

Waking Up Empty: What Samson Teaches Us About Drifting From God

There is a particular kind of spiritual danger that never announces itself. It does not arrive with a crisis or a catastrophe. It does not slam a door or make a scene. It just gets a little quieter, and then a little quieter still, until the quiet becomes normal and normal becomes invisible. And by the time you notice, you have been running on empty for longer than you would like to admit.

That is the danger this message is about. Not the dramatic fall. The slow drift.

The Check Engine Light Nobody Checks

Most of us know the feeling of driving around for weeks with a check engine light glowing on the dashboard. At first it startles you. Then you Google it, call someone who seems to know cars, and eventually, you just get used to it. The light becomes wallpaper. You start saying, "Oh, that light is always on. The car is fine." Which, if we are being honest, is automotive language for famous last words.

That is precisely how many of us have learned to live with a quiet distance from God. The warning light has been on for a while. We just stopped being alarmed by it.

Instead of dealing with the distance, we find ways to cope with it. Some of us add more activity, more busyness, more serving, hoping the noise will cover the silence. Some of us lean on what God did ten years ago as though it were a subscription that never expires, letting an old testimony do the work that a present relationship was always supposed to do. Some of us just keep performing the habits and hope the feelings eventually catch up. We keep singing the songs, posting the verses, showing up on Sunday, and because nothing has collapsed yet, we assume everything must be fine.

But there is a difference between the absence of consequences and the presence of God. And confusing the two is exactly what cost Samson everything.

A Man Who Stopped Checking the Gauge

The book of Judges introduces Samson as someone set apart from birth. Before he was born, an angel told his parents that their son would be a Nazirite, a word rooted in the Hebrew concept of being separated and consecrated for God's purposes. The Nazirite vow

came with visible boundaries: no contact with the dead, no wine, and no cutting of the hair. These were not arbitrary rules. They were physical reminders of a spiritual reality. Every strand of uncut hair was a visible sign of an invisible dependence. The hair was never the source of the power. It was a covenant marker, a daily reminder that Samson's strength did not belong to Samson. It belonged to God, and Samson was simply carrying it.

For years, the arrangement worked. Samson tore apart lions. He dismantled city gates. He walked into battle after battle and walked out the other side. But somewhere in the middle of all that winning, something began to shift. He touched a carcass. He sat close enough to wine feasts that the boundary stopped meaning anything. He kept pursuing relationships with women who actively wanted to destroy him. Small steps. No dramatic collapse. Just a slow, steady drift away from the covenant he was born under.

By the time Delilah enters the picture in Judges 16, Samson has already broken nearly every part of his vow. The hair is the last thread. And even then, God kept extending grace, kept showing up, kept honoring a man who had long since stopped honoring the covenant. The moment Delilah cuts his hair is not actually the moment Samson loses his strength. It is simply the moment when all the small compromises of his life finally catch up to him at once.

Then comes the most haunting line in the passage. When the Philistines close in, Samson wakes up and does exactly what he has always done. Same posture, same confidence, same routine. He expects strength to be there because it has always been there. And then the text delivers its gut-punch verdict: he did not know that the Lord had left him.

He did not know.

Familiarity Is Not the Same as Closeness

That is where Samson's story stops being about Samson and starts being about the rest of us.

His real problem was never his hair. His real problem was that he had started trusting in the memory of God's presence instead of staying dependent on the presence of God himself. He had years of evidence that God had shown up for him. So he assumed God would always show up for him, regardless of what he did with the space in between. He confused God's past faithfulness with a blank check for his present compromise.

And that is the trap that catches so many people who have been walking with God for a long time. Familiarity with what God used to do can quietly become a substitute for what God is doing right now. The habit stays standing even after the heart has moved out. You

can keep every outward rhythm of a life that once held God's presence and never notice the presence is gone, because the routine looks exactly the same from the outside.

Strength without surrender eventually becomes performance without power.

Checking the Gauge Before the Philistines Do

George Mueller, the nineteenth-century minister who cared for thousands of orphans without ever publicly soliciting funds, understood what Samson did not. Mueller's name carried enormous weight by the end of his life. He had every reason to coast on a long and faithful legacy. Instead, he kept a daily habit of getting alone with God each morning, not to check a box, but to check the gauge. He believed the most important thing he could do each day was to make sure his own soul was genuinely at rest in the Lord. Yesterday's presence of God, he understood, is not a substitute for today's.

That is the invitation sitting inside Samson's story. Not guilt. Not fear. Just an honest question worth asking before the day gets going: Is God actually close right now, or am I running on the memory of when he used to feel close?

The good news is that unlike Samson, you do not have to wait for a collapse to find out where you stand. Jesus stepped into the gap for every person who has drifted further than they intended, staying perfectly dependent on the Father all the way to the cross so that our stories do not have to end the way Samson's did.

Check the gauge today. Come back close today. A heart that stays near the Father never has to wonder if he is still there.

Scripture References from "Waking Up Empty"

Judges 16:15-20** — The central passage of the sermon, covering Delilah's persistent questioning of Samson, his revelation of the Nazarite vow, the cutting of his hair, the departure of his strength, and the key verse: "He did not know that the Lord had left him."

Judges 13:3-5 — Alluded to when Pastor Isaiah describes the angel appearing to Samson's parents before his birth, declaring he would be a Nazarite set apart from the womb.

Alluded to Broadly

Judges 14:8-9 — Referenced when Pastor Isaiah mentions Samson touching a carcass to retrieve honey, a violation of his Nazarite vow.

Judges 14:10 — Alluded to when Pastor Isaiah references Samson attending wine feasts, another boundary crossed against the Nazarite vow.

Judges 14-15 — General allusion to Samson's battles, tearing lions with his bare hands, taking down city gates, and defeating enemies.

Numbers 6:1-8 — The foundational passage governing the Nazarite vow, alluded to throughout when Pastor Isaiah explains the three requirements: no contact with the dead, no wine, and no cutting of hair.

Judges 17:6 — Alluded to in the contextual description of the book of Judges as a season when "everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

Thematically Suggested

****Psalm 139:7-10**** — Relevant to the sermon's theme of God's ever-present nature and the danger of drifting from his presence.

****Revelation 2:4-5**** — The letter to the church at Ephesus, warning believers who have "forsaken their first love" and calling them to return, directly paralleling the sermon's central concern about spiritual drift.

****Hebrews 2:1**** — A warning against drifting away from what has been heard, closely aligned with the sermon's theme of slow, unnoticed spiritual departure.

****Hebrews 12:1**** — The call to throw off what entangles and run with endurance, relevant to the pattern of small compromises Pastor Isaiah traces in Samson's life.

****Lamentations 3:22-23**** — God's mercies being new every morning, supporting the sermon's application point about daily dependence on God rather than resting on past experience of his presence.

****Romans 11:29**** — "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable," relevant to the discussion of Samson continuing to operate in strength even as his relationship with God deteriorated.

****Luke 15:17-20**** — The prodigal son "coming to himself," paralleling the sermon's call to wake up, check the gauge, and return to the father before circumstances force the realization.

****Matthew 7:22-23**** — Jesus warning about those who performed ministry in his name but whom he did not know, directly supporting the sermon's theme of performance without genuine presence.