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What's the first thing you think of when you hear the name "Samson"? For most people, it's probably two things: **1.) Long hair** or **2.) Strength**, strength probably the more prevalent of the two. In fact, a friend recently told me that if he ever has a son, he wouldn't name him Samson, because that would put too much pressure on him to be ripped! A scrawny guy named Samson just seems wrong!

And that makes sense, because many of the Bible accounts of Samson focus on his great strength! But today, and in this sermon series, we won't just marvel at how strong Samson was. I also want to focus on how weak Samson was. Instead of putting Samson on a pedestal, let's put God up on the pedestal for the way he powerfully uses weak, sinful, flawed, ordinary people to carry out his extraordinary work—people like Samson; like us. I want you to see yourself in Samson, because although none of us possess the miraculous strength Samson did, we all possess Samson's weaknesses.

Samson was one of what are called God's "judges." After the Israelites began settling into the Promised Land, the wheels fell off. For about 300 years around the 1300s B.C., the Israelites started a pattern.

First, they'd fall into sin by worshiping the false gods of their unbelieving neighbors. Then, to lead the Israelites to repentance, God would allow an enemy to enslave and oppress his people. Eventually, the Israelites would call on God for help. Then, God would raise up a "judge," a leader to deliver Israel from their enemies. Finally, with peace restored, the Israelites would again serve God...for a time, until they started the cycle over. Samson is one of the most recognized Judges God used to deliver Israel.

Before Samson was even born, God had chosen him for that purpose. Appearing to Samson's mother, who at the time was a sterile, childless woman, the Angel of the LORD revealed, ***"You are going to conceive and have a son...The boy is to be a Nazarite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."***

What exactly is a Nazarite? From the Hebrew word meaning "separated" or "dedicated," a Nazarite was a person dedicated to God for a special purpose. Since Nazarites were to be set apart, God gave specific rules and restrictions for Nazarites to follow. A Nazarite couldn't drink wine or fermented drinks or eat grapes. They couldn't cut their hair, hence why we associate long hair with Samson. And finally, Nazarites couldn't go near dead bodies. As a Nazarite, dedicated to serving God, Samson had to follow these rules for life.

Our sermon text for this morning is our first glimpse into Samson's adult life. Let's just say he doesn't get off to a strong start. ***Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. He said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife."*** We can all agree, it's a bad decision to marry someone you've literally only seen once. But what's worse, God had expressly forbidden the Israelites from intermarrying with unbelieving nations, because he knew those unbelieving nations would lead his people into idolatry.

Samson's parents tried to dissuade him, but Samson replied, ***"Get her for me. She's the right one for me."*** In Hebrew, Samson literally says, ***"She's right in my eyes."*** That's pretty appropriate, because Samson was self-focused and self-reliant. No matter what God said, Samson basically did whatever was right in his own eyes!

That was Samson's attitude as he traveled back to Timnah to make wedding arrangements, when ***"suddenly a young lion came roaring toward [Samson]. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands."*** Can you imagine how ridiculously strong you'd have to be to rip a lion

apart? However, don't miss where Samson's miraculous strength comes from. Every time Samson performs some amazing feat of strength, the Bible always explains, ***"The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him."*** It was God who made Samson so strong, not Samson.

And yet, did self-focused, self-reliant Samson understand that? Just before our sermon text, we're told, ***"The Spirit of the LORD began to stir [Samson] while he was in Mahaneh Dan."*** Was this the first time God had given Samson such great strength? Or had he experienced it before? Combine Samson's understanding of God's purpose for him with the kind of strength Samson possessed, and you find a guy who was pretty self-reliant. But that strength led him to think he didn't need God, and that ultimately made the strong man weak.

A while later, traveling back to Timnah for the wedding ceremony, Samson discovered that inside the carcass of the lion he killed was a swarm of bees and honey. Scraping some out, he ate it, and gave some to his parents as they traveled along. That might not seem like a big deal, but Nazarites weren't even supposed to go near dead bodies, let alone eat things out of them! But Samson didn't tell anyone. Samson had broken his Nazarite vow, but he didn't confess it, nor does he show any signs of repentance. He figured no one knew.

And in this man who saw no need to repent, we can see ourselves, can't we? The things we do when we're alone; the words when say behind others' backs, or behind our keyboards; the perceived secrecy of the thoughts of our minds. We can try to build an illusion of strength by keeping our sins hidden from others, and refusing to confess them. But deep down, we know better. We're all too aware of our weaknesses, and none are hidden from God!

Sadly, Samson doesn't get any better as this account continues. Samson throws the customary week-long marriage feast, but this feast was more than just food. The Philistines were infamous for their massive beer consumption. Although it's not explicitly stated, we can pretty safely assume, based on Samson's attitude about the other terms of his Nazarite vow, and his reaction to the rest of God's commands, that he also consumed the "strong drink" God had prohibited. In just this one chapter, Samson broke 2 out of the 3 aspects of the Nazarite vow. And spoiler alert, he'll break #3 next week.

Let's face it. Samson does and says things here that make us really uncomfortable. He doesn't act like we'd expect a bible hero to act. He disobeys God's commands more often than he obeys. He's self-reliant, rather than reliant on God. Samson doesn't come off as the strong, godly hero, but more like an anti-hero.

Despite the amazing physical strength the Spirit gave Samson, he was a spiritual weakling. For a man whose life was dedicated to serving God, Samson was usually more dedicated to serving himself.

And yet, when I look at Samson, I see... me. I see his weaknesses in my life. The lust, the entitlement, the pride and self-reliance, the aversion to God's commands. Like Samson, I too am the spiritual weakling.

I remember in college while studying for pastoral ministry, that for a stretch of time, I got away from going to church. What a ridiculous thought, right? A guy studying to dedicate his life to serving God—failing to worship and prioritize God. It took a friend pointing out the ridiculous nature of my sin to snap me out of that sinful rut I'd gotten into.

And yet, that spiritual weakness didn't disappear after college. Although I'm not skipping church anymore, at times I act like I'm dedicated to serving myself in ministry, instead of God; serving myself in my family, instead of God; serving myself in my heart, instead of God.

And even if you aren't in ministry, as a Christian, your life is also dedicated to God. Do you serve him? Or serve yourself? Do you listen to him? Or listen to yourself? Do you look to him for your strength? Or are you self-reliant and self-focused?

Samson was weak, broken, sinful. My friends, so are we. And yet, in love God still sent his Spirit powerfully on you, to bring you to faith, and to empower you to serve God with your life! Amazingly, as we'll see in the next few weeks, although Samson is far from a humble godly hero, God still uses that weak, broken, sinful man to carry out his purposes. That's one of the extraordinary things about God. He uses weak, sinful, undeserving, ordinary people like you, me, and Samson to carry out his will!

After a riddle, a wager, a nagging wife, and 30 sets of clothes, ***"The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon [Samson],"*** moving Samson to take the first step to carry out God's purposes to deliver his people from the Philistines. When Samson was connected to God in his life, he was unstoppably powerful. But when he was self-reliant, and self-focused, he was spiritually weak. And the same is true of us. Like branches on the vine, we too can only live and produce fruit, if we, the branches, stay connected to Christ, our Vine!

Sometimes, being connected to Christ makes us look outwardly weak. But in reality, that's when we're strongest. When we can recognize our lack of power, and instead rely on Christ, who is all-powerful. That's what Paul was talking about when he said, ***"I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."***

I was reminded of that by Brandt Jean this week. Brandt is the 18-year old brother of Botham Jean, who was killed by a Dallas police officer when she went into the wrong apartment and mistook him as an intruder. At the officer, Amber Guyger's sentencing, Brandt said to his brother's killer, ***"I forgive you. I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you. I love you just like anyone else. Give your life to Christ."*** Then he gave her a hug.

Some might view that as weakness, right? A strong person would get revenge, spew hate, tell her he hopes she rots in prison. But what that young man said was powerful, because it was full of love and forgiveness. That's not power that comes naturally from people. There's a reason that speech was on every news outlet, because it was so powerfully uncommon from what we'd expect. That's the kind of power that only comes from a person who relies on Christ for strength, and not themselves.

It's OK to think about strength when you think about Samson. But remember whose strength it really was. And remember who it is that is your strength!