must carry this beyond our own generation and into the next.

3. HIS DESTINY

We continue our study of Samson with Judges 13:2-7: "A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, 'You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean, because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines.' Then the woman went to her husband and told him, 'A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will conceive and give birth to a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from birth until the day of his death.'"

The angel of the Lord revealed that Samson was to be a Nazirite. A Nazirite is "a member of a class of individuals especially devoted to God. The Hebrew term means consecration, devotion, and separation. Two traditional forms of the Nazirite are found. One was based on a vow by the individual for a specific period; the other was a lifelong devotion following the revelatory experience of a parent which announced the impending birth of a child. The Nazirite's outward signs – the growth of hair, abstention from wine and other alcoholic products, the avoidance of contact with the dead – are illustrative of devotion to God" (*Holman Bible Dictionary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991; p. 1011). It was because Samson was to be a Nazirite that his mother was not to drink any wine or to eat any unclean thing. Also, Samson was not to cut his hair. As he explains to Delilah later in the story, he was "a Nazirite set apart to God since birth" (Judges 16:17).

Samson had a destiny, and "the angel of the Lord" came to tell his mother of God's plan for him. God has a plan for each of his elect. And God's plan for each person is specific, supernatural, and purposeful.

God's plan is specific in the sense that he does not call every one to do the same thing. Here, Samson was called to a highly specific task to serve God at a specific point in time, and God gifted him with certain unique abilities.

Further, God did not call Samson to do something that he could do simply by virtue of the capabilities he would inherit from his parents. His strength was supernatural – it was available to him through the Holy Spirit, and not because of any unusual strength inherent in his body. No human being is born as strong as the Samson we see in the Bible. Yet, to fulfill God's plan, he required the superhuman strength demonstrated in his ministry, which means that God had called him to a humanly impossible task, as all his callings toward men and women tend to be. In other words, although God had called him

to do certain things, Samson still could not have done it without the Holy Spirit or the supernatural power of God.

God's plan for you is purposeful. It is not useless. He does not assign you with tasks merely for entertainment purposes. It is not just to give you something to occupy yourself with so that you will not become bored with this life. But God's plan for you serves a function. It does something meaningful.

It is no different with us. As Christians, God has a specific plan for each of us. And he may have called your child to a special ministry or calling. If so, no other plan is like it. He has not called your child to do exactly the same thing that somebody else is doing.

My point in this chapter will be that you need to do all you can to gain information concerning this plan God has for your child, and seek to understand it and make way for it. I give such place to parenting in this book because, as I have shown you, the entire cycle of sin and idolatry seen in the previous chapter began, at least in part, due to the negligence of the former generation.

Parents must be highly knowledgeable in the word of God. The Bible says that it is through the renewing of our minds that we will be "able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). So, the first place to look when we desire to know God's specific will for our lives and that of our children is not supernatural revelations – visions, dreams, prophecies, or even an inner impression. Rather, we must give Scripture priority in everything, including the times when we seek God's will for our lives. Of course, if God is pleased to reveal information to us through other means as well, then we should be receptive to such also; nevertheless, we must judge any extra-biblical sources of information with the Scripture.

We must learn what God's will is for our children, because it is counterproductive for you to clash with God's calling for them. Parents who are ignorant of the Scripture and who are insensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit will fail to understand and appreciate the calling that God has given to their children.

The Bible continues to say, "Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: 'O Lord, I beg you, let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born.' God heard Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was out in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. The woman hurried to tell her husband, 'He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!' Manoah got up and followed his wife. When he came to the man, he said, 'Are you the one who talked to my wife?' 'I am,' he said. So Manoah asked him, 'When your words are fulfilled, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and work?' The angel of the LORD answered, 'Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her'" (Judges 13:8-14).

Manoah prayed and asked God to show him "how to bring up the boy who [was] to be born"; that is, to let him know "what [was] to be the rule for the boy's life and work." Upon realizing that God has a plan for your child, the natural question to ask is how you may bring him up in line with God's calling on his life. Most parents, even Christian ones, do not think of their children as having God-ordained destinies. Even fewer parents take the time to read the Bible and pray to God for instructions on how to raise their children.

It is a terrible mistake for Christian parents to raise their children as unbelievers do, with no divine goal in mind. If you are a Christian, there is no reason why you should not know and appreciate the destiny and calling of your child. Parents who ignore God's plans for their children are really doing them an injustice, making their paths more difficult in the future.

Of course, the negligence of the parents does not imply that their children will fail to fulfill God's plan, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). By God's grace, his purposes for the elect will stand. But if the parents have not been performing their duties in raising them correctly and with the plan of God in view, then the children will reach their destiny without any help from them.

Then, Judges 13:15-22 continues, "Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, 'We would like you to stay until we prepare a young goat for you.' The angel of the LORD replied, 'Even though you detain me, I will not eat any of your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD.' (Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD.) Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, 'What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?' He replied, 'Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.' Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the LORD. And the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. 'We are doomed to die!' he said to his wife. 'We have seen God!'"

The angel who appeared to Manoah and his wife may have been the pre-incarnate Son of God. This interpretation is possible for several reasons. First, not a few scholars agree that the phrase "the angel of the Lord" refers to the person of Jesus Christ before he took on human form. Second, this "angel" seemed to have accepted worship, having "ascended in the flame" of the sacrifice.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines the angel of the Lord as "A mysterious messenger of God, sometimes described as the Lord Himself (Gen. 16:10-13; Ex. 3:2-6; 23:20; Judg. 6:11-8), but at other times as one sent by God. The Lord used this messenger to appear to human beings who otherwise would not be able to see Him and live (Ex. 33:20). The Angel of the Lord performed actions associated with God, such as revelation, deliverance, and destruction; but he can be spoken of as distinct from God (2 Sam. 24:16;

Zech. 1:12). This special relationship is a mystery similar to that between Jesus and God in the New Testament ("Angel of the Lord"; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986).

People believed that if one ever saw God, he would die. Thus, in verse 22, Manoah exclaimed, "We are doomed to die! We have seen God!" But his wife reasoned, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this" (v. 23).

Manoah's wife soon "gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the Lord blessed him" (v. 24). So, the word of God performed a miracle in Samson's mother, causing her barren womb to conceive and enabled her to give birth (Judges 13:2-3).

Soon after, "the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him while he was in Mahaneh Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol" (v. 25), revealing to the reader that the Spirit of God would be the secret of Samson's supernatural life and ministry. This will certainly not be the last time we see the Spirit's work on Samson. It was the Holy Spirit who enabled Samson to do what God had called him to do.

Tragically, Samson betrayed the anointing later in life and the strength of the ministry left him. When God calls one to a ministry, he also anoints him to perform the tasks related to it. We must realize that God's grace is priceless, and we must remain faithful to our calling for which God has given us his anointing.

If God has called you to a certain task, he has also empowered you through his Holy Spirit. It is essential for us to remember that the secret to our success in ministry is the enabling that comes from God's Spirit, and not our fleshly efforts. Our dependence should not rest on natural credentials such as academic degrees, financial support, or other human beings, but only on him, that no one may boast in his presence.

No one can accomplish what God has called him to do without the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Even the furniture of the Old Testament tabernacle was produced by those especially anointed by God's Spirit: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you'" (Exodus 31:1-6).

Only the Holy Spirit can bring a divine quality to the work that we do in the ministry. Without the Holy Spirit, no truly good sermon, book, or lecture may be produced by ministers of the gospel. But with the divine power of the Holy Spirit, mere human beings may preach, write, and teach with words that bring enlightenment and transformation.

4. HIS ANOINTING

By Judges 14, Samson had grown to an age suitable for marriage, and he told his parents that he would like to marry a Philistine woman: "Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, 'I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.' His father and mother replied, 'Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?' But Samson said to his father, 'Get her for me. She's the right one for me.' (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel)" (Judges 14:1-4).

In this passage, we witness God's providence, his control over our hearts and circumstances. God had called Samson to attack the Philistines, "for at that time they were ruling over Israel." As the angel who appeared to Manoah's wife said, he would "begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). Israel was under the control of the Philistines, and God had chosen and enabled Samson to be a fighter for Israel against them.

When Samson wanted to marry a Philistine woman, his parents were surprised and dismayed. Their preference, of course, was for him to marry one of their own people, but to marry one from the enemy's side was perhaps too much. However, verse 4 says that, "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines." God had constructed in Samson a destructive weapon against Israel's enemy, and this is his way of deploying it.

So, Samson's desire to marry a Philistine woman was from God. His providence is actively involved not only in the initiation of our calling, but also in its execution. We may not recognize many occurrences as from God, but Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Paul explains that, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phillippians 2:13).

Scripture reveals that by choosing a Philistine woman to be his wife, there would arise an occasion, or opportunity, to "confront the Philistines." The situation would create an opportunity and a reason for Samson to fight against Israel's enemies.

However, "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord." And this brings us once again to a discussion on parenting, and the relationship of God's chosen ones to their parents.

As mentioned previously, part of one's parental responsibility is to recognize and nurture the child's calling in life. Although the parent may be able to obtain only a limited

amount of knowledge as to God's plan on the child's life, it is still possible to find out enough in order to raise the child properly and in line with God's plan.

Samson's parents knew of his calling – they had known about it even before he was born, for the angel said to them, "You will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazirite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5).

So, what we are observing here is that although this set of parents knew of their son's calling, yet they had failed to understand God's providential arrangement of specific details in relation to that calling. They failed to discern accurately as to which individual actions that Samson took were consistent with his destiny.

This implies that as a parent, even if you know of God's calling on your child's life, it is still conceivable that you may construe certain decisions that he makes as mistaken, even when they are within God's providential arrangement.

If that is true, then what chance is there for you to rightly relate to your child, if you do not even understand his calling as a whole? How will you know when he is simply doing something beyond your understanding, or if he is in fact committing an error in judgment? Samson's parents understood his general commission, but still failed to understand his specific actions, even though they were of God.

If you understand your child's general calling, and have studied to gain the knowledge of God through the Scriptures, then perhaps you may at least have the ability to recognize decisions that contradict his calling, or actions that are outright unbiblical. You will also realize when something is simply against your preference, but may not be wrong. You will then take time to think on these things and perhaps gain further understanding on what God is doing in your child's life. To be a responsible parent, therefore, you must seek to understand God's plan for your child.

This seems to be what Mary did. She may not have understood everything that occurred in Jesus' life, nor did she appreciate immediately what Jesus had said or done, but she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

I am certainly not saying that you are to allow your child to do anything he wants. There are actions and decisions that are clearly unbiblical and immoral which you must prevent. But the fact remains that you must gain as much understanding as possible on your child's calling, so that you may become a help, and not a hindrance, and so that when your child grows up to be a man of God, your relationship with him will not become increasingly distant.

I should also address this issue from the perspective of one who is called by God. That is, family members often do not understand or appreciate our calling. As Jesus states, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24). In non-Christian families, or those in which the Christians are uncommitted to Christ, there is almost always a certain level of

resistance or even resentment from one's family toward one's calling. The same people would readily applaud one's decision to obtain an ordinary job (though preferably well-paying), and live out one's life just like everyone else.

Modern-day parents, even those who are Christians, often seem to feel threatened or disappointed that God has chosen their child to be a preacher. This demonstrates how far their minds have wandered from God. It should be an answer to their most earnest prayer that God has chosen their child to hold the highest office available to a human being – that is, to be Christ's ambassador and to preach God's word. Such lack of gratitude toward God for calling the child is not only tragic for the parent and child relationship, but also sinful, seeing that they despise the gift of God.

Those who are called to the ministry must not be so eager for the approval of parents, family members, or friends that they compromise God's commission toward them. Jesus had predicted that his coming would generate family division: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'" (Matthew 10:34-36).

But he also promised that those who prefer him in spite of family opposition will be rewarded: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

Finally, Jesus warns, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:37-39).

An angel had announced to Mary that Jesus would "be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David...the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:32, 35). It was also revealed to Joseph that Jesus would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Yet, the parents of Jesus had not always understood the circumstances surrounding his life or the specific actions which he took.

For example, in Luke 2:42-50, we read, "When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they

were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he was saying to them."

In other words, Jesus said, "Why do you not know where I am supposed to be? Don't you know I must be involved in the things of God, my Father?" However, "they did not understand what he was saying to them."

There are other passages in the Bible demonstrating his natural family's lack of support toward his work. Matthew 12:46-50 may be one example: "While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"

There are several reasons why we may understand this passage as a suitable example to the point being made. Matthew Henry observes, "...Christ was interrupted in his preaching by his mother and his brethren...perhaps it was only designed to oblige him to break off...His mother and brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him, when they should have been standing within, desiring to hear him...Frequently those who are nearest to the means of knowledge and grace, are most negligent. Familiarity and easiness of access breed some degree of contempt...They not only would not hear him themselves, but they interrupted others that heard him gladly. The devil was a sworn enemy to our Saviour's preaching. He had sought to baffle his discourse by the unreasonable cavils of the scribes and Pharisees, and when he could not gain his point that way, he endeavoured to break it off by the unseasonable visits of relations...We often meet with hindrances and obstructions in our work, by our friends that are about us, and are taken off by civil respects from our spiritual concerns" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1991; p. 1676).

The resistance of Jesus' brothers toward his ministry is even more explicit in John 7:3-5: "Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.' For even his own brothers did not believe in him." Later, some of his brothers, such as Jude and James, believed on Jesus, but initially they did not.

The only proper encouragement to offer those called to be ministers is that family approval seldom proves anything; that is, their acceptance or rejection does not prove whether your calling or actions are legitimate or otherwise. This is something that you must settle between God and yourself. Once you have taken hold of God's direction for your life, then no psychological, financial, or other threats from your family should move you away from it. Your commitment toward God and the Scriptures should be such that

there will not even be any struggle or agonizing over the right course to take in the face of family opposition.

Once again, I quote Matthew 10:37-39: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Then, the Bible continues in Judges 14:5-6, "Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done."

Samson demonstrates for the first time what his anointing would do. Back in Judges 13:25, we came across the words, "the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him," but the verse does not tell us what the Spirit would do through him.

We understand that "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4) – the Spirit caused Samuel to prophesy, enabled David to rule as king, and inspired Jesus to preach and to heal. But the anointing of Samson had to do with physical strength.

Although God had called Samson to deliver Israel from the Philistines, he did not give him a gift of military leadership. In fact, Samson did not need an army. The anointing of physical strength was such that he equaled an army. If God has called you to the ministry, he has also given you a gift, and a place to exercise this gift. We must also function in a place that corresponds to the gift that God has given us. Only by using your gift, and not trying to be somebody else, will you be effective in the ministry.

God could have given Samson the wisdom and influence of a military leader, as he did to Joshua and Gideon. The latter two led the armies of Israel to fight against their enemies, at times against tremendous odds, and were victorious by the power of God. But God had given Samson the strength of an entire army.

An interesting point in this passage is that, after killing the lion, Samson "told neither his father nor his mother what he had done" (Judges 14:6). Most people, if they were ever to accomplish such a feat of strength, would immediately advertise it everywhere. In fact, some people, if they were even to succeed in breaking a board with a karate kick, they would tell everyone they know. Samson tore a lion apart with his bare hands, yet the Bible makes a point of saying that he did not tell his parents.

Although this has meaning for a passage that is to come, it also implies something else: Samson did not think that killing a lion with his bare hands was something to boast about. It was not some great deed for him. Without further evidence, we may think such an

inference stretches the point, but when we look at his reactions to his future feats of strength, we will see that such an interpretation is likely to be correct.

Judges 14:7-9 continues to say, "Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her. Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass."

Samson went to the Philistine woman and talked with her. As he was returning to her after a time to marry her, he remembered the lion's carcass and so went to look. There he found a swarm of bees and some honey.

No sooner had we witnessed the anointing of Samson do we see him betraying it. Samson was a Nazirite and was not supposed to touch the dead: "Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body. Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head" (Numbers 6:6-7). But Samson touched the lion carcass and even ate from his corpse.

The fact that Samson was able to tear a lion apart with his bare hands, and that he did not think it was a big deal, implies that he had great faith in the power of God. His confidence was such that such feats of strength did not provide him reasons to gloat or boast. However, this passage indicates that he may have a problem of not taking his identity as a Nazirite seriously enough. That is, although he had faith, it seems that he lacked the fear of the Lord. And one who does not fear the Lord can do some quite foolish things. Since "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10), all who do not fear him have not even started to be wise. It seems that, ultimately, this was what caused Samson's downfall. His problem was not Delilah. Sexual lust was not what brought him down.

Jesus says in Luke 12:4-5, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."

Fearing God is precisely what Samson failed to do. Perhaps his view of God was distorted so that he had faith in God's power but failed to recognize his holiness, and the seriousness of his Nazirite commitment. He demonstrated no fear that he might have done something to offend God. This attitude made him reckless and careless.

We must heed the words of the prophet Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

5. HIS WEAKNESS

Samson's spiritual problem, as I have just mentioned, is more likely to be a lack of the fear of God rather than sexual lust. This serious flaw in this relationship with God made him careless in his spiritual life. For example, his actions demonstrate that he lacked respect for his identity as a Nazirite.

In this chapter, we will also discover a weakness in the way he relates to other people that contributed to his later downfall. Let us begin by reading from Judges 14:10-14: "Now his father went down to see the woman. And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. When he appeared, he was given thirty companions. 'Let me tell you a riddle,' Samson said to them. 'If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes.' 'Tell us your riddle,' they said. 'Let's hear it.' He replied, 'Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.' For three days they could not give the answer."

The passage refers to Samson's wedding. Recall that earlier in Judges 14, Samson met a Philistine woman and told his parents that he wanted to marry her. His parents initially resisted the idea, but since Samson insisted on it, his parents capitulated. We also noted previously that this marriage was designed by God so that Samson would gain the opportunity and reason to attack the Philistines.

Verses 10 and 11 say, "And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. When he appeared, he was given thirty companions." According to the custom of that time, Samson gave a wedding feast, and while the bridegroom had "companions," the bride had "virgins" with her.

During the feast, Samson issued a challenge, where he would tell a riddle. For the Philistines to win, they would have to solve it within seven days. Orientals at that time were fond of riddles. It was a form of entertainment for them, especially on such occasions. The challenge involves the loser giving to the winner "thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes." The "linen garments" were worn next to the body, often by people of rank and wealth, while the "clothes" refers to outer woolen clothing. These were expensive items, and therefore there was much at stake.

The Philistines still had not come up with the answer by the third day, and therefore resorted to a rather dishonorable tactic: "For three days they could not give the answer. On the fourth day, they said to Samson's wife, 'Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death. Did you invite us here to rob us?' Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, 'You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the

answer.' 'I haven't even explained it to my father or mother,' he replied, 'so why should I explain it to you?' She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people. Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, 'What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?' Samson said to them, 'If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle'" (Judges 14:14-18).

The riddle was really about the lion Samson killed and the honey later found in its carcass. Let us read about it again in Judges 14:5-9: "Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her. Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass."

Based on this incident Samson put forth the riddle, "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet" (v. 4). No one really knew the answer to it except Samson – he had not even told his parents what happened on the road to Timnah, and when his wife asked him for the answer to the riddle, he said, "I haven't even explained it to my father and mother, so why should I explain it to you?"

It was important for the Philistines to solve the riddle, since in addition to having a substantial amount of money at stake, the issue of national pride was also involved. They were not about to be outwitted by an Israelite! So in verse 15, they threatened Samson's wife to get the answer to the riddle from her husband; otherwise, they promised to kill her and her family.

Having yielded to pressure coming from the Philistines, Samson's wife pressed her husband for the answer to the riddle and would not relent: "Then Samson's wife threw herself on him, sobbing, 'You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer.' 'I haven't even explained it to my father or mother,' he replied, 'so why should I explain it to you?' She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people" (Judges 14:16-17).

This brings us to the weakness that Samson had when dealing with other people, namely, he was vulnerable to manipulation by women. Now, my intention is not to focus on manipulative tactics used by women in particular, but since this passage we are dealing with involves such, naturally we must discuss it from this perspective.

Of course, not only women manipulate other people psychologically, but even infants know how to do that. Most children learn early in life that they could gain the attention of

the parents and probably all the others in the room when they cry. Sooner or later, the children may begin to cry intentionally, or delay in ceasing, in order to gain extra attention or whatever they want at the time. The parents who never realized the importance of being firm with their children at the right time, then become the objects of such manipulation.

We should realize that whether we are discussing men, women, or infants, every human being has the tendency to manipulate others using illegitimate means. Such wickedness proceeds naturally from man's corrupted nature, and it is only through God's work of regeneration and sanctification in us that it may be corrected.

In this case, we have an example of a woman manipulating a man using tactics typical for her gender. That is, she "cried the whole seven days of the feast" (v. 17), and said to Samson such words as, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer" (v. 16). Such manipulation is carnal and demonic. Christians should take care to resist such control and see to it that they do not attempt to manipulate others through such means.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that every type of control is ungodly. God places people in certain positions of authority to exercise legitimate control over others according to his purposes. He has instituted positions of authority in the family: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24), in the government: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1), and in the Church: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17). Although human beings often abuse what God has ordained, this does not negate the fact that he has placed certain people in positions of authority.

Returning our attention to Samson, his wife was trying to force the answer to the riddle out of him using psychological manipulation. What is significant about this, besides what we have just discussed, is that Samson's weakness in this case is apparently not sexual in nature, but he had insufficient defense against manipulative tactics used by women. Although his desire for this Philistine woman did place him in such a situation, in this case it was a legitimate marriage, which "was from the LORD" (Judges 14:4). Any sexual urges he had certainly did not cause him to give up the answer to the riddle, for the Bible explicitly says that "on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him" (v. 17). He was not defeated until he yielded to his wife's psychological pressure.

I must pursue this point since it is popular to think that all the problems Samson got himself into was due to his insatiable sexual appetite. But his weakness in this case is evidently not sexual but psychological. He could not be firm against his wife. He could not maintain a decision he had made in opposition to manipulation and pressure.

Although this is just the answer to a riddle that we are speaking of, later we will see that Samson even compromised his commitment to God for the same reason.

Although this example may not be sufficient to demonstrate the point, as a later one certainly will, Samson's weakness is a warning for us, whether men or women. That is, we must not allow psychological pressure coming from others to steer us away from our commitment to God or his will for our lives.

There is an additional lesson here: Even before Samson submitted to his wife's manipulation, she had already submitted to external threats. Often, a woman may perceive a certain standard that the world expects from those who claim its respect. In some people's eyes, those without a certain level of wealth or fame are despised, and those involved in certain professions are automatically viewed with contempt.

When what God has called the husband to do does not measure up to the worldly standard, a spiritually weak woman may become dissatisfied and ashamed. Instead of placing her trust in God and in the spiritual gifts given to her husband, she may attempt to influence him through the tactics referred to above so that he may conform to the worldly standard of what is respectable.

Samson's wife could have entrusted her life to God and the anointing he had given to Samson, then she would be safe from harm, since the Philistines were no match against Samson when it came to combat. As we shall see later, not even an entire army of the Philistines could capture Samson. Instead, she yielded to the threats of the Philistines, and turned against Samson. And what she compromised to keep, she later lost anyway.

If you are a wife whose husband has been called to the ministry, let me warn you so that you may not allow the values and standards of the world to infiltrate your mind, causing you to be ashamed of your husband's calling. Although the world may look down on ministers of the gospel, there is no greater calling for a human being than to preach God's word. Instead of pressuring your husband to conform to worldly standard, you should rather defend his calling and encourage him to pursue it with diligence and passion. Do not allow yourself to be the biggest hindrance in his determination to obey God.

As for those who are called to the ministry, never succumb to pressure from friends or relatives to compromise your calling. Remember what Jesus says in Luke 18:29-30, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." We must say with the apostle Peter, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). Of course, the husband must also encourage his wife in what God has called her to do.

Samson had lost the challenge, and therefore incurred a debt. We will conclude this chapter by reading the biblical account of how he managed to pay it: "Before sunset on the seventh day the men of the town said to him, 'What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?' Samson said to them, 'If you had not plowed with my heifer, you

would not have solved my riddle.' Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house. And Samson's wife was given to the friend who had attended him at his wedding" (Judges 14:18-20).

The only reason why Samson lost was because he yielded to his wife's manipulation, and now he had to pay the Philistines. Nevertheless, the Philistines did not play fair, since they threatened Samson's wife to get the answer: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle."

But God "was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines" (Judges 14:4), and perhaps in revenge for the way his riddle was solved, Samson went about thirty miles away from where he was, through Philistines territory to a place called Ashkelon, "struck down thirty of their men stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle." In other words, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power" to pay the Philistines by robbing some of their own people!

God had called and anointed Samson to be a killing machine against the Philistines. Throughout his life, we see instances of him slaughtering Israel's enemies based on what seemed to be personal issues. But in fact, God "was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines," and he used Samson to bring judgment against them.

Christians, and especially those called to the ministry, should have a distinct sense of God's providence in their lives. And the spiritual gifts that he has given us correspond exactly to the need and the circumstances that he arranges for us. Even our personal needs will be supplied through the gifts that he has given us. As the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 9:14, "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." Whatever it is, God is going to meet your needs through what he has called and anointed you to do.

6. HIS VICTORIES

At the end of the previous chapter, we have come to the point in Samson's story where the Philistines, through their threats against his wife, had obtained the answer to the riddle. Samson, having lost the challenge and therefore had incurred a debt, went and robbed thirty Philistines and paid it off. Then, "Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house" (Judges 14:19). As far as the biblical record goes, this is Samson's first attack against the Philistines.

After some time, Samson decided to be reconciled with his wife and went to her: "Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, 'I'm going to my wife's room.' But her father would not let him go in. 'I was so sure you thoroughly hated her,' he said, 'that I gave her to your friend. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead.' Samson said to them, 'This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them.' So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves" (Judges 15:1-5).

Samson had been "burning with anger" about the entire situation – how the Philistines were able to solve the riddle and how his wife had betrayed him by giving them the answer. After some time, his anger subsided and he wanted to be reconciled with her, and so he "took a young goat and went to visit his wife." However, when he arrived, "her father would not let him go in." He explained, saying, "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her that I gave her to your friend."

The father thought that, because of her betrayal, Samson must have "thoroughly hated her." The word translated "hated" here in verse 2 may have been a technical word when used in the context of marriage that implies the intention of divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance." The word translated "dislikes" here in verse 3 by the NIV is the same word translated "hated" in Judges 15:2, and it is rendered as such in the KJV of Deuteronomy 24:3.

So, the word "hated" in Judges 15:2 may have conveyed the idea of divorce. In other words, Samson's father-in-law may have meant, "I thought you must have divorced her after what she had done to you."

Samson responded by saying, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them" (v. 3). He exacted his revenge by burning down the Philistines' crops: "So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves" (Judges 15:4-5).

This was the second attack that Samson had launched against the Philistines. Once again, the conflict was the result of a personal issue between the two parties; yet, the purpose of God was fulfilled as a result. Apparently, God had chosen to have Samson fulfill his calling in this manner. God had created Samson to be a killing machine, and his way of setting him loose against the Philistines was to create personal conflicts between them. Even this marriage was initiated to seek "an occasion to confront the Philistines" (Judges 14:4) in the first place.

Although Christian ministers are usually much more conscious and purposeful in fulfilling their callings, there are still similarities between Samson and them. That is, God's gift upon Samson was such that his entire life was geared toward his mission. And this is quite true of those who are called by God into the ministry. God's providence is such that their lives are geared toward the destiny that God has chosen for them. In verses 3-5, Samson was provoked to fight those whom God intended for him to fight. From Samson's perspective, it was due to a personal issue. It seemed like he was fighting only for himself. Yet, it was within the plan of God.

The way he burned down the Philistines' crops was to tie three hundred foxes together by their tails, fastened torches to them, lit the torches, and "let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines."

This caused much damage, and when the Philistines asked, "'Who did this?' they were told, 'Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his friend.' So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death" (v. 6).

The Philistines had threatened Samson's wife with death by burning in order for her to manipulate the answer to the riddle out of him. Instead of depending on her husband's strength, which was given to him by God, she capitulated and betrayed her husband. But what she compromised to keep, she lost, and she as well as her father was burned to death. But if she had sided with her husband, he could have protected her against the Philistines rather easily.

Many people are intimidated by the world, and so they find ways for self-preservation. Christians should never compromise their spiritual life to save themselves. What you compromise to protect, you are likely to lose. Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-25, "If anyone

would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Do you wish to live a godly life, yet you are desperately seeking approval from your parents, friends, and the world in general? If so, it is likely that you will lose both. In compromising to gain the approval of others, you are no longer living in a way that is pleasing to God, because "Anyone who choose to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). At the same time, you will also fail to gain the respect of the world, since "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:19). A Christian can never be truly loved by the world, and one who compromises his relationship with God to gain worldly approval will fail to maintain either. As long as he remains this way, he will live in misery.

Jesus reminds us that, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24), and Paul reasons that, "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Timothy 2:4).

God's power is more than sufficient to protect us from the world's intimidation – we have no reason to compromise. Some compromise the contents of the gospel to attract sinners, or to make ourselves more acceptable to the world. But if we do that, will we still be able to keep what we are seeking to preserve? No, we have lost it already. We must come to the place where we can sincerely say, with the apostle Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). We do that not through an irrational commitment or "a leap of faith," but a realization gained through diligent study and the assurance of the Holy Spirit that the Christian worldview is the only one that reflects reality, and that our gospel is superior in every way to any other proposed solution to man's needs and problems. In an age of intellectual feebleness and indecision disguised as "tolerance" and "unity," even some Christians abandon the uniqueness of our matchless gospel, as if God will be displeased with us for having too much confidence in his word and the redemptive work of Christ!

Not soon after the second attack had ended was Samson provoked once more to attack the Philistines. When Samson found out what the Philistines had done to his wife and father-in-law, he said, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." And so, "He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam" (Judges 15:8).

The Bible then quickly leads us into the fourth attack that Samson made against the Philistines: "The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. The men of Judah asked, 'Why have you come to fight us?' 'We have come to take Samson prisoner,' they answered, 'to do to him as he did to us.' Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, 'Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?' He answered, 'I merely did to them what they did to me.' They said to him, 'We've come to tie you up and hand

you over to the Philistines.' Samson said, 'Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves.' 'Agreed,' they answered. 'We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you.' So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. Then Samson said, 'With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men.' When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi" (Judges 15:9-17).

After having "slaughtered many" Philistines, Samson went "and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam." The Philistines went up to Judah and demanded that Samson be handed over to them. So, the men of Judah came to Samson and said, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" In other words, they were saying to Samson, "What have you gotten us into? Don't you realize that the Philistines had conquered us, and our nation is currently under their rule? Why do you seek trouble with them?" And they told Samson that they were going to tie him up and surrender him to the Philistines.

Most crowds are like that – they yield to those who are giving them the greatest pressure. The men of Judah could have just as easily expressed their confidence in God's anointing in Samson's life, and recommended a full-scale insurrection, which would have also proved that they were cured from the sin and unbelief that resulted in their subjugation under the Philistines in the first place.

Samson was God's chosen deliverer for Israel from the Philistines at the time. Thus to a great measure, their faith in his ability reflected their attitude toward God. If so, what can we infer from their giving up Samson to their enemies? They could have said to him, "Samson, we recognize that God has gifted you with supernatural strength, and that he has called you to deliver Israel from the Philistines. We are grateful for God's provision and we have faith in his power, and therefore we also have confidence in you. Now, why don't we take this opportunity to declare war against the Philistine and be rid of them forever? Let us take this nation back!"

That is what they should have said, but instead, they complained against God's chosen one and said, "What have you gotten us into? Don't you realize that the Philistines are our rulers? We have come to surrender you to them so that they will leave us alone." They were going to give up to the enemy the man of God – their only chance for deliverance at that time.

Here is a lesson for Christian leaders: Most people, even Christians, cannot be trusted under pressure. You would like to think that they will remain faithful to you and to God, but most of them are not as committed as they present themselves to be. You would like to think the best of people, but you must also think truthfully and realistically – most crowds are fickle and easily intimidated by pressure.

In fact, most Christians are not even willing to compromise their income for the advancement of God's kingdom, let alone for you. Can this be true? Well, you are probably like this, too. You can talk loud and bold, but when the pressure comes, you just may be one of those who turn and run.

When Jesus was about to be arrested, he said to his disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matthew 26:31). But Peter protested, saying, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (v. 33). Jesus responded with the prediction, "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times," and it happened just like he said. Not only Peter misjudged his own commitment, but the other disciples as well, since they insisted along with Peter, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (v. 35). But later, "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (Matthew 26:56).

For this reason, a faith that passed the test of pressure is priceless. As Job said, "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10), and the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6-7, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

True faith that can withstand the fire is rare. Even Jesus in his earthly life did not place his trust on his disciples. The Bible records in John 2:23-25, "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."

Leaders who base their confidence in the number and current loyalty of their supporters are deceived. They do not really have the backing that they think they have. Those who place their trust in the crowds may be disappointed when the situation comes under pressure, or when the organization suffers persecution. It may never come to that, but if it does, then there is no way of knowing how many people will remain behind them. Of course, it is possible that some will remain faithful. My point is simply that not all who say that they are committed are in fact committed. Ultimately, only God can be trusted, since only he is pure in intention and unlimited in ability: "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD'" (Jeremiah 17:5).

Again, this is not to say that there are no Christians who will stay faithful to God and their leaders under pressure. But the fact remains that human beings, without regeneration by the Holy Spirit and a subsequent process of sanctification and growth through the aid of Christian leaders, are extremely fickle. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the renewing of the mind through the Scriptures may one be transformed into the likeness of Christ, and be bold to stand for the truth in the midst of pressure and opposition.

If you are a Christian who has never faced any sort of intense pressure, you do not need to question your commitment, but at the same time, you should not overestimate yourself. You should diligently prepare yourself, and seek to grow spiritually, so that if ever you encounter a situation where your faith is challenged, you will be ready for it.

Samson was aware of the people's weakness, but he had enough confidence in God's power working through him that he did not require their assistance. He only asked that the men of Judah would not try to kill him themselves, but simply hand him over to the Philistines: "They said to him, 'We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.' Samson said, 'Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves.' 'Agreed,' they answered. 'We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you.' So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock" (Judges 15:12-13).

In recent years, there has been much emphasis on "team work," and how it is foolish to think that one person cannot "do it all." This concept has also influenced many Christians' thinking regarding the ministry; however, it really depends on how good the team is – one "Samson" is greater than an army of fools.

Nevertheless, I do agree that God intends for Christians to work together, and that each has something meaningful to contribute: "As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:20-22).

However, I strongly oppose the idea that one person is *always* insufficient – it is simply unbiblical to say so. This perspective shows little confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit working within a regenerated person. King David was able to say, "You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall" (Psalm 18:28-29). In another place, he says, "O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.' But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side. Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people" (Psalm 3:1-8).

Although the prophet Jeremiah experienced much inner turmoil due to his ministry responsibilities, God had called him to face the nation alone, and he ultimately pulled through splendidly: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation" (Jeremiah 15:16-17).

May we learn to overcome every worldly idea and teaching that opposes our confidence in God's power, and in our context, particularly those concepts that undermine the Christian's individual potential in Christ, so that we may imitate the faith of the apostle Paul, who says, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:16-18). Although everyone left him, it was sufficient that God alone stood by him and strengthened him. He believed that God would deliver him "from every evil attack," and would bring him "safely to his heavenly kingdom."

Can we say with the apostle Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phillippians 4:13)? Or, do we say, "We can do some things through team ministry?" (even though in many cases one capable person should be able to do the same tasks several times by the time the team gathers), and with the unspoken assumption, "and if we fail the whole team is blamed, so none of us will have to take personal responsibility for it!"?

"Team ministry" is good, but it is best only when each member is spiritually strong. It is better to have a small team made up of spiritual giants rather than to have a large group of spiritual cowards who are psychologically dependent on one another, and where no one individual is truly strong. Of course, a team of mostly mature believers with several weaker ones in training is not only acceptable, but encouraged.

In the final analysis, the issue of team ministry and its implementation should not be settled by secular leadership or organizational theories, but through biblical exegesis. For example, the Bible speaks of the delegation of authority, but our implementation of such should not be informed by the corporate policies of secular organizations, but should be governed by biblical revelation. However, such is beyond the scope and purpose of the present volume.

Samson was totally depending on God's miraculous power, and anything other than that could not have saved him. He had no team members to support him, since they were the very ones who had surrendered him to the enemy, but he had faith in God. At the beginning of this book, I noted that instead of looking for Samson's weaknesses, especially those typically attributed to him, we should search for his faith. That is, what did he believe that made him great? His fearless willingness to face an entire army of Philistines by himself was an indication of his faith in God's power and in God's willingness to demonstrate it through him. We must also learn to place our trust in God's supernatural influence in our ministries. Preaching the gospel is not merely a human endeavor, but one that is initiated and energized by divine power: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:28-29).

Then, the men of Judah handed Samson over to the Philistines: "As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men" (Judges 15:14-15). There were three thousand men from Judah who would rather persuade Samson to surrender rather than to fight the Philistines; yet, it only took one Samson to defeat them all. I would rather have the assistance of one "Samson," than three thousand "men of Judah" who would betray God's man at the first sign of trouble.

Having "struck down a thousand men," Samson said, "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men." In Hebrew, this is a rhymed couplet with a play on words. I think the NIV has translated this as fittingly as the English language can represent the original: "With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them"! Corresponding to what we have discussed earlier, Samson's faith is such that he could make light of situations even such as this one. He was in trouble with an entire ethnic group and he was still playing around.

But then, we see another example of what may be his lack of the fear of God. The Bible records, "When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi. Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, 'You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?' Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi" (Judges 15:17-19).

Listen to how he prays: "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" It seems that with all his faith in God's power, he still failed to address God with the proper respect and fear. This made him spiritually careless and foolish. God's mighty deliverance was taken for granted, and thus rather than giving thanks, he demanded another need to be met. But Paul tells us to pray "with thanksgiving" (Phillippians 4:6).

One may have faith in God's mercy but does not fear him, while another fears him but does not have confidence in his willingness to be involved in human life. The first endangers himself while the second allows himself to live in guilt and defeat. Either way results in one who lives a twisted spiritual life. We should both have faith in God as a loving Father, and fear him as the Almighty God.

7. HIS DOWNFALL

We have not seen Samson ever having lived an especially godly life, although as a Nazirite, he was supposed to have exhibited a high level of devotion to God. He had violated his Nazirite commitment by not only touching, but eating from a lion's carcass. The Bible seems to record him as one who had faith in God's power, but he is also one who had little of the fear of the Lord. As mentioned, the premise of this book does not deny that Samson had problems with his character, but the problems that directly led him into trouble was not sexual, but spiritual and psychological.

At the beginning of Judges 16:1-3, we do see him going to a prostitute: "One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. 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.' 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."

Lest through this passage, the reader thinks that Samson's main problem was sexual after all, let me remind him that although most people who go to prostitutes may do so with the intention of satisfying sexual needs, that is often not the only reason why they go. Many sexually promiscuous men are that way because they have certain spiritual and psychological issues besides sexual ones, such as loneliness.

In addition, we have no reason to assume that all the women Samson had been with were simply to satisfy him sexually instead of psychologically as well. For example, Samson wanted to marry the Philistine woman at Timnah because "he liked her" (Judges 14:7); thus, his interests were not purely sexual, but he was fond of the woman as a person. Further, if his interests were indeed only of the flesh, then why did he put up with all the psychological pressure and manipulation exerted upon him by the woman? Surely, there were attractive women elsewhere.

As we shall see, even his relationship with Delilah was not only sexual, since the Bible says that he "fell in love" (Judges 16:4) with her. The popular portrayal of this relationship as one involving intense seduction and uncontrollable lusts cannot be substantiated by the actual biblical account. Certainly, lust was likely to have been a factor, but to make it the exclusive factor in that relationship, or even to use it as the main factor to explain the whole of Samson's life, would be an irresponsible distortion of the biblical text.

We must also remember what Samson had just been through. He married the woman he loved, but she betrayed him even before the wedding feast was over. When his anger

subsided and went to seek reconciliation, he discovered that she had been given away to someone else. Then, after seeking revenge on the Philistines, they burned her and her family to death. After exacting revenge on them once again, the men of Judah, his own countrymen, surrendered him to the Philistines. His parents did not understand him, his wife had betrayed him, his own countrymen failed him, and the entire nation of the Philistines was after him.

Men of lesser character may have not only gone to a prostitute or alcohol for relief, but some may have even committed suicide by this point! Without making excuses for any genuinely unbiblical actions that Samson had done, I think we should seek to understand his life based on a broader context than is usually done by taking all the available information into account.

Returning to our text, verse 1 in our passage says, "One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her" (Judges 16:1). This time, the Bible does not say that this relationship was "from the Lord." Whether he was seeking company or sexual gratification, or both (as I am inclined to believe), it was sinful for him to have been to a prostitute.

When the people of Gaza found out that Samson was there, they "surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate," and planned to kill him. But then, Samson "got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts...and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron."

Samson carried the gate of Gaza from where it was to, as the NIV has it, "the hill that faces Hebron." If the "hill that faces Hebron" means the top of a hill from which one could see Hebron, then the distance between the gate of Gaza to that location was about one mile. However, if the phrase means a hill that was within Hebron (NASB: "the mountain which is opposite Hebron"), then the distance over which Samson had carried the gate becomes twenty to thirty-four miles. Either way, it was a long distance to have carried an entire city gate. This once more reminds us of the anointing of physical strength that God had given to Samson.

Many people wonder why some seem to possess great spiritual power and gifts, yet do not exhibit mature Christian character. It astonishes Christians to see that many, who by the power of the Holy Spirit, operate in the gifts of healing or prophecy, live blatantly sinful lives. This is explained by the fact that God's grace is received by faith, and not earned by good behavior. In this episode of Samson's life, although he was not in the best condition morally, he was still able to operate in God's power. However, one cannot but notice that he is treading on dangerous grounds. Indeed, one who has learned to walk in spiritual gifts, but refuses to grow in knowledge and character, can hardly continue to minister properly for very long. This person will either mislead others or lose his position.

It is not until now that we have come to the part of Samson's life that has to do with Delilah: "Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose

name was Delilah. 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'" (Judges 16:4-5).

This passage contains the first mention of Delilah in the Bible. As I have explained when discussing the basic premise of this book, the story of Samson is not mainly, let alone wholly, about his relationship with Delilah. In our study, we have gone through Judges 13, 14, and 15, but not until now do we see Delilah mentioned, and we have already arrived at the final chapter in the Bible on Samson's life.

Verse 4 says that Samson, "fell in love with a woman...whose name was Delilah." It does not directly tell the reader that Samson's relationship with her was based wholly on sexual lusts, but in fact, he "fell in love" with her. I have no argument with one who points out that he fell in love with the wrong woman, but he fell in love nonetheless. To remedy such a tendency, the Book of Proverbs would be most helpful, but it is a book that Samson had no privilege of reading.

I simply do not accept the notion that Samson's sexual problem, assuming that he had one, could explain his behavior satisfactorily. Rather, it seems that we have to at least include spiritual and psychological problems, such as his lack of devotion to his Nazirite commitment (and therefore to God), his loneliness, and all that he had been through as discussed earlier, in order to account for his actions.

Certainly, lust is not the only factor that controls a person's behavior or relationships. In our day, it is easy to find many friendships or marriages that are governed by one or both parties' insecurity, loneliness, fear, and other psychological factors. Healthy relationships can only originate and be maintained when all parties are committed to godly ideals and are subjected to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. For sure, Samson's example should warn us to choose our friends and our mates with utmost caution.

We get the impression that Samson was a passionate person, but he could not keep his feelings under control. He was not a passive person, but felt deeply for things that he was involved with. Although this is positive if we were discussing one's commitment toward God, it can be destructive when applied to other areas and if it gets out of control, as Samson demonstrates. One should never allow his passion to override good judgment.

The "rulers of the Philistines" went to Delilah and said to her, "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" (v. 5). Samson was about to be betrayed once again by another woman that he loved, only this time it was not even for self-preservation, but for money.

Delilah wasted no time, but asked Samson outright, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued" (v. 6). Imagine a person coming to you

with such a question: "Tell me how I may tie you up and subdue you. Tell me how I may cause you to fail." Would that not be a cause for alarm?

Samson lied to Delilah, saying, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man" (v. 7). Then, "the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh thongs that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. 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. 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.' He said, 'If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man.' 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" (v. 8-12).

If someone asks you how he may cause you to fail, and as an answer, you told him a lie. But then, he actually does whatever you told him would cause your failure, what would you do? It would clearly indicate that the person is trying to do you harm. You would either retaliate, at least in the sense of stopping him, or get out of the relationship. It is hard to believe that Samson did not sense the danger, or Delilah's evil intentions, but he remained in the relationship, and kept playing around with her by lying about the secret of his strength.

Delilah takes it one step higher, and began to say, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." She was beginning to use the manipulative tactics that we have discussed previously, but Samson was not about to give up that easily: "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 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" (v. 13-14).

We have pointed out how Samson seems to be vulnerable to psychological manipulation coming from women, and here we see it once again: "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'" (v. 15).

Compare what Delilah says here to Judges 14:15-18, where by persistently saying such things as, "You hate me! You don't really love me. You've given my people a riddle, but you haven't told me the answer," Samson's wife was able to manipulate out of him the answer to the riddle.

Delilah used the same strategy, only she was probably even more skillful at it. She said things such as, "Until now, you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied," and "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." She did not say these things only once or twice, but the Bible says that, "With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death" (v. 16)! All this time, Samson played around with her by giving her false answers. He did not confront her firmly, nor did he leave the relationship.

Finally, Samson, being "tired to death" of her "nagging," told her the secret of his strength: "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'" (v. 17). So, Samson had finally committed the fatal error, in that he allowed a person, through manipulation or deception to invade and take away from his spiritual life.

The consequences were devastating: "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. 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. 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. 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" (v. 18-21).

Never allow the enemy to corrupt your spiritual devotion. The devil, "like a roaring lion," is "looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He will use manipulation, intimidation, deception, and all kinds of distractions in the attempt to remove you from your spiritual focus. Adam and Eve fell this way. Satan himself deceived Eve, and then used her to take down Adam, who was, according to the Bible, not deceived (1 Timothy 2:14). One who does not yield to one type of pressure may yield to another kind. Adam, who was not deceived by the devil, sinned because of Eve. Likewise, Samson, who was not in the least afraid of the Philistines, fell because of manipulation coming from women.

It is essential that Christians do not become overconfident simply because they are strong in certain areas. We must see to it that Satan will not be able to cause us to stumble in any way. As the apostle John says, "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him" (1 John 5:18). But ultimately, it will be God who keeps us "blameless" to the end (see 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 3:13, 5:23). Although we must "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling," it is "God who works in [us] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phillippians 2:12-13), so that no one may boast in his presence.

Samson's behavior was indeed strange. It was unlikely that he was totally oblivious to Delilah's intention; otherwise, why did he not tell her the truth about his strength the first time? And after the first or second time, he must have known that Delilah's plan was to discover his secret, exploit it, and then hand him over to the Philistines. Knowing this, he could have left Delilah at any time, but he chose to remain. Again, I am not convinced that his sexual lust could cause this behavior, since his sexual needs could have been

satisfied by another woman, and the Bible tells us explicitly that he had fallen in love with Delilah. Thus, his decision to remain must have been due to psychological rather than sexual factors, or both.

The lesson to us is the realization that the enemy is after our spiritual commitment, and he will try to use various means to entice us to abandon or compromise our relationship with God. Although many are deceived into sin, others walk into trouble with their eyes wide open.

8. SAMSON AND HIS COMEBACK FAITH

In God's providence, the Philistines did not kill Samson, but they "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" (Judges 16:21). Although he had literally slaughtered more than a thousand Philistines and destroyed their crops, they did not execute Samson once they had captured him. Perhaps they thought they would make him an example, or maybe after all that Samson had done to them, they wished to humiliate and torture him a while first. Having "gouged out his eyes" and bound him "with bronze shackles," maybe they thought he was no longer a threat. In any case, God's providence was at work – taking Samson into the important city of Gaza, with or without his eyes, was like taking in a ticking time bomb. Samson, now blinded, was God's Trojan horse to the Philistines.

The Philistines "gouged out his eyes," which on the surface seemed to be a tragic event – but it was probably the best thing that had ever happened to Samson. He was a passionate, energetic, and outgoing person, but no one understood him. His relationship with God was poor, and he was seeking to satisfy himself by looking for love in all the wrong places. Losing his sight and freedom forced him, perhaps for the first time in his life, to turn inward – to reflect on his actions and his commitment toward God.

Lest the reader thinks that one's spiritual welfare is not worth losing his sight over, Jesus himself stated, even though it may well be an hyperbole, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell" (Mark 9:43-47).

The apostle Paul explains that, "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:31-32). If Samson had put a stop to his own spiritual negligence, then he may not have needed to suffer. But given that he was unwilling to do so, what he needed was divine discipline, so that he would "not be condemned with the world." Our confidence should be that, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

It was after all the continual recklessness of Samson that got him into his present condition. He had violated his Nazirite commitment long ago. He failed to resist manipulation. God had given him numerous opportunities to remove himself from dangerous situations; yet, he never pulled himself together spiritually. And he positioned himself for defeat.

But God's purposes and plans were not to be thwarted by man's disobedience, and whether blind or seeing, free or bound, God put Samson right where he was supposed to be – right in the middle of the Philistines. To be mocked by them? No, but to destroy them, as we shall see.

Now that Samson could not look outward, which he had tended to do, now that he had no strength or freedom, he had to look inward, to examine himself, and to commune with God. We have no indication of him ever having done that in the previous chapters of Judges.

Many people, like Samson, are so busy today that they blaze forward in their careers, or even ministry, without stopping often to have fellowship with God, to look inward, and to examine themselves. They fail to apply themselves in the area of biblical studies and prayer. Their minds are constantly thinking on earthly things and ambitions. Some of them may assume that because they are Christians, they have the support and the blessings of God unconditionally. Others tend to think that material concerns are more urgent, and spiritual matters should be reserved for times when they are "free" – perhaps during vacations, spiritual retreats, or even when they retire.

However, as we have seen from the life of Samson, it is dangerous to compromise your spiritual life. Foolish are those who look to the earthly at the expense of the heavenly: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). There is a misleading saying, that one can be "so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good." If this refers to one who seems to be so focused on his spiritual life that he fails to obey God's commandments regarding his relationship with other human beings, then he is not even spiritual in the first place (James 1:27), or at least he has a spiritual defect in this area even though he may be doing well in others. On the other hand, there is no limit to how "spiritual" a person can or should be. Often, this misleading statement is used by those who wish to defend their carnal lifestyle and attitude, and therefore deride those who are genuinely more spiritual.

It is vital for Christians to take time for daily Bible reading, study, and prayer. At such times, we must, at least temporarily, shut out all distractions such as entertainment, our careers, or even the demands of friends and family.

Jesus often took time to pray, at times even spending the night in prayer: "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God" (Luke 6:12). Jesus was a busy man. He did not even have to look for people to minister to – at times, they came to him in crowds. So, he could be as busy as he wanted to be. But he made the effort to remove himself from the multitudes to spend time alone with God.

Once, when Jesus was teaching his disciples, Martha, who had "opened her home to him," "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made," while her sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet" and was "listening to what he said." When Martha complained about Mary, Jesus answered that Mary had "chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42). Spending time alone in prayer and studying the Bible is

more important and better than all the outward things that we so often busy ourselves with.

Then, "the hair on [Samson] head began to grow again after it had been shaved" (Judges 16:22). God was not about to leave him in that prison forever. The anointing began to return, Samson is once more in a position to operate in God's power.

God is a God of opportunities. Regeneration by the Spirit is the greatest of all "second chances." Talk about a second chance, that you can be born again! This is God's mercy toward his elect. Even after that, God continues to restore us when we fail: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness...My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 1:9, 2:1).

The Bible continues in Judges 16:23-27, "Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, 'Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.' When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, 'Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.' While they were in high spirits, they shouted, 'Bring out Samson to entertain us.' So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, 'Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them.' Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform."

Samson's failure brought reproach to the God of Israel, since the Philistines interpreted their capture of Samson as the victory of their pagan god, Dagon. Similarly, when Christians fail to properly represent Jesus Christ, to stand strong in doctrine and character, they bring reproach to his name. Contrary to the opinion of many, your "religion" is not purely a personal business – your beliefs and actions will affect other people. At the least, the quality of your spiritual life will affect your family members, and if you are a pastor, your congregation as well. In the final analysis, it is difficult to ascertain how many people one's spiritual failure affects.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:13 are especially relevant: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

As Christians, we are the salt of the earth, meaning that, although sin causes decay, we are the ones who prevent ultimate corruption from taking place on this planet. However, "if the salt loses its saltiness," "it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." If the salt loses its flavor, it is no longer acting as a preservative. Being good for nothing, it is thrown out into the streets, and is stepped on by people who walk by.

No matter our deficiencies, without Christians, this planet would "rot." Without "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), what is left of human morality and decency would crumble, meaning and dignity would disappear, and the fear of God would be non-existent, and the earth would become the devil's paradise. Only Christians can prevent this from occurring.

However, when Christians lose their distinctiveness, or Christian "flavor," then they become "no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men." This is what has happened in too many instances. When Christians compromise their spiritual commitment and lose their flavor, they become overwhelmed by the world, when the Bible says that they are the ones who can and should overcome it because of their faith: "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1 John 5:4-5).

Having compromised his spiritual commitment, Samson lost his sight and his freedom to the Philistines. And they mocked him, saying, "Bring out Samson to entertain us," "So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them" (v. 25). Samson was a spiritual hero – he was called by God to be a man of God, a great deliverer, but due to his spiritual negligence, the Philistines had captured him, gouged out his eyes, and had made him an object of ridicule and amusement.

And now, we come to the conclusion of Samson's life: "Then Samson prayed to the LORD, 'O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.' Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived. Then his brothers and his father's whole family went down to get him. They brought him back and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of Manoah his father. He had led Israel twenty years" (Judges 16:28-31).

Here is the amazing thing: After all Samson had done and been through, and when the situation looked so final, he still had faith to believe that God could and would work through him. What insight and confidence into God's mercy and power did he have, to have had this kind of comeback faith! This kind of faith is rare even in Christians, who supposedly have a revelation in God's electing grace and the entire canon of Scripture to convince them of his mercy.

Many become weak or even quit the ministry altogether because of guilt and failures. These are not humble, but unbelieving. They do not believe that God's grace is sufficient, but that their sin is greater than God's forgiveness. They do not believe that God's mercy endures forever. They do not believe that God's grace abounds in the midst of sin and weakness.

The Bible says that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). They cannot be canceled. Once God has given his gifts and issued forth his calling, they cannot be abolished. Samson had the faith to believe that, while many of God's people do not. Is it any wonder, then, that although Samson is portrayed negatively by people who misunderstand him, God would rather honor him through placing his name alongside Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, and the others in Hebrews 11? The world is not worthy of one who understands and has faith in God's mercy.

If you look at Samson's life only in the context of his relationship with Delilah, you will not understand his greatness. But if you see him from the perspective of Hebrews 11, that he was a man of faith, you will come to understand why God approved of him. He believed in God's goodness despite of his sin and failures.

This is not to say that one who has faith in God's goodness may go on sinning, since a person who truly belongs to God will do no such thing. The apostle John explains that, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). Christians are not encouraged to follow Samson in his sin, but rather his faith in God's kindness. It is faith in God's mercy, not our good works, that enables the Church to move forward. It is by faith that we will overcome the world (1 John 5:4-5).

It seems that Samson had also learned to have the fear of God, as evidenced in his prayer in verse 28: "Then Samson prayed to the LORD, 'O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.'" This may not sound too special to you, but compare this to how he used to pray: "Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, 'You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?'" (Judges 15:18).

Formerly, he was irreverent and demanding toward God in prayer. But in Judges 16:28, he was humble and submissive, taking nothing for granted, and addressing God as "Sovereign LORD." He now realized that God did not owe him his grace and mercy, and neither did God owe him the water that came out of the donkey's jawbone in Judges 15. God answered him, and he answers us, because of his goodness and faithfulness – not because he owes us whatever we demand from him. We must never mistake arrogance for faith.

In connection with this, let us read the words of Jesus in Luke 18:9-14: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Samson learned this lesson the hard way: it cost him his sight, his freedom, and then his life. Such is the folly of "learning by doing" instead of heeding the admonitions of the Scriptures without having to experience the consequences of sin. Nevertheless, by the end of his life, Samson had truly learned his lesson and realized that all good things proceed from God's mercy alone, and it is on his mercy that we must rely: "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then, in Luke 12:4-5, Jesus teaches us to fear God and not to fear people: "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him." As it is stated in Proverbs 29:25, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe."

With his last breath, Samson performed what God had called him to do: "Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived" (v. 30). Some teach that, due to his sins, Samson had died prematurely and never accomplished what God had intended for him. I strongly disagree for at least two reasons.

First, when the angel announced Samson's birth to his mother, he only said that Samson would "begin" to deliver "Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5), and not that he would completely and permanently destroy them.

Second, the capture of Samson had caused the "rulers of the Philistines" (Judges 16:23) to gather in one place. In fact, the Bible says that, "all the rulers of the Philistines were there" (Judges 16:27). He then killed them all "with one blow" (v. 28).

By his providence, God had gathered all the leaders of Israel's enemy in one place, and Samson was right there where he was supposed to be, and with his last breath, he did what he was supposed to do. Indeed, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35).

Thus, it seems that, by the grace of God, Samson accomplished exactly what God had intended for him to do. "For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27). The call and gifts of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

Without doubt, Hebrews is justified in including Samson as an example of great faith. God wants us to learn from his example, that we should imitate Samson in his faith in God's mercy and power. He wants us to believe that his mercy endures forever and that his calling and gifts are irrevocable. But at the same time, God's grace is not to be abused:

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2).