From before his birth, Samson was to be set apart for God’s use. But his unbridled lust, arrogant pride, and violent temper corrupted his character and ruined his reputation. Even a seemingly solemn, happy occasion like his wedding turned into a rage-fueled bloodbath.

Samson’s nightmarish wedding likely occurred in early springtime. After sulking at home for a while, he decided to return to his wife around the time of the wheat harvest. But unknown to Samson, his Philistine father-in-law, who assumed the angry groom would never return, had given his daughter away to someone else (Judges 14:20).

Samson showed up at his wife’s house with a young goat, apparently a meager peace offering he hoped would appease the family agitated by the wedding debacle. To his surprise, he was met at the door only by his father-in-law, who refused to let him in. Thoughts of reconciliation turned to rage as Samson heard his father-in-law say the unthinkable: “I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead” (Judges 15:2).

The betrayed bridegroom was understandably furious, and again he took out his anger on the Philistines. In an incredible feat of superhuman ability, Samson captured three hundred “foxes” and tied their tails together to create one hundred fifty yelping pairs. The Hebrew word for fox can also be translated jackal. It is likely that jackals were the actual animals involved in this episode since they were more plentiful than foxes in ancient Israel. Having secured the coyote-like creatures together, Samson attached torches to their tails, lit the torches on fire, and sent them frantically zigzagging through the nearby grain fields. With kindled wrath, he used them to ignite the Philistine crops in a blaze that destroyed everything in its path, from grain fields to vineyards to olive groves (Judges 15:5).

When they learned why he had started the fires, the Philistines blamed Samson’s former in-laws. They retaliated by burning both his former wife and father-in-law to death (Judges 15:6). Ironically, in order to avoid death earlier, Samson’s wife had begged him to reveal the meaning of his riddle to her so she could tell the thirty Philistines at the wedding. Yet by doing that, she set in motion a series of events that ended with the very outcome she had desperately tried to avoid—her own death.

Upon hearing the news of his wife’s brutal execution, Samson again became enraged. He accepted no blame for the circumstances leading to her death. Instead, he launched further vengeance against the Philistines. According to Judges 15:8, “he struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.” Here is the providence of God and the fulfillment of divine purpose in a most unimaginable manner. The Lord was using Samson’s self-centered rage and revenge to defeat the Philistines.

Escaping Arrest
With their fields scorched and their kinsmen slain, the Philistines had enough; they gathered an army and came looking for Samson. The men of Judah saw them approaching and asked, “Why have you come up against us?” The Philistine answer was simple and direct, “We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us” (Judges 15:10).

Samson’s reputation was such that even his fellow Israelites were afraid of him. Accordingly, the men of Judah sent their own army of three thousand men to find him and bring him back to the Philistines. When they located Samson, they asked him, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?” Samson’s response, full of self-vindication, was nearly identical to what the Philistines had said just a short time before, “As they did to me, so I have done to them” (Judges 15:11).

An awkward and tense standoff ensued, as the Israelite soldiers announced that they had come to arrest Samson and deliver him to the Philistines. The three thousand men against him posed no threat to Samson. He knew they had been coerced to come after him. So after making them swear that they would not kill him, Samson agreed to give himself up and go quietly. To prevent his escape, the soldiers bound him with two new ropes.

As the cohort returned to deliver Samson to his enemies, “the Philistines shouted as they met him. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands” (Judges 15:14). Snapping away the new ropes, Samson faced his attackers like a real-life superhero. He picked up the nearest object he could find to use as a weapon—the jawbone of a donkey lying on the ground—and ran to confront his enemies.

The Israelite soldiers watched in shock as their former captive single-handedly decimated the army of oppressors. One can hardly imagine the chaos and carnage of that conflict, as Samson slaughtered a thousand of his enemies by himself, with nothing but a nine-inch jawbone. When the battle was over and any surviving Philistines had fled, Samson piled the bodies of his slain adversaries in a heap, and called the place “Ramath Lehi” which means “Jawbone Hill.”

Samson, claiming the credit for himself, composed a song to celebrate his victory (Judges 15:16). He was vividly reminded very soon, however, of the fact that God was the source of his strength. Exhausted from the battle, Samson became exceedingly thirsty—to the point of death. He cried out to the Lord in desperation, “You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” (Judges 15:18).

In spite of Samson’s arrogant presumption, he bowed to the reality that “You [God] have given this great deliverance.” God responded, answering his prayer by miraculously bringing water from a rock. In the same way that the Lord delivered the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness during the days of Moses (Exodus 17:6), He now delivered Samson from life-threatening dehydration. For the first time in Samson’s life, he experienced severe physical weakness and cried out to the Lord for help. He would have to do so again at the end of his life.

After recounting this episode, the biblical text states that Samson “judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines” (Judges 15:20). For two decades, under his protection, the Israelites enjoyed
a time of reprieve. Although the Philistines would continue to trouble Israel long after Samson’s lifetime, he had broken the back of their dominance. And in his death he struck them with the final, fatal blow.

**Fatal Attraction**

The closing drama of Samson’s life features a man who completely failed to advance from the reckless impulsiveness of his youth. The final chapter began when, as before, he fell for a Philistine woman. But even before he met Delilah, the text notes that he visited a prostitute in Gaza (Judges 16:1–3). While he was with her, the men of Gaza were informed and attempted to capture him. Escaping their effort, Samson uprooted the heavy city gates and carried them (bars and all) on his shoulders to the hills of Hebron, thirty-eight miles away!

The sordid episode in Gaza highlighted both Samson’s superhuman strength and his super-sinful weakness. His fatal attraction to pagan women was not only the pattern of his life, but proved to be the path to his death. If Samson were Superman, his own sinful desires were his kryptonite. He could kill a lion, but not his lust. He could break new ropes, but not old habits. He could defeat armies of Philistine soldiers, but not his own flesh. He could carry away the gates of a city but allowed himself to be carried away when lost in passion.

When Samson fixed his lust on Delilah, disaster was inevitable. And the path to that disaster was familiar. Just as Samson’s wife had been coerced by the Philistines to learn the answer to her husband’s riddle, so Delilah was enticed to discover the secret of Samson’s strength. Rather than a threat, as in the first case, this time the Philistine rulers offered Delilah an exorbitant amount of money—fifty-five hundred shekels of silver. Biblical scholars have noted that the average yearly wage for a laborer was only ten silver shekels, making this offer five hundred fifty times that amount! If we compared that to wages of $50,000 today, the cash reward would have been almost $30 million. No amount was too high to eliminate their deadly enemy.

With a fortune at stake, Delilah was happy to seduce her Hebrew boyfriend. She employed the same tactics that Samson’s wife had used two decades earlier—manipulating him by complaining that he did not truly love her (Judges 16:15). Delilah’s probing questions were anything but subtle: “Please tell me where your great strength is and how you may be bound to afflict you” (Judges 16:6). And her repeated attempts to trap Samson (in vv. 8, 10, and 14) were a dead giveaway as to the nature of her intentions. Perhaps Samson initially found the game of cat and mouse to be amusing. But eventually Delilah’s persistence melted his resolve and he succumbed and told her the truth about his strength.

It came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, “A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I will become weak and be like any other man.” (Judges 16:16-17)

Delilah wasted no time. She coaxed Samson to sleep and called for a local barber (v. 19). When the Philistine guards arrived to apprehend him, Samson was helpless. The harrowing words of the text, “he did not know that the Lord had departed from him,” (v. 20) express the shock and dismay that Samson suddenly felt. Never before had he been unable to overpower all enemies; never again would he escape from their custody.
Still, God Himself would overpower Samson’s defeat to bring Israel victory. We’ll look at that part of the story next time.

(Adapted from *Twelve Unlikely Heroes*)

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