

Introduction

When my son was a toddler I had a computer in the family room. It had an old CRT monitor—a hulking 17-inch display! Back in the day this was massive! I was using my computer for something when my toddler came up and pressed the power button. You need to understand that at the time the ATX standard was still being rolled out. It wasn't until the year he was born that a delay was built into the power supply, and this computer was not brand new. Today you have to hold in the power button on a computer for four seconds for it to respond by cutting power. The older AT-style power buttons simply turned off the computer.

One day my son toddled over to my computer and pressed the button. In his defense I had never made this rule known: do not touch my power button. I promptly restarted my computer and assured him that was not a button he should press. Several minutes later he wandered back over to me and pressed the monitor's power button. I turned it back on while telling him he also should not press that button. Suddenly we had two new rules.

On the front of this massive computer monitor were six buttons for adjusting the display. He looked at me, looked at the buttons, and then proceeded to press the one immediately left of the power button. I told him he could not press that button, either. Then he pressed the second one to the left. Now we have four rules, or rather, a new principle about computer-related buttons. I wondered when—if?—he would understand the concept. This boy proceeded to press each button, with the newly added rule each time: don't press that one, either.

Finally, out of physical buttons to press, my toddler looked me in the eye and held my gaze as his hand slowly extended toward the monitor with his index finger extended in order to see what, exactly, he could touch. I realized in that moment that he had discovered an entirely different sort of button to push. And he loved pushing that button.

A significant part of childhood is learning limits. What can I do? What is allowed in this wide-open world as I explore it in wide-eyed wonder? It takes many years of trial and error but most children grow up into adults with a solid grasp of what is allowed and what is not. The world ceases to be an endless buffet of equal choices. A healthy adult is aware that not everything available to him or her is wise, even if the specific opportunity has never been presented before. A healthy adult may come across an entirely new button but based on experience can determine whether it is wise to press it.

Some never learn to stop pressing buttons. They push and push and push and eventually they push too far and the consequences can be far-reaching. To say this another way, some never stop being toddlers. Today we are going to see the lengths to which God will go to prevent us from going to far. In this, perhaps Samson's darkest depths, God is ever at work, and this ought to fill us with hope. We're in Judges 16.

Jdgs 16:1 Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in

to her. ² The Gazites were told, "Samson has come here." And they surrounded the place and set an ambush for him all night at the gate of the city. They kept quiet all night, saying, "Let us wait till the light of the morning; then we will kill him." ³ But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.

⁴ After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. ⁵ And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver." ⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you."

⁷ Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." ⁸ Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. ⁹ Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he snapped the bowstrings, as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

¹⁰ Then Delilah said to Samson, "Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound." ¹¹ And he said to her, "If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." ¹² So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And the men lying in ambush were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

¹³ Then Delilah said to Samson, "Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound." And he said to her, "If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." ¹⁴ So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web. And she made them tight with the pin and said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

¹⁵ And she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies." ¹⁶ And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. ¹⁷ And he told her all his heart, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man."

¹⁸ When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "Come up again, for he has told me all his heart." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their

hands. ¹⁹ She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. ²⁰ And she said, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him. ²¹ And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. ²² But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.
Judges 16:1–22

A Prostitute

Samson is powerful. He knows it. If ever there were a self-confident man, it's Samson. He knows his power. He knows what he's capable of. We just saw that he knew a donkey jawbone would be sufficient for him to defeat a thousand Philistines. He could have done the same with his bare hands, though. There's practically nothing Samson cannot do if he determines he's going to do it. There's nothing he could want that he cannot simply take. We see this in today's episode of the Samson Chronicles.

Verse 1 says Samson went to Gaza. We have to recognize the boldness of this. Samson is Public Enemy #1 for the Philistines. He's on the PBI's Most Wanted List—the Philistine Bureau of Investigation. He's on the Department of Philistine Security's watch-list. He's killed over a thousand of them and they know he's nearly untouchable. He literally took on an army all by himself and sent them running. Then one day he just waltzes into Gaza, one of the five Philistine strongholds.

This would be like Osama bin Laden walking downtown Washington DC in early 2002, just months after 9/11. Or imagine Zelenskyy being told that Putin was in a bar in Kiev sipping on some vodka. Samson has no fear, whatsoever. He's not there to fight, though. We're not told why he's there, but his presence itself is mocking the Philistines. The author says that while he was there he noticed a prostitute and decided to feed his appetite.

Gaza was a port city and was a major city of the Philistines. There would have been many prostitutes there. Samson is picky, though. There's no doubt she stood out so he decides to visit her. While he's there the Gazites—the rulers of Gaza—were told Samson had come to visit. They know they can't just attack him. They've tried that before and it ended badly, with heaps upon heaps of dead bodies as a monument to Samson's power.

Instead of a direct confrontation they decide to ambush him early in the morning as he's leaving the city. They seem to think he will leave at dawn so as to not be seen. There's no indication he resorted to sneaking *into* the city, so why would he sneak *out* of the city? They set up the ambush at the city gate.

Understand what this means. In that day a city's walls would be weakest, of course, at the gates. In a prominent city such as Gaza there would be six to eight guard houses along the gate path. You would enter through the gate and walk down a narrow street with guard houses on each side. Because the gates were the weakest defensive fortifications, it made sense for the guards to be stationed there. If an attacker managed to break through the gate, the entrance into the city would be quite narrow, making it difficult for the attacking army to march into the city.

Their plan is to be ready and waiting for when Samson would try to sneak out of the city, and surely that would be early in the morning after he had satisfied his immense appetite. In that narrow corridor leading to the gate he would be surrounded by the city guard and attacked with nowhere to run or hide. It's a great plan. The only problem is Samson knows it's a great plan.

The author says Samson got up around midnight and went to the city gate. This means he passed the guards who were stationed there. Many would have been sleeping, preparing for the battle, but the battle plans depended entirely on surprise. Samson walked to the city gate, grabbed hold of it, ripped it off its foundation, and then carried it. Understand how massive this gate would be. It was made of wood and reinforced with iron. It would have stone pivots at the bottom.

There is zero chance he yanked this gate—which would have weighed upwards of 500 pounds!—off its hinges, breaking ropes and chains holding it in place, without making a sound. Where are the guards? He then lifted the gate onto his shoulders and walked through the now wide-open entrance to the city. Surely every one of the soldiers heard this. Why don't they stop him?

Listen, if you saw a man walk up to a massive gate weighing more than several of your fellow soldiers combined, see him rip that gate off its foundation, and then see him pick it up on his shoulders and begin walking off with it, like he picked a flower from his neighbor's flowerpot, would *you* square up with him? These soldiers want nothing to do with Samson! He's probably whistling the entire time, like he's strolling through a park!

The author says he carried this gate—several hundred pounds of city gate—to the top of the hill that faces Hebron. Hebron was 40 miles away so it's likely the hill was near Gaza but faced Hebron. Still, carrying that much weight up a hill and most likely depositing it on top of the hill so that it was upright and *protecting nothing*, is an extraordinary feat that would have instilled awe in everyone who saw it.

Samson could have called for his fellow Israelites to attack the now defenseless city. Instead, he merely plays with his own power and strength—and that power and strength the Holy Spirit gave him.

Lady Of-the-Night

Samson simply does not care to deliver Israel from the Philistines. He has completely disregarded his calling, his Nazirite vows, his purpose in life. Some time later he met a woman and “loved” her. We've seen Samson only loves himself, however. Women are tools in his hands. He may well be infatuated with her, filled with lust for her, but this is not a woman he wants to spend his life with. This is merely a woman he wants to share a bed with.

Her name was Delilah. This is not a Hebrew name, but it sounds like Hebrew for “of the night”. She is a fitting match for Samson whose name means “little sun”. Samson does not yet know it but the sun is about to be eclipsed by one who is of the night.

Some time after Samson moves in with Delilah the lords of the Philistines hear of it. They approach her and offer her 1,100 pieces of silver—each. That's 5,500 pieces of silver if she will find out the secret of his strength. This is more than three times the weight of the gold Gideon received from defeating the Midianites. For comparison, she is offered 5,500

pieces of silver while in chapter 17 a Levite will be offered ten pieces of silver per year to be a full-time private priest. He could be a priest for 550 years at that rate!

Samson may be in love with her, but she is a business woman, through and through. She gladly accepts the price to betray her lover. The Philistine kings were clear: they intended to overpower Samson, to disable him and humiliate him. She gladly accepts. It's a lot of money and besides, there are other men out there.

One night she is being rather playful with Samson. She asks him directly: where do you get your great strength? How can one subdue you? It's likely she means this in a playful and sexual manner—or Samson is really, truly stupid and foolish. He plays along.

He tells her in verse 7 that if they—who said anything about “they”?—if they tie him up with seven fresh bow strings, he will become weak. You know, *weak*. Like other men are *weak*—not like *some men* are weak, but weak like *ordinary men* are weak.

It's clear Samson knows what she's up to. Some time after this she is provided with seven fresh bowstrings. Remember, Samson told her to tie him up with seven *fresh* bow strings. He knew she would tie him up with seven *fresh* bow strings. Bow strings were made out of animal tendons. You might recognize the word “fresh” for it means they were still regarded as part of a corpse. Samson is, once again, playing with his strength and utterly disregarding his Nazirite vow which forbids him from touching a dead body.

After tying him up, likely while he was sleeping, she called to the men hiding in her house. They came out and she shouted to Samson to wake him up. He simply went all Superman and snapped the fresh bowstrings as if they were nothing. There's no indication of a fight with the men. It appears they simply left the house. Again, would you square up with such a man?

Some time after this Delilah is trying to manipulate Samson again. She whines that he has mocked her and has lied to her. Yeah? Well, you were selling Samson into his enemies' hand, right? Samson plays along. He tells her all that's needed to subdue him is to tie him with new ropes—but not like the new ropes his own people had used. They must be new ropes that have never been used! She again had men hiding in her own house, ready to attack Samson. Once again Samson plays with his own power and simply breaks the new ropes that have never been used.

Then she tells him he's still mocking her and still lying to her. Yeah, and she's still betraying him! Samson has zero fear. None. He plays along. He tells her that his hair, which he keeps in thick braids, must be woven into a loom and fastened with the pin that is used to tighten the weave. It's likely that he falls asleep on the floor so that she can position a portable loom near his head and weave his braids into it. It's not hard to imagine him sleeping in that exact spot so she can, in fact, weave them into a loom.

The story is the same, with the same outcome. She wakes him up and he simply pulls out the pin and shakes his head free. At this point we're left wondering why he is with her still. She's clearly trying to get him captured by the Philistines in order to become rich! Samson knows his power. He knows there's nothing anyone can do to him. Three times now men have been lying in wait, only to walk out without so much as a punch thrown.

Delilah then really pours it on, playing the love card. You don't love me, Samson! You don't care for me! The author says she kept this up for days so that “his soul was vexed to death”. Finally he told her that he has been a Nazirite from birth and has never had his hair cut. Oh, he's violated his Nazirite vow in every other way, but not this one! This is the last

vestige of anything that might resemble faithfulness to his vow. He say if his head is shaved his strength will leave him.

Shaved

She knows he has finally told her the truth. She causes him to sleep with his head on her lap and then calls for a man to shave his head—all seven thick braids are cut off. She calls out the men and shouts to awaken Samson. Samson, as arrogant as ever, simply says to himself, “I’ll just do what I’ve always done.” The author then writes what I find to be the most frightening words in all of Scripture: “But he did not know that the LORD had left him”.

How is this even possible? From the time he was a young man he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to do extraordinary things. Even though he misused the power given him, the power was still available to him. While he was certainly naturally strong, he was supernaturally empowered even beyond that. When he killed the lion, the Holy Spirit rushed upon him. When he killed the thirty men to pay his debt, the Holy Spirit rushed upon him. When he killed the thousand Philistines, the Holy Spirit rushed upon him.

Samson, however, seems unaware that the Spirit was the one giving him such incredible strength, and not for his own amusement. Each time the Spirit rushed upon him, he was supposed to act on Israel’s behalf and bring deliverance to the people. Samson sought to satisfy his own bloodlust, his own sense of petty vengeance. He never acts to deliver Israel. He only satisfies himself. He pursues his own desires. He plays around with what he thinks is his own power. When that power that was given him by the Lord is gone, he is completely unaware.

After all the times Samson has completely and utterly despised his Nazirite vow and has defiled himself, why does the Lord leave him when his hair is cut? Samson has repeatedly handled dead bodies, whether the lion’s carcass or the fresh jawbone or the dead bodies piled up or the fresh bow strings. He has repeatedly engaged in sexual immorality with prostitutes and powerful women like Delilah. He has frequently refused to obey the Lord by engaging in the battle against the Philistines. Why is it that cutting his hair is the last straw, the last button to be pressed?

Samson’s hair is the only thing he has not defiled. It is the only thing keeping him even remotely connected to his Nazirite vow. It is the barest hint that he cares at all about it. It is when he despises the last vestige of his consecration to the Lord that the Lord hands him over to his own foolish desires.

He knows what Delilah is doing. When he told her that seven fresh bowstrings would cause him to become weak, she tied him up with seven fresh bowstrings and tried to hand him over to the Philistines. When he told her that new ropes that have not been used would cause him to become weak, she tied him up with new ropes that have not been used and tried to hand him over to the Philistines. When he told her his braids woven into a loom would cause him to become weak, she wove his braids into a loom and tried to hand him over to the Philistines.

There’s a pattern here! He should see this pattern and the pattern should serve as a warning to Samson. When Samson tells her shaving his head—for the first time in his entire

life—would cause him to become weak, he knows exactly what she will do. He simply doesn't care.

Samson believes he is the source of his own power. This is why verse 20 tells us he said, upon waking up bald, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free". He really believes his own hype. None of the other acts of defilement, of breaking his Nazirite vow has ever caused his strength to leave him. He's still Samson, after all.

Remember that the Holy Spirit does not rush upon Samson, supernaturally empowering him, that he might satisfy his own desires. God supernaturally empowers Samson for his obedience, and Samson uses this divine enablement for himself. Rather than use the gifts God has given him to deliver his people, Samson uses God's power for himself.

Over and over again God empowered Samson to obey him and to bring deliverance to God's people. This is the very reason God promised Samson's mother she would give birth to a son. This is the very reason Samson was set apart even while in the womb and placed under a Nazirite vow. Over and over again God empowered Samson to be faithful and Samson used that very power for unfaithfulness.

We saw a few weeks ago when Samson murdered 30 men to pay off his debt over the riddle that God often binds himself to our decisions. God often binds himself to the actions you and I determine to do. If you insist on playing with fire, God may allow you to get burned. In this final act of Samson's rebellion, of his utter disregard for his calling, God bound himself to Samson's foolish choices and Samson finds himself bound with ropes he cannot break. When Samson completely and finally disregards his Nazirite vow, his head is shaved, he is bound, and God binds himself to Samson's decision. He's going to allow it to play out.

The Philistines overpower him and gouge out his eyes. Samson—"little sun"—is cast into darkness by the betrayal of Delilah—"of the night". He is forced to entertain the Philistines by grinding grain for the Philistine god Dagon, the god of grain.

Growth

The Philistines aren't interested in killing Samson. When the lords of the Philistines first approached Delilah they told her their plans: they would bind him *to humble him*. What an interesting aim! Their desire to *humble* him is greater than their desire to kill him. Why would that be? It seems that Samson's mouth matched the size of his muscles. The boldness with which he strolled into Gaza reflects how his own mouth would have run.

They don't plan to just stop him from attacking them. They aren't interested in preventing him from gathering an army. They know he won't do that. They want to humble him for Samson is arrogant. They took him to Gaza, bald and blinded, in bronze shackles. He would spend his days using his still enormous—though no longer divinely empowered—strength to grind at the mill in prison. This was humiliating, for grinding grain was work that belonged to women and to slaves. In that culture this was an incredible insult designed to humble mighty Samson.

Their plan is to humble him. Ah, but church! Even though God has bound himself to Samson's choices resulting in his enslavement, God's purposes still stand! In the words of Joseph after his brothers sold him into slavery and God used him to rescue all Israel,

what the Philistines meant for evil, God meant for good! When the text says the Lord *left* Samson, it doesn't mean God has *forsaken* Samson!

In his pride and arrogance Samson has played with his power, the very power God had given him. God left him to himself, that God might humble him, for God is not done with Samson. The Philistines intend to humble him and this is precisely what God intends to happen. Day after day Samson grinds at the mill in prison. As we'll see next week he is frequently trotted out as a trophy of Philistine power and control. Though he cannot see his captors he is finally beginning to see the error of his ways.

In chapter 13 when the angel of the LORD tells Samson's mother she will have a son, he made an interesting statement that many scholars have wrestled with:

Jdgs 13:5 ...for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

Judges 13:5

Why does the Lord say that he will *begin* to save Israel from the Philistines? He doesn't tell her he *will* deliver Israel; he shall *begin* to save Israel. Yet Samson is stuck in prison, blinded by his captors, and humiliated for their enjoyment. When has Samson begun to do anything remotely resembling an attempt to deliver Israel? His strength has left him. He's in shackles. He's blind. He's actively being humbled by grinding at the mill *in prison*. "Little Sun" is in perpetual darkness! Ah, but it's not over. As James Crenshaw observes:

With a single stroke of the artist's brush the ominous skies give way to the promise of brilliant sunshine; all is not lost, for hair grows back.

James L. Crenshaw, "Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored"

The last straw was Samson allowing his hair to be cut for the first time in his life, and repudiating his Nazirite vow entirely. His life of darkness was finally plunged into darkness, but into this darkness a light begins to shine. *The hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.* Samson may have forgotten about his vow, but God hasn't. Samson may have forsaken his calling, but God hasn't. Samson may have left it all behind, but God makes his hair grow again.

In that darkness as Samson was humbled by the Philistines God began to work in him. As Samson suddenly had time to reflect, God himself was humbling Samson and bringing him to a point of faith and repentance. Despite Samson's best effort at foiling God's plans, God wasn't interested in letting that happen. His purposes will be accomplished. Samson will, in fact, begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. God must continue to prepare him, however.

Application

One of the remarkable themes that is found throughout the book of Judges is that even in the midst of Israel's gross unfaithfulness, God's faithfulness never fails. Remember Samson is, chronologically, one of the earliest judges, judging Israel within a couple generations of

Joshua. This early in Israel's history the people have embraced idolatry as a way of life. While Samson is never said to have bowed down to Baal or to Ashtoreth, he certainly bowed to himself.

In the midst of their unfaithfulness, God's faithfulness was on display. His promises to Abraham would be fulfilled, for they were rooted not in Abraham—or in Israel—but in God. I'm reminded of Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2.

2 Tim 2:11 The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

2 Timothy 2:11–13

Paul issues both a warning and a promise here. Those who are united with Christ in his death will experience resurrection—they will also live with him. The promise is those who endure will reign with Christ when he returns. The warning is firm: if we deny him, he will also deny us, but then he gets to an incredible promise: if we are faithless, that is, if we struggle to follow him and experience constant setbacks and struggles with sin, God remains faithful for he cannot deny himself. God's faithfulness is rooted in himself, not in us!

Samson was bound by the Philistines for God had bound himself to Samson's decisions. God is ever bound to himself and to his purposes. He will do all he said he will do. He says he will complete the work he began, even if that means God binds himself to the decisions you keep making for your life.

The truth is as simple as it is profound: sometimes God lets you grind grain for a time so that your hair can grow. Sometimes God allows you to suffer the consequences of your sin because in the darkness he is working to enable you to truly see. God's plan *is* to rescue you but you have to stop cutting your own hair.

Though God binds himself to our decisions, this binding is not final. What is final is God is bound to his word and to his purposes. God is the one who binds himself to us. God binds himself to our salvation. God binds himself to his word. God binds himself to his purposes. Though we continue to struggle against this, these are ropes that cannot be broken, shackles that cannot be snapped, for God binds himself in love.

Church, God is committed to your holiness. The one who began the work of saving you is the very one committed to seeing it through. He will use a millstone if he has to, so don't let it come to that. Follow him in faith. Pursue his honor and his glory in love for who he is and for what he does. Submit to him. Surrender to him. Let him have his way in your life, for he will have it, one way or another.

Samson shows us the lengths to which God will go to save his people. We all have those dark corners of shame for sin. We all have sin buttons we have pushed repeatedly, over and over, testing God's patience. We've all wondered if we've pushed it too many times. Hear the gospel, New City: God cannot deny himself. Samson is included in Hebrews 11 as a man of faith to show us the incredible power of God on display in salvation, for he did nothing to earn his salvation. He did nothing to merit it. Samson's inclusion in Hebrews 11, God's "Hall of Faith" so to speak, doesn't show how great Samson is. It shows how great God is. It shows his great ability to save, the depth of his love, the profundity of his grace, the enormity of his mercy.