

August 16, 2026

COMPROMISE: JUDGES 16:16-31

Introductory Activity

Introduce: Good educators use many tools and best practices to teach children new and difficult-to-grasp concepts. Object lessons are useful tools to help young people understand difficult concepts. Consider a pair of prescription glasses. When I put on a pair of glasses, I can see the world clearly. But when I remove them, everything becomes blurry. An object lesson functions like prescription lenses. They make blurry, abstract concepts clear to the learner. Today we are going to examine a familiar story. The story of Samson is often told as that of a strong man who is too weak to control his appetites. His life is also a cautionary tale for those called to the work of ministry. His story is both of those. However, I think his story can function as something more. His life can be viewed as an object lesson that helps us see more clearly the history of Israel during the time of the judges. His life can also help us see our spiritual lives more clearly.

Summarize and Transition: Our lesson picks up near the end of Samson's life story. We do not have time to examine his entire life. But we do need to take a moment and get the back story to this lesson. Last week we examined the culminating battle under the judgeship of Gideon. After Gideon, God raised up several minor judges, called thus because of the small amount of text dedicated to their lives, and regional judges. Judges 13 tells us that Israel "again did what was evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord handed them over to the Philistines forty years." (v. 1) Very quickly the chapter reveals that God already had a plan to address this dire situation. An angel of the Lord appeared to a childless woman and told her, "You will conceive and give birth to a son. You must never cut his hair, because the boy will be a Nazirite to God from birth, and he will begin to save Israel from the power of the Philistines." (v. 5.) This child was Samson. Two things about Samson's life that we should note are his miraculous strength given by the Spirit of God and His great desire for Philistine women. The first he used on several occasions against the Philistine oppressors. The second he succumbed to at least three times to his own detriment. Today we pick up in the middle of his third entanglement with a foreign woman. Her name is Delilah, and the Bible tells us that Samson "loved" her. She, on the other hand, used their relationship to enrich herself. When their relationship became known to the Philistine officials, they offered her a very large sum of money to discover the source of Samson's strength so that they could cripple the warrior. On three separate occasions, Delilah inquired about the source of his strength. On each occasion, Samson lied to her. She did not know this until after she performed the supposed disarming feat that failed to work.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Judges and Ruth* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Judges* (NAC)
- *Exalting Jesus in Judges and Ruth* (Exalting)

Our lesson picks up after the third occasion. Let's see what happens when she asks a fourth time.

1. STRENGTH DEPARTED (JUDG. 16:16-20)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 16:16-20.

Explain: The Bible tells us that Delilah nagged him "to death." (NAC, 459 fn. 415) He finally breaks down and tells her "the whole truth." She responds in the way an astute reader would expect. She lets him fall asleep on her lap and then calls in the henchmen to shave his head and thereby remove his power. Let's stop there and consider what is really going on.

Block says that Samson was "both extraordinarily powerful and extraordinarily stupid." (NAC, 457) Surely, he knew that she would shave his head. It was stupid of him to tell her. Others focus on Samson's unbridled desire for the woman that led him to reveal his secret. Still others focus on his apparent true love for her. He would do anything for her. Barry Webb, though, focuses on Samson's spiritual and emotional state. Remember, Samson was set apart before birth to the calling of a Judge. Moreover, he was set apart as a Nazarite. Numbers chapter 6 explains the Nazarite vow and the regulations surrounding it. It appears that there were two types of Nazarites in Jewish tradition: the lifelong Nazarite called from birth and those who dedicated themselves to the Lord, usually for thirty days.¹ The lifelong Nazarite was the less common of the two. According to *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, these include Samson (Judg. 13), Samuel (1 Sam. 1), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15–17).² Samson "was a Nazirite by *divine* decision." (Preaching, 212) But it appears that he never really wanted to function as a Nazarite. His surely not live a very sanctified life. "One by one he discarded all the outward signs of his Naziriteship. He has drunk wine (14:10), he has scraped honey from the carcass of a lion (14:8, 9), and he has handled 'fresh' (raw) jawbone of an ass (15:15)." (Preaching, 213) It appears that the only thing Samson liked about being a Nazarite was his extraordinary strength. And it appears from the passage we read that Samson is even willing to give that up to rid himself of his special calling. Webb says, "He's tired of being a 'holy' man." (Preaching, 213)

I said earlier that Samson can serve as an object lesson to understand Israel's spiritual condition. Israel, like Samson, was chosen by God to be a holy nation, set apart for God's missionary purposes. They too often discarded the signs of their separation. Samson chased after women and Israel chased after other gods. Samson wanted to be like the evil Philistines around him. He spent much of his life among them and their ways appealed to him. Like Samson, Israel "was always looking over its shoulder at the

Notes:

"The English idiom captures the meaning of קִצְרָה נֶפֶשׁ לְמוֹת, "the soul is depressed to the point of death," which means to be worn out by the importunity, to reach the limit of one's patience/endurance." (NAC, 459 fn. 415)

"The only thing he really enjoyed about his separation to God has been his extraordinary strength, and now even that has become a burden he wants to be rid of. He's tired of being a 'holy' man." (Preaching, 213)

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Nazirite, Nazarite," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1532.

² Chad Brand et al., eds., "Nazirite," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1179.

other nations and wishing it could be like them, worshiping their gods and adopting their ways." (Preaching, 214) Samson is an object lesson for Israel's apostasy.

Discuss: Samson can also present a picture of the struggling believer today. What are some ways that believers or those raised in the church can act like Samson and, in effect, shake off their faith or Christian worldview?

Explain: We see this in at least two ways. First is the young person raised in church who decides to walk away from their expressed faith or the faith of their parents. There can be many reasons for this, but in a way it is similar to the life of Samson. He was "raised in church" as a young Nazirite. It was just the world he swam in. When he left the land of Israel and entered into Philistine territory, he shrugged off these Israelite ways and "experimented" with the world. It seems that "Samson didn't appear to have much of a relationship with God...and this played out in some of his choices." (ETBC, 111) Like Samson, some young people either do not have a faith of their own or they have a very immature or underdeveloped faith and connection to the church community. While they make their own decisions as young adults, we can help them make good decisions through deep discipleship as children and teenagers and, probably more importantly, intentionally connecting them to the faith community. Of course, even these efforts to ensure that young people maintain their faith commitments might not succeed. Samson is a good example of that, but we can still do our best to help.

There is another aspect of Samson's journey that helps us understand why believers walk away from their faith commitments, and this can apply to a believer of any age. Samson had become intimate with the world. He had already literally been intimate with other women. Now he loved Delilah, an untrustworthy, Philistine woman. The writer tells us that after he told Delilah his secret, he fell asleep *on her lap*. "The picture of the intimate trust that Samson had for Delilah at this point and her utter betrayal in spite of it is a powerful one." (ETBC, 113) His intimacy with women was just a picture of his spiritual state. He was at home with the world. As we saw before, he was a worldly man. When a believer becomes intimate with the world and worldly ways of being, he or she is more likely to walk away from their faith commitments. Again, discipleship and connection to community are essential here. Actually, discipleship is relational. For a person to grow in their faith, they *must* (note the emphasis) be in relationship with the faith community. This relationship should extend further than worship attendance. It should even extend further than attending a Sunday school group. If a believer is going to remain committed to the faith and avoid following after the world, they must be connected with others on a deep level.

Notes:

Summarize Transition: It appears that Samson was tired of living the holy life. Over time he shed aspects of his calling and identification with Israel and her God. Now he sleeps in the lap of his betrayer. While he does so, his head is shaved. When he awakens, he intends to fight off his oppressors. Instead, the Bible tells us “he did not know that the Lord had left him.” (v. 20) Samson’s power never came from his long hair. It came from the Lord. The long hair was simply the last vestige of his commitment to the Lord. When he told Delilah his secret and his hair was shorn, he was in effect voluntarily, definitively stepping away from the Lord. Therefore, the Lord stepped away from him. True believers who step away from their faith commitments do not lose their salvation, but they will, like Samson, lose their connection to His power and blessing.

Samson is a picture of both Israel’s apostasy and the possible apostasy of the modern believer. He is also a picture of what can happen when Israel and believers forego their spiritual commitments. Let’s look at that.

2. SAMSON DEFEATED (JUDG. 16:21-25)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 16:21-25.

Explain: Samson is now defeated. We can observe three aspects of this passage and apply them both to Israel and the modern believer. In verses 21 and 22 we see both **Humiliation and Hope**. Samson is captured, and his eyes are taken from him. Block writes, “Overnight this man is transformed from one whose life is governed by sight and whose actions are determined by what is right in his own eyes into a blind man with eyes gouged out.” (NAC, 462) Samson had been defeated by his appetites. Israel too was defeated by her appetites. When she chased after the gods of foreign nations, God turned her over to the people of those nations. That is how the Philistines and the other nations in the book came to rule over Israel in the first place. Modern believers too face the same situation when they chase after their appetites.

Read James 1:14-15

Just as Samson and Israel ended up in bondage to the things they chased after, so too will the believer who chases after ungodly appetites. And those appetites lead to death. Yet there's always hope. Verse 22 tells us that Samson’s hair had begun to grow back. In Crenshaw’s words, “With a single stroke of the artist’s brush the ominous skies give way to the promise of brilliant sunshine; all is not lost, for hair grows back.” (NAC, 463) As we said before, Samson’s strength did not *really* come from his hair. It came from the Lord, but Samson’s realization that his hair had grown brought to mind his former relationship with the Lord. Likewise, every straying believer who catches a glimpse of God’s blessing can be reminded of their former close relationship with the Lord. These are glimpses of God’s grace available through repentance.

Notes:

James 1:14-15

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. ¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

Verse 22 is just a glimpse of what is possible. The author quickly draws our mind and eye back to the larger ramifications of sin. On the human level, Samson had lost his freedom and his eyesight. On the spiritual level, God had been scorned. Verses 23-24 reveal **Misplaced Honor and Honor Displaced**. As the Philistines viewed the capture of Samson through their erroneous theology, they thought their god Dagon had defeated Yahweh God. Therefore, they mistakenly showed honor to their false god instead of Yahweh. That is what Samson's sin had done. His actions and inactions had dishonored the Lord and caused others to disparage Him by worshipping the wrong (false) god. Again, Samson's story is a picture of Israel. Their sin had always carried with it the possibility of causing others to disparage God. It was God who brought down Jericho, and that one event caused His name to spread (see Joshua 6:27). It was God who defeated the nations during Joshua's lifetime. Yet, now because of her sin Israel suffers at the hands of those same nations, and those nations now ridicule God. The same can be said of the believer who lives sinfully among the sinful. Those same sinful people who know of the believer's faith commitment and see his faithless actions will ridicule the God he professes. Sin leads to Misplaced Honor and Honor Displaced.

The last things we see in this passage are **Entertainment and Retaliation**. Verse 25 returns us to the plight of Samson. He is now the entertainment for the pagan party. "Overnight the person who had spent his life insulting and humiliating others becomes the object of their humiliation." (NAC, 462) He was a pitiful and pitiable sight, but so too was Israel. The nation, delivered from bondage and destined for greatness, now swings like a pendulum between faithfulness and faithlessness, freedom in God and fealty to foreigners. In his poem *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton places these words in the mouth of Israelites when they observe the ruined Samson: "O mirror of our fickle state." In effect, they are saying, "That's us. When we look at Samson, we see ourselves." (Preaching, 213) Samson is an object lesson to help us understand Israel's predicament.

Summarize and Transition: We too can be like Samson. When we see the fallen saint, we might say, "But by the grace of God go I." That is true. Only by the grace of God can we stay faithful to Him. Samson was graced by God from birth with a righteous calling. We are graced by God when we answer the call to salvation. Like Samson, we are blessed with a call to rescue the perishing. However, when we walk the unrighteous path, we bring dishonor to God and suffer the humiliation of our dishonor. In Samson, we see that "overnight a man with the highest conceivable calling, the divinely commissioned agent of deliverance for Israel, is cast down to the lowest position imaginable: grinding flour for others in prison." (NAC, 462) Let us not be the same. Nevertheless, there is always hope. Grace abounds where repentance is found. Let's finish up and see how Samson seeks the Lord one last time.

3. PHILISTINES DESTROYED (JUDG. 16:26-31)

Read (or have someone read) Judges 16:26-31.

In this passage, we see a Plan for Retaliation, a Prayer Lacking Repentance, and a Path to Recognition.

A Plan of Retaliation: With recognition that his hair had regrown, Samson made a plan to exact his retaliation on the Philistines. The once great man was now led by a young boy, and he asked that young boy to guide him to the pillars. The Bible tells us that 3,000 people stood on the roof of the temple turned party to be entertained by Samson. That means there could have been 5,000 or more people present. He now sought to eke out his revenge on them. That leads him to prayer.

A Prayer Lacking Repentance: If you examine Samson's prayer, you will see that it is self-centered. He seeks only retribution for the harm done to him. He is concerned only for his honor, not the honor of God. He seeks his own death, not the survival of Israel. It is the imperfect prayer of an imperfect man. We have said that Samson is an object lesson for Israel. We see that again here. Throughout the book of Judges, Israel only calls upon God for selfish reasons. They never repent of their spiritual adultery. They only call upon the Lord to rescue them in the midst of their sin. Neither of these should be an example for us. Yet they are examples of how we often respond to our self-inflicted disasters. Instead of learning from Samson and Israel, we should learn from the prophet sent prior to Gideon's service as Judge. In Judges 6, He reminds them of their sin and, in effect, calls them to repentance. Let us call to the Lord in repentance, not selfishness.

In response to Samson's prayer, God answered. We must ask ourselves why? Why would God respond to this seemingly unrighteous prayer? Well, we have to remember the purpose of Samson's life. He was called before birth to begin Israel's deliverance from the Philistines. His prayer is in line with that calling. The God of Samson is the same God we serve. However, Samson's historical situation is not the same as ours. God used this man in His work to bring Israel back to Himself. Samson's actions that day were one step forward in that process. And in his actions, we see a **Path to Recognition**. Verse 31 tells us that Samson's family honored him after his death. His ignoble life had finally accomplished something noble.

Summarize and Transition: It appears that God saw something in Samson that is hidden from us in this passage. Not only is the man honored by his family and the nation, but he is honored by God as well. The writer of Hebrews 11:32-34 speaks of his faith. We can look at Samson's last act and understand that it is flawed, but we can also see that he had faith in the one who gave him strength.

CONCLUDE

Samson is an object lesson to help us understand Israel. He is also an object lesson to help us understand the straying believer. He, however, should not be an example for how we should live our lives. Samson was driven by his appetites. We should hunger and thirst for righteousness. Samson shunned the call of God to rescue the people. We should answer God's call to seek the lost. Lastly, Samson brought shame on the name of the Lord. We should do all we can to bring Him honor through our faithful living.