



THE STORY OF
Everything
LUKE 24:27

Garrett is a pastor that I know from my seminary days. He is a dynamic pastor and a great leader in a thriving Virginia church. But Garrett has been very open about his flaws – both personally and ministerially.

For years, Garrett was watching his ministry thrive. He’s a great looking guy – very muscular from working out, very athletic, and very talented. But secretly, Garrett was addicted to pornography. He would spend hours upon hours indulging in his secret lusts, and his lusts finally caught up to him. When his lust had consumed him, Garrett found himself rethinking his life and ministry.

The book of Judges ends with a downward spiral. Israel’s final judge, Samson, is a very flawed man. His leadership reflects the deterioration of the nation, and as a man who lives in the northern tribe of Dan – a tribe that did not conquer their territory, Samson’s leadership looks a lot like the nation.

The story of Samson reveals that God is able to work with very imperfect people who have very tainted motives. While God calls us to purity and holiness, God’s purposes cannot be thwarted by very imperfect obedience.

Even before Samson is born, the angel of the Lord appears to Samson’s parents and announces that they will have a special son born to them. In spite of her infertility, God will raise up a leader to deliver his people, even though they do not cry out to him in repentance and deliverance. He will be a Nazirite – a devoted man committed to God’s purposes who must not cut his hair, drink alcohol, or touch any dead thing as Numbers 6 commanded.

But Samson will not keep his Nazirite vow. His lover Delilah will cut his hair; Samson will have a wedding feast to celebrate his unholy marriage to a Philistine woman and the alcohol will flow; and he will tear apart a lion, only to return and find that the bees have left a hive of honey in the lion’s carcass, from which Samson will take the honey. And Samson’s life will be full of vengeance – he will kill thirty men when he loses a bet; he will burn down the Philistines’ fields, and kill a thousand men using the jawbone of a donkey.

And Samson’s weakness for women will lead him astray. Instead of marrying a believer in the Lord, he will chase after unbelieving women – even marrying a Philistine woman, sleeping with a prostitute, and having a lover who seduces him into revealing the secrets of his great strength.

Yet God is able to accomplish his purposes through people who are weak in morals. Samson may love godless women and he may explode with vengeance when someone crosses him, but God will keep his promises to bring a deliverer to rescue his people from the power of sin and

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death. The way that Judges 13-16 play out are intended to ask us several questions that will take our imperfect obedience to the Lord and cry out to him for mercy.

Where are your eyes looking?

Throughout the story of Samson, we are supposed to notice that many of our problems come from where our eyes are looking. Israel does what is evil in the sight of the Lord (13:1), and so their gaze is not looking to what God wants but what they want. Because their eyes are fixed on what they want, they end up being oppressed by the Philistines.

But God is able to deliver people who don't even want to be delivered. Unlike other times in Judges where the people were oppressed and cried out to the Lord for mercy, this time there is no cry. The people love their sin too much. They are trapped by their sin and have grown tolerant of oppression. But God in his mercy is able to do something amazing. In Judges 13:1-5, we have the incredible story of Samson's miraculous birth. A couple who cannot have children are told that they will have a miraculous baby, and this baby will begin to deliver Israel (13:2-5). In other words, God can grow a deliverer when there is no one available.

But this deliverer is far from perfect. His eyes are wandering too. As Samson grows, we are told in 14:1-3 that he went to one of the Philistine cities and saw a godless woman whom he wanted for a wife. When his parents try to reason with him that he should look for a godly wife, Samson replies, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes."

Samson's eyes continually lead him astray. Just as Israel does what is evil in the eyes of the Lord, so Samson's lustful eyes cause him to lust after Philistine women. And the end result for him is that his lustful eyes cause his eyes to be gauged out (16:21). The strong man is made weak by his eyes looking at what he wants rather than what God wants. Even in the end, Samson prays to the Lord that he could avenge his eyes (16:28), resulting in the death of a couple thousand Philistines.

Sin is very sneaky. It begins by averting our eyes. Sin distracts us from what is truly good and beautiful and paints over the terror of evil. The result is that our eyes can be easily diverted from seeing what is truly glorious. Judges ends with the refrain that "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6). And Proverbs 16:2 says that "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit." In other words, we can be tempted to judge what is right by what we see rather than by what God sees. God knows all things. He knows the beginning from the end. That's why we are to fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen (Col. 3:1ff) by looking to the heavenly wisdom that comes from the mouth of God. Our eyes are to be fixed on the commandments of the Lord (Ps. 119:6) and upon his ways (Ps. 119:15).

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What does your heart love?

Samson is an incredibly strong man. From the earliest of days, we are told that a lion came toward him, roaring, ready to devour him as prey. But instead of Samson being ripped apart, he tore the lion in pieces (14:5-6). He can tear the huge gates and posts off of the city of Gath after the people of Gath try to ambush him, and carry the city gates for almost 65 kms on his shoulders to Hebron to make a spectacle of the Philistines.

But as strong as Samson is, he is incredibly weak because of what he loves. He has an eye for women. He sees a Philistine gal in Timnah and wants to marry her because she is right in his eyes (14:3, 7). His eyes catch a prostitute, and when the Philistines try to get revenge on Samson for killing their people (16:1-3).

But what leads to Samson's downfall is Delilah. She wants to know the secret of his strength. Every night for three nights, she tries to seduce him. And every night for three nights he does not tell her the true source of his strength. But finally, as she manipulates his lust, asking him how he can say, "I love you," when he doesn't tell her the real source of his strength. And in a moment of weakness, Samson confesses that he has been a Nazirite from birth. He has not cut his hair, and this has been the source of his physical strength. So while he sleeps, she cuts his hair and has the Philistine warriors hide nearby. Then as she cries out for him to rescue her, Samson cannot and is bound by the Philistines and led away (16:4-22).

What Samson is reflects what Israel has become. Without a godly leader, Judges 2:17 tells us that Israel whored after other gods. They prostituted themselves. They chased after other lovers rather than the Lover of their soul. And just as Israel prostitutes herself by chasing after other gods, Samson's life displays Israel's infidelity.

Yet in all of this, God provides a flawed leader. Why does he do this? It's better to have a flawed leader than for everyone to do what is right in their own eyes. And while Samson may not be able to keep a secret, the Lord is working out his secret purposes. This seems to be the point behind 14:4 – that while Samson wants revenge on the Philistines and loves Philistine women, the Lord is using this opportunity to bring his judgment against the Philistines who rule over and oppress the Israelites. God will not overlook evil. He calls his people to love him with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength. But even when they fail to love him, he won't let his purposes be thwarted.

However, just because God's purposes won't be thwarted does not excuse our disordered loves. Instead, what we love – what we spend our time on, what we pour our money into, what focuses our imagination – these things are to help us see more clearly where our eyes are looking. Our loves are to focus our attention on where our gaze is so that our obedience might be refined. Yes, God can use imperfect obedience because that's the only kind of obedience

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there ever is. But this is a reminder that the Lord is gracious and compassionate, working with us, even when we are deeply flawed and even when we are in sin so that we might be saved.

What is the source of your strength?

Throughout these four chapters, we meet a man who is incredibly strong and uses his power in ways to exact revenge on the Philistines. He tears a lion apart. He ties foxes' tails together and puts a torch on their tails, sending them out so that they spread fire throughout the fields of grain. He kills a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone. He tears the gates of Gath off their hinges and carries them 40 miles. Ten times in these chapters we hear of Samson's great strength.

Part of his strength comes from his miraculous birth and his Nazarite vow. Yet as a Nazirite, he was not to drink alcohol – and yet his wedding feast in chapter 14 suggests that he is just as much of a partaker of wine as anyone else. He is not to touch any dead thing, yet in chapter 14 he takes honey from a lion's carcass. And he is not to cut his hair, which ends up in his loss of strength in chapter 16.

We might even think that Samson's hair is what ultimately matters, because in chapter 16, after his hair has been shaved and his eyes gouged out, we are told in v. 22 that his hair began to grow back. And in the end, in a final act of vengeance, he pulls the columns of the temple down as the people celebrate the defeat of Samson.

While we are led to believe that the source of Samson's strength is his hair, there is another source to his strength. Three times in chapters 14 & 15 we are told that the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him (14:6; 19; 15:14). And this is what makes strength confusing to us. Sometimes it is supernatural. And other times it is just the giftedness and physical brute force that people have. If our eyes are not looking in the right places, we will assume that what matters is how gifted someone is, how strong they are, and how talented they can be.

But Samson's strength was only temporary. There is no mention of the Spirit's power in chapter 16. There is an obvious weakness to this very strong man.

But God would promise his people that he would put his Spirit within his people so that we may live knowing that he is our God and we are his people (Ezek. 37:14). And the only way that we can walk in obedience is if we have our eyes, heart, and strength directed to the right place:

See the Glory of Christ

A thousand years later, there would be a baby born miraculously. He would come to deliver his people. But he would not have his eyes turned toward power and lust. Though the devil would

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tempt him to look at how powerful he could be, Jesus lifted his eyes to the Father. From the moment of his baptism, Mark tells us that he looked to heaven and saw the Spirit come upon him, giving him power and authority. And at his baptism, we are told that he heard the voice of heaven saying, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased” (Mk. 1:10-11).

And this is how Jesus walked: in the power of the Spirit, obeying his Father perfectly. And he obeyed his Father so that he might overthrow our oppressor – the evil one – and deliver us from the bonds and chains of sin and death. He would overcome disease as he healed the sick. He would conquer death by dying and being raised in the power of the Spirit (Eph. 1:19-20). And this power is then given to us – the power of the Spirit – so that we might walk in obedience. And even though our obedience will always be imperfect on earth, God gives us his Spirit so that we would not love that which is godless. As Paul would tell the Corinthians, he puts his Spirit in us so that we would cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Yet what is amazing is that God can take flawed people and use them. Hebrews 11 says that there isn’t time to tell of the faith of Samson. Yes – Samson! God uses imperfect obedience to accomplish his purposes. And through Samson, God paved the way for his Deliverer to come and rescue us.

And by rescuing us, it allows people like Garrett to be used too. When Garrett confessed his lust and how he had used his strength and charisma to hide how little he depended upon the Lord, what God did was take a man who looked strong outwardly and turned him into a man who now gives leadership to many younger men, encouraging them to find their strength in the right place, knowing that our imperfect obedience is always being refined so that we might find our chains are broken and the glory of Christ shines through our lives as we die to sin and live for Christ.