

Rhythm

I come back to read Samson's story for the 91st time, this time finally to put pen to paper and make some sense of it.

Ambitious, I am.

Stalled out as well.

One foot slides forward, the other stays put as the drumbeat of the first verse echoes back, and

I stand straddling the text. I set aside the online Bible, as much as I love my Biblegateway.com. The feel of worn paper better ignites my heart. I reach for my leatherbound and push fingertips over the words.

Turning pages fails to drown out the drumming while words march in straight lines and the ground rumbles beneath my feet with the rhythm.

The rhythm.

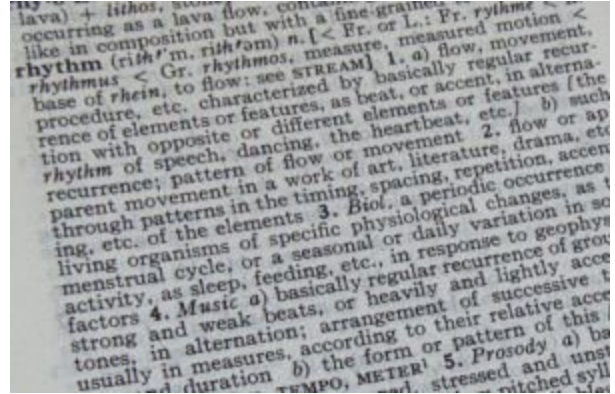
Rhythm (*rith'em*) *n* [*< Fr. or L.: Fr. rhyme < L. rhythmus < Gr. rhythmos, measure, measured motion < base of rhein, to flow: see stream*] 1. *a. flow, movement, procedure, etc., characterized by basically regular recurrence of elements or features, as beat, or accent, in alternation with opposite or different elements or features [the rhythm of speech, dancing, the heartbeat, etc.] b) such recurrence; pattern of flow or movement* 2. *flow or apparent movement of a work of art, literature, drama, etc. through patterns in the timing, spacing, repetition, accenting, etc. of the elements.*

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The flow. The movement. The pattern.

The regular recurrence of elements.

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)



These elements, they keep repeating. I read Judges to the cadence of *rescue, rebellion, repentance; rescue, rebellion, repentance*.

Samson taps his foot, keeping time. There in the chorus, the pony-tailed baritone belts out his part.

He joined the choir at a time of rebellion, when Israel had hauled her goods to the market of foreign gods and laid herself bare for the taking. And oh, she was taken.

As those gods put their hands on her, God threw up His hands, again, and let her go.

This time, to the Philistines.

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The rhythm.

I can listen to one song for only so long. Perhaps my favorite last week, it grates on my ears today. This business of *rescue, rebellion, repentance* jerks back without end as the needle stuck in the gouge of a vinyl record.

When will someone raise the spindle?

How many more times will Israel sing this song?

I am so quick to turn off the music. But wait, let this one play to its conclusion. Listen to the rest of the suite.

Samson was born to begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines.

Another was born to begin our deliverance, planned long before Samson first flexed a powerful bicep. His rhythm floats past the brisk tempo of *rescue, rebellion, repentance*. He sings the song of *redemption* as He storms that same marketplace, searching out His handled and soiled bride, giving all to buy her back.

He invites us to sway with the rhythm of *grace*.

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay

anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11: 28-30, The Message, emphasis added)

The rhythm.

Unforced.

Free. And light.

He calls to us, Rest from this rebellion.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

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The Wasteland: Alternate Ending Edition

Parched. Desolate. Impoverished.

Empty. Fallow.

Depleted.

This is barren. This is the wasteland.

This is the woman, standing lifeless in withering field, sunscorched. Hands crack open as she labors to find life among brittle stalks, knowing she will never labor to bring life from her own womb, dry and fruitless as this desolate soil.



This woman is nameless, faceless. Known to us even today only as *Samson's mother*.

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Hot wind mixed sand with sweat, and the grit scored her cheek as she wiped at it with a caked hand. She was in no state to meet the stranger who appeared beside her as she worked.

He was awesome, this man of God. *He looked just like an angel*, she told her husband. He was awesome, and she, humble. So much so that she neglected to ask him his name. Or from where he came.

She knew only that he brought news. News she desperately wanted, but never expected, to hear.

You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son. (Judges 13:3)

Baked soil widened its cracks to receive the rainshower as wilting leaves strained upwards to catch tiny droplets and carry them to the roots. The woman pried open her heart to welcome this life into her desolate place.

Manoah, Samson's father, prepared a sacrifice. *They would bear fruit after all, his dry fields and parched wife.*

::

God, it seems, draws to the arid places. To ones who split open and bleed in the desert sun.

Walk back through Israel's story, and you'll see Him come to those such as Samson's mother.

To those who languished for years with no children. They were scorned by their neighbors.

Suspected of some secret sin, believed to be under the curse.

They wept into pillows in the dark of night while their husbands sought out more fertile ground for their seed.

They concocted crazy plans, sidestepped God's direction, nursed jealousy and swallowed bitter pills. They waited, they watched, and they prayed while each day took them further from the promise.

But God came to those broken places. He inserted those women right smack in the middle of redemptive history.

To Sarai, after she sent Abram to sleep with her maidservant, He brought Isaac. Isaac would be the first in that vast nation God promised, the first of his descendants too numerous to count.

To Rebekah, after twenty years of marriage, He brought Jacob, and Esau, his twin. Jacob would be the father of the nation of Israel, spawning the twelve tribes.

To Rachel, after she waited fourteen years to be Jacob's bride, and after she watched her older sister bear him six sons and a daughter and surrogates bear him four more, He brought Joseph (she would die bringing Benjamin into this life).

Joseph would become a ruler in a far away place, saving Jacob's descendants and moving history forward again.

To Hannah, after she endured years of provocation from her husband's other, fruitful wife, He brought Samuel. Samuel would crown David the king of Israel.

And to Elizabeth, after she reached an age far too advanced to bear children, He brought John. John would go before and prepare the way for Messiah.

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He came to those broken places. While all around them men and women made their families, produced their offspring, He came to those who could not bring forth life on their own.

In the most unexpected of places. To the most broken and desolate and hungry, He came. He came and birthed in them what none other could dream to do.

He comes to us in our brokenness. In our desolation.

Not when we are hidden in the clutter of plenty, but when we are cracked open and exposed in our lack.

And He whispers to us in that desert place,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

(Matt. 5:3-6)

Blessed are the barren, who have nothing to give on their own.

For they will _____.

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The desert place caught up with me, leaving me a little dry around the edges. I'm not one who often asks for help; too proud for that. But I did something here I've never done before.

When this post first went up, I asked readers to finish the post for me.

And some did just that. With cool, refreshing words that filled me up.

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Nancy (find Nancy at [Treasures of Darkness](#)) said this:

Blessed are the barren, who have nothing to give on their own, for they will . . . *be fruitful. Nothing of their own to give, only the fruit of heaven which "He came and birthed in them what none other could dream to do."*

Jennifer D. (find Jennifer at [More than Just Adam's Rib](#)) said this:

Blessed are the barren, who have nothing to give on their own, for they will . . . *learn to be thankful for even the tiniest of blessings. As one who lived these women's stories for 6 years, my barrenness taught me how to be thankful even*

when my prayers aren't answered. Thankfulness — the ability to see life's small blessings that most miss — they're blessings in themselves.

Deb (find Deb at [He Gave Me a Dream](#)) said this:

Blessed are the barren, who have nothing to give on their own, for they will
... *have their emptiness removed. Their shame. Their brokenness.*
Because there are different kinds of barrenness. And brokenness.
And that's what He does for us.

Julie (find her at [Random Thoughts](#)) said this:

Blessed are the barren, who have nothing to give on their own.

For they will experience birth of a different kind. Birth of the ability to comfort a grieving women who has traveled this same path...knowing the terrain. Birth to the seeds that I plant in the children of the youth group I help lead. Birth to each new day that the Lord blesses me with.

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Meet the Parents

They mean well.

But gosh. Samson's parents strike me as about as unzipped as Ferris Bueller's mom and dad.

Later on they bear an awkward resemblance to Veruca Salt's father in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. But that's to tackle another day.



When Samson's screenplay was scripted, somehow or other his parents slipped into that two-dimensional caricature of parents who are endearing but just a little empty-headed.

Cute but clueless.

But they mean well.

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When the angel first appeared to Mrs. Manoah, their visit was brief and cordial. He brought news, gave instruction, and moved on. Most times when an angel had a face-to-face with a person, the first words out of the angel's mouth amount to "Fear not." Angels almost always started their conversations with words of comfort to a terrified soul.

Not this time. With Samson's mother, there was none of the usual gasping, panicking and falling onto face at standing in the presence of an angel. They just took care of business.

He left and she hurried off to tell her husband. She at least had the sense to know he was a man of God, but she stopped short of recognizing his true stature.

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. (Judges 13:6)

Well, Honey, he sure did look like everything I ever imagined an angel to be. But I don't know. I'm thinking prophet. Not angel.

To their credit, they took his words to heart. The angel told Samson's mother she would bear a son though she could not, and that they were to raise him as a Nazirite, set apart to God in the most set apart way a guy could be (we'll also tackle that another day). This boy would be the beginning of Israel's deliverance from the Philistines.

Manoah knew this was big, and wanted to get it right. He wanted to talk to this man himself.

So he prayed. He begged God to send the man back and make sure they got it straight.

This is a prayer God loves to answer. *Help me know what You want.*

This is a prayer He doesn't think twice about.

True to form, God sent the angel back.

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The angel ran through the plan again, same as before.

Set him apart.

No wine, no dead bodies, no haircuts.

In preparation, Samson's mother was not to eat anything unclean nor drink any fermented beverage.

Ok, got it.

They were so grateful for this news they pleaded with the angel to stay for a meal. He agreed to stay, but not to eat, and urged them instead to prepare a burnt sacrifice to the Lord.

These folks may have been a bit dizzy, but they never were doubtful. They seemed unaffected by the presence of this angel, awesome though he was, but never found reason to doubt that his message was true.

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They prepared the sacrifice, and much like the angel who spoke to Gideon (perhaps one and the same?), he disappeared into the flame and they did not see him again.

Then, finally, the shock and awe struck home. In a word, Manoah *freaked*.

Suddenly, he realized this was no man of God. This was no prophet. This was the Lord's angel.

And they were done for.

"We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!" (Judges 13:22)

They were a little slow, sure. But when the dawning came, it pulled the ground out from under them. When they realized it was God, it blew the doors right out of the house.

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I see the Buellers, leaning over the altar with their dopey grins, when the horror crosses their faces like the curtains opening wide.

Ahhhh! We've seen God! We're going to die!

And has become my custom as I plod along in Judges, as soon as I start to make that clucking sound with my tongue and shake my head at a character, *I see me.*

Painfully, honestly me.

How often I see something of God. I see His mighty work. And I go all Katie Bueller and just don't get it. I give God the patronizing grin, nod along as though I get what He's doing.

Even though I don't.

And then, *Bam!*

He shows me.

He shows me *His plan.*

He shows me *Him.*

And then I don't nod. I don't grin.

I fall flat.

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I Can't Handle the Truth

Manoah, on the whole, asked good questions.

His failure to recognize God on the scene wasn't for a lack of trying.

He knew the guy who spoke to his wife was a man of God, and he went to God and asked to send him back. He wanted to make sure he had it right. "Let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us."



We've already considered how that's a prayer God loves to answer.

But Manoah's inquiry continued while the answers became a wee bit more elusive.

When he asked the man of God his name, the angel shut him down. And I can't help feeling a little like Col. Jessep just handed Lt. Kaffee his backside when he shouted, "You can't handle the truth!"

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Granted, Col. Jessep was no man of God. Certainly not an angel, and not very awesome. And I'll concede, the angel didn't get all shrieky and contorted like Jack Nicholson when he schooled Tom Cruise in the courtroom.

But the angel did say to Manoah, "You can't handle the truth."

Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that when your words come to pass, we may honor you?"

But the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" (Judges 13:17-18, NASB, emphasis added)

When you tell me there is something that I just can't know, I don't hear it the way you say it. I hear it like Col. Jessep screaming.

The angel, he didn't have Jessep's heart. He didn't seek to hide or deny knowledge that Manoah should have been privy to. He had no desire to shame or belittle Samson's dad.

He just spoke the truth. And that Manoah couldn't handle it.

For it was simply *too wonderful*.

This word he uses, *wonderful*, is the same Hebrew word the Psalmist wrote in [139](#).

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

It is too high, I cannot attain to it. (Psalm 139:6, emphasis added)

He's not withholding. *It's simply too much.*

Incomprehensible. (A word I do not like.)

That is to say, *you can't handle the truth.*

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You've been here long enough to know that's hard for me to hear. *I want to know.*

I don't swing around passages that don't make sense to me. *I dig them out.*

I have this idealistic notion that the angel just shattered to bits. This idea that if I study hard, read it once more, research deep, ask God, and put my brain in a vise, I'll get it. I'll figure it out.

It is not too high, not too lofty, not impossible to attain to.

That's what I think.

That's what the angel says just ain't so.

God knows. Sometimes . . . sometimes I can't handle the truth.

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It's not because there's something wrong with me (though perhaps there is). And it's not because of what I am.

It's because of what the truth is. *It's too wonderful. Too high.*

Some truth is so wonderful it's just a little bit out of reach.

Here, the angel tells Manoah his name is *wonderful*, don't ask about it. You won't get it.

And over in 139, the knowledge that is *wonderful*, so far beyond comprehension, is the depth of God's knowledge of us. That He knows our sitting down, our standing up, all our ways, our thoughts from afar.

I don't think I get how deep that is. Do you?

We can only get so much of it.

The rest is beyond us. It's wonderful.

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That word, *wonderful*, it comes up again.

*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6, emphasis added)*

Here too, flipping back to the Hebrew, the word has a sense of something hard to understand. Something beyond our comprehension.

Truth we can't quite handle.

And yet. And yet.

That *Wonderful Counselor*, that *Mighty God*, that *Eternal Father*, that *Prince of Peace* — that would be One that would be *born to us*. Who would be *given to us*.

That same One would teach eager followers that the Kingdom was *within their reach* ([Luke 17](#)).

Not too lofty. Not too high. Not for everybody but me.

Not too far off, but within my reach.

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By way of her "[Mystery File](#)," Jennifer over at [Getting Down with Jesus](#) famously reminds us that though there is much left unanswered "this side of the Fall," there is "hope on this side of the Cross."

This cloak of mystery conceals what I cannot yet know, the truth I cannot handle. Yet now and again it billows in the wind, and the curtain lifts just a smidgen.

And with the fingers and toes that peek out there at the hem, I see that hope of knowing, and knowing fully.

For I see the hope that something wonderful edges within my reach.

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Business Up Front, Party in the Back (or, Samson Was a Nazir-what?)

Five posts into the Samson series, and we still haven't made it to the *really big deal*, the thing everybody likes to talk about: *his hair*.



I'm pretty sure we made his hair the big deal about the same time as the flannelgraph and modern Sunday School came on the scene. (Sorry to burst anybody's bubble, but nope, John Stamos wasn't really the father of the mullet; Samson was. And yes, I've been known to watch too much TV and movies. But I promise, not lately.)

My theory is the prospect of explaining Samson's whole story for young kids came off a little daunting and so we took the shears to the story, not to his hair, clipping away to something that felt easier to teach.

To prove out my hunch, I did a little Googling and found that after we trim away the sideburns and hard questions, we're left with Sunday School lesson plans that have learning objectives looking a little something like these:

- Students will recognize that girls are sneaky.
- Pupils will learn not to listen to sneaky girls.
- Learners will discover that sneaky girls will destroy them.
- Students will remember that girls named Delilah are sneaky and deceitful.
- Learners will be reminded not to cut their hair because it makes them more vulnerable to the wiles of sneaky girls named Delilah.

This is what I remember about Samson too. *His hair was a really big deal, and he was a sucker for a sneaky girl.*

Samson had it all, and lost it all when a sneaky girl tricked him and cut his hair.

But is this it? Have we taken away all we can from Samson's story when this is all we see?

What about his utter lack of self control? What about his short fuse and relentless drive for vengeance? What about his superficial motion-going with his Nazirite vow?

His Nazir-what?

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His Nazirite vow. Signing on was no small undertaking.

Most Nazirites were short-termers. They took the vow voluntarily, for a particular period of time, and for a particular purpose — most folks couldn't keep it up much longer anyway, so stringent were the requirements.

Samson, on the other hand, was different. Like Samuel and John the Baptist, he was a lifer. He was consecrated at birth, with his father taking the vow for him, at the angel's direction. It's important, I think, that he never chose this way of life for himself.

As part of the vow, one committed to abstain completely from wine or any other product from the vine, to keep hair and beard uncut and never touched by a razor, not to come in contact with a dead body and to abstain from any unclean foods.

Because of its inherent strictness, the code provided means to be restored to the vow should it be accidentally violated, including a particular burnt offering and something of a do-over beginning with a head shave. So strict was it that in the event that a Nazirite was in the presence of another who died unexpectedly, he would still have to follow this process of restoration, though there was nothing he could have done to avoid such a violation.

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So what about Samson? *What about his vow?*

I'll give him credit. Up until that one unfortunate sneaky girl thing, he did a great job on the hair. Jesse Katsopolis would have been proud. But it seems as though he missed the point of the vow altogether.

He kept its form, but lost its heart.

While he may have kept the jots and tittles (though I have to question if he did), his life apart from the vow was one that seemed would only answer to his stomach and other body parts.

And that *life apart from the vow* really becomes the problem, doesn't it? The whole point of being consecrated, and in particular with such an extreme vow as the Nazirite, is to be set apart. Samson was to belong fully to the service of the Lord.

Yet he fractured his own soul, fulfilling the appearance of his vow while living another life apart from it.

He went after women, after revenge, after conquests other than those for which he was set apart, but at the end of the day he could hold up his pony tail and boast of his adherence to the rigid vow.

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Oh Samson, you kill me. I haven't had a pony tail since the third grade. But I find myself standing there with you, holding up whatever proof I can find that I've done it all right.

I chase after what fills my own appetite. And live a life apart from the one to which I've been drawn, perhaps fracturing my own soul in the process. And then I shout to the crowds of my own righteous acts.

I forget that I draw attention to naught but filthy rags, and were I to grow hair to the ground it couldn't cover me enough.

Even to preserve the minutia of the Nazirite vow would not be enough.

No, to restore this fractured soul takes everything the Nazarene has got.

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I Want It Now!

The hair on the back of my neck just stood up.

The same way that it stood up when I was a kid during the Super Bowl. While the Dallas Cowboys kicked somebody's rear in one room, we non-NFL fans holed up in another and watched *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.



Between the Oompa Loompas

looking just a little too much like the scary Jolly Troll in the smorgasbord commercials and the maladjusted characters not getting what they deserved quite soon enough, it's an old movie I love to hate. Or hate to love. Or something.

It's one of my all time favorites but still one that creeps me out a little.

On today's reading of Judges 14 (you don't want to know for which numbered time), Samson's giving me that same sick chill.

When he demands that his parents fetch him up a cute Philistine bride, it is as though he's just slipped into Veruca Salt's prim red dress and Mary Janes and taken over the Golden Egg Room at the factory. As Veruca implores her doting father to procure a goose that will lay golden eggs (one hundred a day) and lay out a feast for her (of beans, no less), Samson joins in with a rousing chorus of *I want it now!*

All the while, I find myself wanting to nudge them both a hair closer to the Bad Egg Chute.

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The first we see of Samson grown up is in Timnah, where a Philistine girl gives him goosebumps. Golden-egg-laying goosebumps.

For Samson, this is it. She's the one. *And he wants her. Now.*

He returns home and insists that Manoah and his wife get her for him. *Now.*

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 fall to their knees. *This set-apart son of ours, he's nothing but trouble.*

Of course they won't go get her. There are plenty of Hebrew girls that will do just fine.

They beg him to reconsider. *We'll get you a sweet girl from our own people. Why would you want a Philistine? Work with us here, ok? Any girl you want. As long as she's one of our own.*

Samson would have none of it. *I want her now!*

They put up a good fuss, but in the end their protests amount to no more than well practiced lip service. Samson will have what he wants, as it seems likely he always has done. Manoah pulls out his check book to start talking turkey with Mr. Wonka and make a deal for the golden goose.

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I'm no parenting expert. Just ask my kids.

The last time I had any parenting encouragement to offer was fifteen years ago in a circle of my youth group parents as we worked through a study on raising teenagers. My pregnant belly protruded far into the room, filled to near overflowing with my first to-be-born. I'm sure I said a lot of brilliant things with which my anteparenting mind seemed also to be quite pregnant.

Once he was born, my belly and my brain grew much smaller in direct proportion, and I had no more brilliant things to say.

So far be it from me to school Manoah and his wife on raising a child.

Particularly a chosen, set-apart child.

Jennifer wondered in the comments yesterday what may have made Samson different from John the Baptist or Samuel, in that they took hold of the special purpose to which they were called, while Samson seemed to milk his status for his own pleasure.

I have a funny feeling it may have had something to do with his overindulgent parents.

I can't imagine that the whole *I want the pretty Philistine girl and I want her now!* thing started with this single episode. My hunch is that in an effort to say *No* to the important things, they said *Yes* a little too often.

After all, the angel's directive was clear.

No wine. Check.

No haircuts. Check.

No dead bodies. Check.

But he didn't say anything about Philistine sweeties.

I wonder if, perhaps, they saw their job as far too small.

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Raising a chosen one was no small task. I wonder sometimes how Hannah and Zechariah and Elizabeth did it. *How Joseph and Mary did it.*

Who wants to be the parents who screwed up the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines?
Or the raising up of a priest who would anoint Israel's first king?

Or worse, *the Messiah?*

Nobody wants to be that guy.

Manoah and his wife sure didn't.

And maybe that affected their approach to parenting this hairy handful.

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And then, I wonder some more.

No angelic vision preceded the birth of my children.

Are they any less chosen?

Have they any less purpose?

Yes, they are of less import than the Messiah. But did Peter's parents realize while they grew him up the man he would become? I doubt it.

Did David's? Read his account again — his whole family wrote off the shepherd boy, and his dad didn't even include him in the king audition lineup with his brothers.

Did Martin Luther's? Or John Calvin's? Or Billy Sunday's?

From time to time I suppose they may have seen a glimmer. But they couldn't have imagined. Not completely.

God sees who my kids will be. More often I worry about screwing them up, dreaming far less of who they might become.

Because of that, perhaps I say *No* when I should say *Yes*, and *Yes* when I should say *No*.

And even more likely, I perhaps say *too much* when I should just *listen*.

I might find myself squishing them into *my dreams* rather than waiting for *God's dreams to play out*.

I want to dream God's dreams.

Maybe it's even fair to say that I want that now.

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Why I Wash My Hands After Reading the Word

2009/09/11 · [11 Comments](#)

If you blog, you might notice we oft find ourselves as the Wizard of Oz, hidden in the control booth of Blogger or Word Press throwing switches and levers to project whatever image suits our fancy. Even when we do let down our guard and expose our shortcomings, we do so in a controlled environment, putting our best foot forward. Our words are measured, thoughts processed, outbursts edited.

If folks start to see our true faults, we might be quick to turn up the volume and pour out more smoke. Like the frail wizard, we shout into the microphone, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”

Don’t worry, you can keep reading. I don’t plan to reveal any dark secrets today. But I will point out one of my more neurotic quirks that often wedge themselves under the fingernails of those who know me. You who have only a digital image are more often spared such annoyances of day to day life.

Curse you, Samson. You continue to expose me.

I apologize in advance.

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My coworkers and I paraded to the cafeteria yesterday and stood in a herd like so many cattle. You’d think we never eat. But the cooks whipped up homemade caramel rolls just the way we like them — warm and free — to kick off the annual Combined Appeal (think: small town United Way) campaign.



When it was this glutton’s turn at the table, I took tongs in hand and felt electricity rack my arm. I tried in vain to hold in the guttural half-scream that left my throat. A nearby coworker jumped away as I jerked my hand back but was unable to rid myself of the utensil, now one with my hand.

Caramel Rolls + Hungry Workers = Sticky Tongues

I seized up.

Once done making my scene, I pulled the tongs from my palm, handed off my plate and slunk to the kitchen to rinse the offending glop down the drain.

I'm not a germophobe. I'm not even particularly neat or tidy. And I don't live in a spotless home.

But sticky does something deep inside me.

It immobilizes.

So, when Samson stuck his powerful paw into honeycomb the bees created inside a lion's carcass, I started to twitch.

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En route to Timnah to check out his would-be girlfriend, Samson tore an advancing lion to shreds as though it were a young goat. I wonder if it were the first time he saw the power he possessed.

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. (Judges 14:5-7)

More than I am impressed with such brute strength, I'm wondering what he did with the mess on his *hands*.

He didn't walk with a basin and water jug. He had no flask of hand sanitizer.

Lions, when ripped apart, bleed. Blood is sticky. And lions are furry.

The conqueror would be covered with sticky fur.

When he caught up to his folks, they didn't ask and he didn't tell them what happened.

How did they not see the mess? Why did they not send him to a stream to clean up?

Why am I the only one having a problem with this?

::

It gets worse. When they returned to Timnah again for the wedding, he passed by the carcass he'd left at the roadside. A swarm of bees had created their gooey wonder inside.

He stopped and scooped some out. *With his hand.*

You should see me now. I can't sit still on my chair.

Ankle twists, shoulders roll in and head curls down. Something sticky walks before.

Again he jogged on ahead to his parents, and shared his sweet treat.

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. (Judges 14:8-9)

::

Where, oh where is the point?

Why don't we talk about Delilah? There is no deep spiritual truth about blood and honey in this passage.

But there is. Don't you see it?

Blood and honey are brilliant here!

Reading the Word makes me want to find soap and water. *My hands feel sticky just for the reading of it.*

The Word, it is alive! I can feel it.

Read that passage again. If you read it monotone, who-really-cares-it's-just-there-to-set-up-the-riddle, then no, it's not alive. It falls flat on the floor. But read it. Really read it.

He scooped honey from the inside of a dead lion on the side of the road, then met up with his parents and shared it with them.

That's all it says.

But look at the picture. That's what drops me. He didn't poke in a finger and taste the honey. He thrust in his hand, stirring a full hive of bees. He drew out dripping honey and walked along with it, nibbling sweetness off the comb.

Honey dripped down his arms to the elbows. He wiped sticky hands on his tunic. His long beard and hair matted to every part of him. And a swarm of bees chased after him like a cartoon.

The picture makes my hands feel all sticky. I have to wash them every time I read it.
And that's awesome.

::

Today, it's blood and honey. But tomorrow?

How about grace and mercy?

Love and forgiveness?

Righteousness and justice?

There are pictures of that too. The Word is full of them.

It's not the choice of words, though He did carefully breathe them through each writer.

It's simply that His Spirit dwells in those words, giving them life.

::

You know I try not to tell you what to do here. It's not my job and it was my promise from the start. But could I today? Just this once?

Could I tell you to blow the dust off some pages that are yearning to be read?

Help those words find flight. You don't have to read much. He'll speak through however much you give Him.

::

Don't Plow with Samson's Heifer

This set-apart stuff can sure go to a guy's head.

Make a guy a Nazirite and give him awesome hair, and *Wham!* The whole world revolves around him.

It started with a harmless riddle between a bridegroom and his wedding party.

It turned into death threats, a sobbing bride, and Samson kicking the snot out of 30 guys so he could take their clothes and pay his wager.

All because an arrogant fool couldn't grasp his calling.

::

While Samson's dad met with his bride-to-be, Samson arranged for the customary seven-day feast with his 30 companions. But rather than lounge around and enjoy the feast for a week, Samson set about to mess with his companions' heads. He put to them a riddle whose answer lay locked up in the mystery of the lion he killed and the honey made inside it.

"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. (Judges 14:12-14)



Samson, from a position of power, toyed with his companions, making a wager they could not win. He had knowledge they simply could not, for none other than Samson knew of the lion and the honey inside.

They worked the puzzle for three days. When it was no longer amusing, they enlisted — rather, coerced — Samson's new Philistine bride to assist. They too acted from a position of power, threatening to burn her, her home and her father to the ground.

His bride pleaded with him to tell her the riddle. He shut her down and shut her out, suggesting that he hadn't even told his own parents the answer. Why should he tell her?

[Insert Rabbit Trail: Anybody feeling prophetic enough to see Samson's failure to "leave and cleave" as a sign of likely marital discord in this lovely young couple's future? But that's a different story . . .]

She cried for four days.

Four days.

All day, every day.

And Samson was more invested in his riddle than his new wife.

The wife he insisted his parents procure for him.

He's already moved on to more interesting things.

::

When he could stand to listen to the weeping no longer, he told her the riddle's key.

And the woman scorned wasted no time in telling the townsfolk the answer. There was clearly no saving her young marriage. But perhaps she could save herself and her father.

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 14:17-18)

::

Samson, enraged, went down to another town and attacked 30 men. He took what they had and delivered the 30 garments to pay his wager.

Still angry, he left his own wedding party and stomped to his father’s house.

And his bride? Who would want to waste a perfectly good wedding feast? Especially when all the guys had shiny new clothes?

Her father gave her to Samson’s companion instead.

::

Samson, this called-out one, had such promise. God had great purpose for him. And all he could ever see was how to make himself happy.

He used his strength for his own gain.

He set up his own bride for calamity. And didn’t lift one of his strong fingers to rescue her from the angry men.

He used his set-apart status to manipulate his parents. He used his strength to dominate those around him. And when God’s Spirit crashed down on him in power, he used it for revenge.

::

I’m thinking, there was another Who was set apart.

One Who was given all power and all authority.

And rather than use His status and His strength to dominate and manipulate, He flexed his powerful pipes and muscled His way underneath us.

His strength, displayed in His humility, bore a cross on His back.

The weight of my sin on His shoulders.

Being in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. (Philippians 2:6)

He took on our likeness. He bore our shame.

His strength does not bear down on us, but rather raises us up.

::

10 Cool Things You Can Do with 300 Fox Tails

You're right, the post title is intentionally misleading.

I only have one idea for what to do with a whole bunch of fox tails. It's been done, and I'm not sure how cool it was.

But I've read that list-posts are popular with readers and I'm all about making you happy. So I figured, why not?



What could it hurt if I didn't deliver the goods?

It's not like anybody would get mad and take three hundred foxes, tie their tails together, start them on fire and set them loose in my back yard.

Nah, nobody would ever do something like that.

Except, I suppose, maybe *Samson* . . .

He might just be crazy enough to do something like that.

::

Samson was one crazy loose cannon.

He was already mad that his heifer, having been plowed with, spilled all her cookies to the Philistine men and helped them solve his riddle. When he finally calmed down around harvest season, he decided it might be a good time to pay a visit to his bride.

Young goat squirming under his arm, he went in search of his lovely heifer.

When he arrived, her father stopped him and would not permit Samson to see his wife. Since he beat up the guys and left in such a huff the last time, it was assumed he did not want her.

And so he gave her to the next available guy.

But hey, how about my other daughter? She's actually better looking.

Take her.

::

Samson didn't want to give his goat to the other girl. He wanted his woman, and he wanted her now.

Samson was the kind of guy that just didn't take well to being told *No*.

So he caught three hundred foxes, tied them together at the tail and lit them on fire. Blazing red, he set wild flaming critters loose in the fields of the Philistines. They lit up shocks, standing grain, vineyards and olive groves.

They destroyed everything of value.

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)

And why? Because *this time* he had a *right* to get even.

Last time, when he knocked thirty guys' blocks off and stole their clothes, it wasn't because they particularly deserved it. *He was just mad*.

But this time was different. This time he found himself *entitled* to extract vengeance.

What ensued was a deadly series of events, each one ratcheted up from the next.

The Philistines retaliated by burning Samson's wife and father to death. (Judges 15:6)

Samson slaughtered a bunch of them in return, *visciously*. (Judges 15:7)

The Philistines prepared to attack Judah before striking a deal to trade in Samson. (Judges 15:13)

Samson broke free, grabbed a donkey's jawbone and killed a thousand men. Then, he fancied himself a poet. (Judges 15:15)

*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." (Judges 15:16)*

(I'm not sure, but I thought I read once that the old saying about what assuming makes out of you and me has its origins with this verse. Perhaps in the KJV?)

::

As the men of Judah sought initially to mediate between Samson and the Philistines, the two parties sounded like my children.

When the men asked the Philistines why they prepared to attack, they answered that they meant only to do to Samson "*as he did to us.*" (Judges 15:10)

And when they asked Samson what he was thinking when he attacked them, he said much the same: "I merely did to them *what they did to me.*" (Judges 15:11)

They deserved it.

I was just doing what they did.

It was the same as what they did to me.

Bottom line: *I believe I am entitled to extract payment.*

::

Mosaic law allowed "an eye for an eye" repayment for wrong for just such a situation as Samson faced. But it was intended to encourage restraint, not justify excessive retaliation. It seems *restitution* was the intent of the law, more so than *retribution*.

Retribution and retaliation seemed to be Samson's priorities. It was as though he said, *I see your eye, and I'll raise you two. In fact, I'll raise you your neighbor's eyes too.*

I'm thinking about this fox stunt. It took planning, deliberation and time.

Lots and lots of time.

He had to *catch* three hundred foxes first. Then he had to pair up and tie three hundred fox tails together.

Every time he got his hands around a fox, he had the opportunity to say, “No. I’m done. I’ll forgive and move on.”

Three hundred times he had opportunity to stop.

Every time he picked up two foxes and tied their tails, he had another opportunity to prevent escalation.

One hundred and fifty times more he had opportunity.

But he pushed on ahead.

Four hundred and fifty chances, plus or minus.

He had the chance to quiet his anger. To let go his pride. To recognize his own shortcomings and say *enough is enough*.

That’s how many times he said *I have a right to get even*.

::

Crazy thing for Samson, after all that hard work it wasn’t enough. He wanted still more. He would later swing the donkey’s jawbone and take off some heads.

Each of those hundreds of moments in which he could have stopped — but didn’t — added fuel to the fires of vengeance burning in his own heart.

His refusal to even consider extending forgiveness helped to forge the very circumstances that would bring about his own humiliating end.

And I wonder. *You know how I wonder.*

How often is that me, tying together fox tails, one by one. Painstakingly refusing forgiveness, choosing not to move on.

Watching the fields burn restores nothing to me, but only sears my heart more deeply.

::

If I Talked to God Like that When I Was Your Age...

Have you been around long enough to know that Judges is just not safe for me?

Tiptoe as I might, I will one day trip over my own feet and spend some time stretched out with my face in the dirt trying to sort out why on earth God worked like He did.

Or works like He does.

Or is Who He is.

If this is new to you, welcome.

Every now and again, it's what we do here.

It's time.

::

Yes, as my dad has pointed out, I've been hard on Samson. We've seen him behave like a spoiled child and throw violent tantrums. We've witnessed assault, battery, theft, murder, vandalism and mayhem at his hands. He inquired more of his appetite for women, revenge and power than of the holy Nazirite vow taken at the time of his birth when seeking wisdom for the day.

Samson, you'll remember, was one born set apart. He was born to begin the deliverance of Israel from Philistine oppression.

Aside from superhuman strength, he hardly seemed up to the task.

But he was God's man for that hour. God entrusted the future of His chosen ones to an impetuous hothead.

And He never seemed the slightest bit surprised.

::



Way back in Judges 14 when Samson demanded a Philistine bride, God breathed parentheses into His Word, tucking in a reassurance that He knew what He was doing, no matter how wrong it all appeared.

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 14:3b-

4

God was there.

They were still on plan.

Are we to believe the plan included Samson dishonoring his parents and breaking the Hebrew law?

::

When Samson beat up thirty guys and stole their clothes, it was after the Spirit came upon him in power.

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. Judges 14:19

God was there.

They were still on plan.

Are we to believe the Spirit of God empowered his rage and violence?

::

After he torched the fields and vineyards of the Philistines with foxes *brûlée*, and after he slaughtered many of the men, he was taken prisoner by the men of Judah to be handed over to the Philistines. The Spirit came upon him again, and he broke free only to kill a thousand more.

"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.

God was there.

They were still on plan.

Are we to believe God energized the slaughter of a thousand?

::

If you've been with me down one of these roads before, you might be surprised to find that I've navigated through those obstacles with relative ease this time.

Samson was the guy God picked, and He stuck with him through thick and thin. He was in it when Samson demanded to go outside his own people for a wife, knowing that it would ultimately present opportunity (after opportunity after opportunity) to confront the Philistines.

And when Samson did outrageous things after the Spirit came on him, I'm comfortable that he acted as he did not because of the Spirit's empowerment but in spite of it.

Is it not fair to say that sometimes the power of God is more than we know what to do with? Is it possible Samson mistook God's power for his own juice and went out to take off some heads?

It took several readings and a fair bit of wrestling on the floor, but I'm okay with all of that now.

I am.

::

But . . .

You knew that was coming.

What I'm not okay with is how Judges 15 ends.

Samson, fresh from his kill, was exhausted. Slaughtering a thousand with a donkey's jawbone makes a guy *thirsty*.

For the first time in his story, we see Samson acknowledge God.

If you want to call it that.

Samson let loose on God over his thirst, accusing Him of giving him a great victory, then leaving him to die.

If my kids were talking to me like that, I'd ignore them. I'd at least roll my eyes at them.

I might even tell them that when I was their age I never dreamed of talking to my parents like that (though Mom and Dad may have a different story to tell).

But God?

God gave him water — popped a spring right up out of the earth.

And then He set Samson as judge over Israel for the next twenty years.

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.

Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines. Judges 15:18-20
God was there.

They were still on plan.

Are we to believe that God rewards arrogance, murder, rage, revenge, self-centeredness, and whining?

::

Just what are we to believe here?

God's man was a jerk. And yet, God used him. God stuck with the plan, and the plan was Samson.

Samson: murderer, thief, vandal. Jerk.

He was flawed, Samson. Deeply flawed.

Yet, he was chosen by God to play his part in redemptive history.

Samson gave God reason after reason after reason to ditch him and start over. But He held on.

When the wrestling is over, I conclude that should I for a moment begin to think I am any less flawed than Samson himself, I have just given you further proof that I am yet more deeply flawed indeed. Even here, despite the vacuum in my own soul, He holds on.

God is here.

We are still on plan.

::

Sleeping with One Eye Open

It's good to sleep with the lights off.

At my house, it helps dispel that nagging sense of being watched.

A few years ago I saw my ophthalmologist for a solution to some headaches that seemed to originate behind my right eye. I rejected the notion that they were tension related or migraines, more out of defiance than anything else.



He reminded me of how people my age start to have trouble focusing, and set me up in some old-people glasses. I was as defiant about the bifocals as I was the migraine. When I pressed him because I was not having any vision changes except when my head hurt, and that mostly related to an eyelid that couldn't support itself, he dug a little deeper.

I left his office with a bottle of goo to squirt into that eye to help bring moisture to a dry band running across my cornea.

As it turns out, one of my motherhood trademarks is not just figurative.

I do, in fact, sleep with one eye open.

::

I wondered tonight if perhaps Samson didn't as well.

Judges 16 opens with a short story as a prelude to his appointments with Delilah. Samson met up with a prostitute in Gaza, one of the larger Philistine cities. The recklessness of the physical risk — showing up in a city where every man within its walls thirsted for his life — was matched only by the recklessness of the spiritual risk.

The one set apart would again fulfill the external requirements of the written code, but defile his heart and flesh to spend the night with this beautiful woman.

The men of Gaza seized upon their opportunity, making plans to kill him when he arose at dawn.

He felt confident in his strength, enough to lie down in a hornet's nest.

They felt confident in their numbers, enough to leave him lie until morning.

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. (Judges 16:1-3)

The men of Gaza misplayed it.

Samson awoke during the night and left the walled city. Never mind that the gates were locked. He tore out the massive wooden doors and their posts, hoisted them on his shoulders and carried them to the hilltop, believed to be about twenty miles from town.

::

He paid for a full night with the girl. Yet he stole away before she'd earned a full night's pay. It isn't every day — or night — that we see Samson walk away from what was rightfully his.

The text doesn't tell us why he got up. Only that he did.

I don't believe the text even gives us a solid basis for speculation.

So I'm just stumped.

Matthew Henry was not. When he penned the wisdom bound in his commentary, he saw reason enough to conclude that Samson did not stay the full night because he sensed the risk, telling us to "observe Samson's danger," both physical and spiritual.

Henry goes on to say this:

Oh that all who indulge their sensual appetites in drunkenness, or any fleshly lusts, would see themselves thus surrounded, way-laid, and marked for ruin by their spiritual enemies! The faster they sleep, the more secure they feel, the greater their danger. We hope it was with a pious resolution not to return to his sin, that he rose under a fear of the danger he was in. Can I be safe under this guilt? It was bad that he lay down without such checks; but it would have been worse, if he had laid still under them. ([Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible](#))

These words pull my feet from beneath me and throw me to the the ground tonight: *Can I be safe under this guilt?*

::

Whether by the Spirit's prompting or just common sense, whether an awareness of a spiritual threat or a physical one, Samson recognized the danger. He got up, ripped a hole in a fortified city wall and walked out.

He took note that he was not safe.

At least not while he lay getting his fill of a girl who was not his wife. A girl he regarded only for what she could give him in exchange for a little coin.

Henry illuminates a view of Samson I seem so reluctant to allow. I see God's Spirit come on Samson in power. Henry sees that, but also sees the Spirit come on him in conviction. A gentle prodding in the night to remind him that he has placed himself in close range of danger.

A prodding to which Samson tuned his ear.

Samson entered the walled city to take for himself. He would flaunt his strength before the Philistine men while he brought more shame to a young prostitute.

Matthew Henry will have Samson asking himself, *Can I be safe under this guilt?*

And he also has him answering a resounding *No!*

::

Then the mirror that is Samson turns on me, as it always does. And I wonder. At those times when I choose to go my way, to find what fills me up. When I look God in the eye and sin anyway, do I recognize the danger? *Do I believe I can be safe under this guilt?*

Henry goes on to observe what is the far worse thing. It is one thing to sin and to follow my flesh. It is another to know it and *lay still under it*.

The Spirit, He will prod. He will seek to wake me in the night.

When He does, will I sleep soundly through it?

Or will I rise and go?

Will I keep one eye open, attentive?

Or will I lie still?

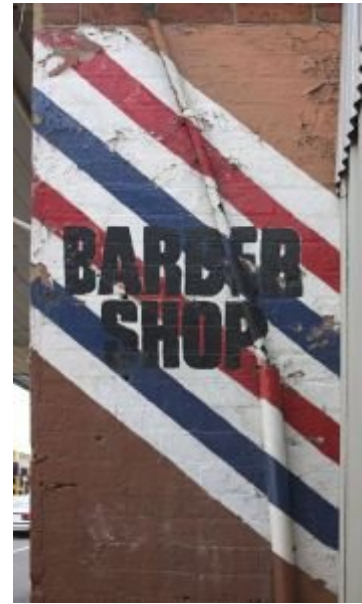
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Fool Me Once, Shame on You — Fool Me Twice, Call Me Delilah

Samson has a new girlfriend.

And now we can understand why those Sunday School lessons were so adamant about students learning to stay away from sneaky girls.

Only, really? I'm not so sure that Delilah was sneaky. She seemed pretty forthright about her intentions. Oh, sure, she didn't tell Samson that the Philistines had offered her a bulging purse and were hiding in the room every time she tied him up. But she left no question that she sought the secret of his strength only to ensure his capture.



She told him so.

So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.” (Judges 16:6)

What about her motive remained hidden?

::

Samson loved a good game. Remember the [riddle](#)?

It must have seemed kismet when his new girlfriend liked to play too.

So when Delilah set up the game table and dared Samson to tell her the secret of his strength, he was all in.

He didn't hesitate to tell her that she could tie him with seven fresh, undried strips of leather and he'd be as weak as the guy next door. And she didn't hesitate to tie him up with those fresh thongs.

With Samson bound, she shouted, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” Shekel signs going off in the cash register of her mind, she stood by awaiting his certain capture and her big payday.

Of course, Delilah didn’t know this joker well enough yet to expect him to pop right out of the leather ties. But he did just that, and humiliated her.

Delilah chided him for making a fool of her, and again begged for the secret. *Ok, Samson said. Try some new ropes, never used. Then I’ll be all yours.*

His girl got the ropes, tied him up and announced the arrival of the Philistines.

You know the story: He broke free.

Samson got a buzz off his game.

Delilah got hot.

Twice he sucked her in.

Twice he made a fool of her.

Twice he jumped between her and eleven hundred shekels times a bunch of Philistine men.

::

Delilah had her issues. Each time Samson gave her a bogus means to drain his strength, she fell for it. Somehow, even though she’d told him she wanted to know how to subdue him, she believed he would tell her the truth.

But Samson, I think, didn’t know about the [Law of Diminishing Returns](#). He knew Delilah’s intent and rather than give her the secret, toyed with her. He made a fool of her over and over again. The problem was that he was a gamer. And in order to keep getting his rush from the game, he had to raise the stakes.

First it was flimsy leather ties. Then the new ropes. But it became dull. He needed to take a bigger risk to get his buzz. He edged closer to his hair, telling Delilah that she could weave his

seven braids into the fabric on the loom, then tighten it with the pin, and he'd be as good as dead. (Where did he come up with this stuff?)

Here we go again. He knew what Delilah would do. Yet he nodded off to sleep in the presence of one bent on his betrayal. He no sooner snored than the woman wove his hair into the loom and screamed of Philistines afoot.

Samson jumped up, pulled the pin, and remained as strong as ever.

Delilah nearly drove the pin through his heart.

Swallowing her rage, she turned on the charm, and like his bride, the tears. We read on in the text and find the unexpected origin of "If you love me, you'll let me."

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." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." (Judges 16:15-17)

Bored with the game, and tired of her cajoling, he spilled it. So confident was he that he would win this game, he dared her to shave his head.

Delilah put him to sleep, then gave him a buzz cut.

Samson! The Philistines are upon you!

He bolted up, and for the first time in his life, felt what it was to be weak.

He had no idea.

He risked it all, and the ultimate gamer lost.

The Philistines bound him, blinded him and set him to grinding in the prison.

It was over.

::

Samson stood at the edge of the water and let the waves lap at his toes. It was risky there at the edge. But he had it under control. The waves were small. His feet would dry.

Soon, splashing toes wasn't enough. He rolled up his pant legs and waded in.

That too grew dull. Why stand ankle deep when the waves beckoned far from shore?

I'm a good swimmer. I can go further in. I have it under control.

As long as I can still see the shore . . .

And then the waves crash hard, the seaweed tangles, and lungs fill with water.

::

Sin is like that.

Last time, Samson sensed the danger. He chose not to lie still in it.

This time? Oh, he didn't lie still. *But neither did he run away.*

He played with it.

And he lost.

And I wonder what I'm thinking those times I dip my toes in the water.

::

Would I Know? How? And When?



Not long ago my son informed me that I was still talking about Samson out here. He pointed out that I'd been doing that since, when? *Summer?*

Yeah, something like summer.

"I don't even read it now, Mom," he said. "You're not funny anymore."

I don't worry too much. I still catch him reading when he thinks I'm not looking. And blog or not, he never seems to run out of reasons to laugh at me.

But he's right. *Samson is starting to seem like forever.*

The problem is, I can't shake him off. Every time I think I'm about there, it's something else. I finally got to give him his haircut, and there's still more before he brings the house down in his big finale.

It's like this: Samson never did ask a lot of questions after his riddle backfired.

But he sure keeps making me ask them.

Samson has become for me a looking glass. And every time I see something foul in him, I see my own eyes staring back. I see the work God still wants to do in me. *Work I need Him to do in me.*

And now he's done it again.

Here's the question: *If all the fullness of God drained out and left me vacant, would I know?*

How would I know?

And when would I notice?

::

Back up a second.

Let me square my theology with you first before you line up in the comment box to school me on grace. (Oh, I still need some schooling on grace, but it's not because I think God will leave me.) While I do, from time to time, wrestle over whether or not God suffers buyer's remorse when it comes to me, I also know that He will not bag me up and drop me off at the Returns counter at Wal*Mart. I cling for dear life to words such as those Paul put to the parchment in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

And while I have bouts of wondering how much time God spends scanning the Covenant (the new one) for a loophole, I take courage from what the writer of Hebrews said when he quoted Joshua, reminding believers that *never* is a long, long time:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

I stake my life on words like those.

So let's just be clear that I'm not asking *if God would leave*.

He won't.

I'm asking, in the very hypothetical what-if world, that if He did go, *would I notice?*

The real question is not about His presence, because it is more secure than anything I know.

The question is about *my awareness* of that life-giving presence.

::

Samson, full of himself and full of the game, got tired. That sneaky-girl Delilah wore him down and his loose lips sunk the ship. *He told her everything.*

Exhausted, he lay his head on her lap and floated off to sleep. While he rested, she called in the Philistines to bring her their silver and snip off his hair. The game always ended with the call to arms. *Samson! The Philistines are upon you!*

He jumped up to fight, believing this was just like all the other times. He'd shake off the sleep and be ready to rumble.

But it ends with the most tragic words I have ever heard.

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. (Judges 16:20b)

He did not know that the LORD had left him.

::

He did not know.

God was, for him, a source of strength. Time after time, Samson received the dramatic empowering of God's Spirit and crushed his enemies. Over and over, after moving in God's strength, he stood tall and mighty, the victor.

And yet. And yet.

When that strength was gone, when the Lord left him, *he did not know*.

So full of Samson was Samson that he did not know the difference between God's fullness and his own.

God left.

Gone.

And until a Philistine thug poked out his eyes, *Samson had no idea*.

::

In the fourth chapter of 1 Samuel, Eli the priest sat at the city gate on a little stool while the soldiers fought for the life of Israel. In the throes of yet another failure to grasp Who God was, His children took the Ark in to battle as though it were no more than a good luck charm. God, Who would be a four-leaf clover for nobody, laid His own smackdown on the Israelites, allowing the Philistines to rout them. They killed thousands. *And they took the Ark*.

As far as the Hebrews were concerned, *God's presence left them with the Ark*.

On hearing the news, Eli, sitting at the gate, *fell off his stool and died*.

Whether God really left or not, Eli's reaction breaks me: To believe God was gone *killed him*.

Eli fell off his stool and died.

Samson, on the other hand, had no idea.

::

And that's how we get to the wondering. *I wonder . . .*

. . . am I full enough of God that I would notice if He leaked out? Or would my own self mask the void?

Do I recognize His working in me such that if He stopped, I would know?

Would it take the punch to gut or the poking out of my eyes before the excruciating pain of utter vacancy set in?

Or would I know it from the very first chill?

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. (Psalm 139:1-3) Let me be so intimately acquainted with Your ways and Your going out and lying down and sitting and rising that I might know Your presence every moment. Let Samson be full of Samson. I want to be full of You.

::

It Was Never About the Hair

Shocking, I know. But I've never been a girly-girl.

Photos like this one, with hair fresh out of curlers and frills on dress sleeves, belie the child who wanted blue instead of pink and chose hand-me-downs from a big brother over those of an older sis.



I played with dolls because we had them, but much preferred building forts and climbing trees in the woods behind our house. When I did play dolls with my sister and her friends, my make-believe role most often permitted me to take my assigned doll with me into the woods, making an occasional appearance just to stay in the game.

My sister had a much better grip on the doll thing. One year she received the coveted *Crissy* doll, a beautiful girl with stunning red hair. But *Crissy* also had a mysterious hole in her head and an unsightly button at the small of her back, there by design rather than defect.

The wonder of this doll was her growing hair.

A girl could tug *Crissy's* hair, and long locks would emerge from the cavity in her head. Press the button on her back, the hair sucked back into her plastic cranium and she sported a pageboy instead.

Everything else about *Crissy* was pretty run-of-the-mill doll business. When it came to the *Crissy* doll, *it was all about the hair*.

But when it comes to Samson, *it was never about the hair*.

There. I said it.

I've been wanting to say that for months.

::

When I lamented Israel's heartbreaking rebellion-repentance rhythm, *it was never about the hair*.

And when we saw God pour life into the parched barrenness of the wasteland and you helped me write the ending, *it was never about the hair.*

When the angel reminded us that there are things too wonderful for us to understand, *it was never about the hair.*

And when we met Samson as the demanding child of indulgent parents, *it was never about the hair.*

When we watched Samson miss the point of his ponytail altogether, *it was never about the hair.*

And when he abused his strength, reminding us of the power of Jesus' coming under and lifting us to life, *it was never about the hair.*

When we witnessed Samson choose vengeance over forgiveness over and over until he was consumed, *it was never about the hair.*

And when God chose to continue to work through Samson after failure upon failure, *it was never about the hair.*

When Samson ever so briefly recognized the danger of sin and got up from under it, *it was never about the hair.*

When Samson was so full of himself he didn't even notice when God's Spirit left him behind, *it was never about the hair.*

And when Samson waded too deep into the water, got in over his head and told Delilah it was all about the hair, even then *it was never about the hair.*

Never. About. The hair.

I plan to reach the end of my life still believing that.

::

Bulging biceps and an ill-fated haircut is all I remember about Samson growing up. But from my first reading of Samson's story this summer through the next hundred or so times until now, I have waited for my chance to say *it was never about the hair.*

Samson's joyride did not come to screeching halt because Delilah cut his hair.

Samson's world collapsed for reasons far more devastating than a bad haircut.

Breaking the Nazirite vow did not cause Samson's strength to drain away. Knowing the vow did not equate to personal perfection, the Mosaic code provided the means for one who stumbled to be restored and reaffirm his vow.

Samson's hair was more than a charm or amulet that held all the secrets of his success. But he seemed to think it was. So when Samson let Delilah wear him down and he revealed what he believed to be his big secret, all he really revealed was his weakness.

He thought his power was woven into his braids. And in his exhaustion, he believed the only way to turn off Delilah's cajoling was to tell her the truth.

He was too weak to cope with his own strength.

And so he gave it away.

He was born to purpose. He was part of a plan God was working.

But He didn't know God well. And he didn't trust God.

All he knew was how to flex like Popeye. It always got him just what he wanted.

Surely his pipes wouldn't fail him again.

But they did.

Samson's ruin was not about his hair.

It was about how little he *loved* God, how little he *trusted* God, and how little he *obeyed* God.

Daring Delilah to give him a shave — that only showed us just *how* little.

Delilah did not take Samson's strength. She only took a little off the sides.

He gave it away.

::

Samson, he trusted his hair to give him horsepower. He loved and obeyed only himself.

Trusting in hair, it seems a little silly to me. But do I trust in things that are just as silly?

I do. *I know I do.*

Do you?

:: :: ::

Bringing Down the House

Samson.

The world was not worthy of him.

So says the [writer of Hebrews](#), bringing me back around to consider just how it was that Samson found himself amongst the [honorable mentions](#) in that great [Hall of Faith](#).

For all the desire to which his eyes wandered, for all the rage that rushed through his veins, for all the destruction his vengeful hands wrought, and for all the self he was content to worship, Samson at last found his moment.

And then we see.

We see how this prodigal, shaved and shamed, unearthed faith before he buried the Philistines.

There came a day, Samson's last, when in faith he brought the house down.

::

His strength drained away, Samson stood alone in a Philistine cell. No more would he tear apart a beast with his bare hands, nor feast on sweet honey fresh from the comb, with wrists and ankles shackled in bronze. His eyes, now gone, would never again gaze on a beautiful Philistine woman.

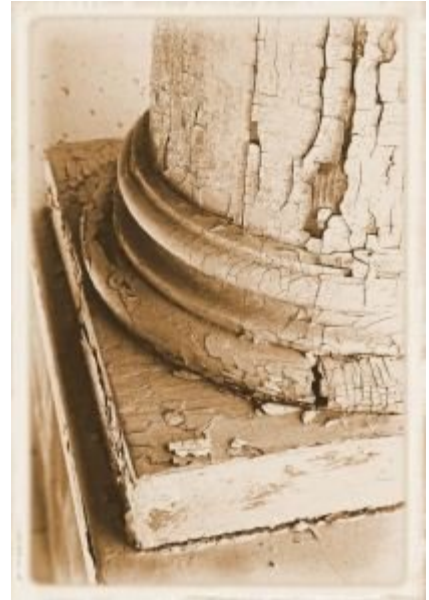
The Philistines, not content to shame their nemesis privately in prison, dragged him out of his cell and put him on parade in the temple for the evening entertainment.

There in the brokenness of his surrender, Samson remembered God.

Remembered? Or perhaps found Him for the first.

In that moment of remembering, he wondered what memory God had of him.

And he asked Him to renew it.



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.” (Judges 16:28)

Samson, who had long believed his strength was his own, found its source in the Sovereign LORD alone.

Propped between two pillars, he called on God, and God sent His power coursing back through Samson’s veins. He flexed, and sensed God’s presence once again.

His last words, at once broken and again defiant, faded away into the echo of rock crushing rock as he forced pillars aside and the building collapsed.

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. (Judges 16:28)

::

God brought Samson to Manoah and his wife to begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. Samson was train wreck. A walking confrontation. I’ve yet to find myself liking the fellow, but I can’t help but see God’s plan and how it unfolded through his tumultuous life.

In the moment of his complete surrender, even in his death, Samson perfected that confrontation with the Philistines God sought in his birth.

Pious, not at all.

Righteous? *By faith.*

For Samson, as with us, our own strength, our self-sufficiency, *our very own way* shackles our hands and feet. When our strength is stripped away, when we are crushed and broken and we no longer have even our own eyes to see, *then God can move.*

In us.

Through us.

And by golly, stand back. He'll bring the house down.

::