Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Gideon and Samson: Stories of Weakness and Strength
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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Welcome to all of you as we gather together this evening to continue our series in unlikely heroes. For those of you who are visiting with us, this will all and much more be contained in a book called *Unlikely Heroes* which will be available, I think, in August or in September. But we don't want to just have the book; we want to share these amazing accounts of people that God used that appear on the surface to be very unlikely as to their usefulness. And I've often said that God uses unlikely people, He uses flawed people, He uses failing people, He uses sinful people, because if He didn't, He wouldn't have any people to use. So we hear another account of how God uses for His own purposes and His own plans those who on the surface appear very, very unlikely.

In Hebrews chapter 11 and verses 32 to 34, we read these familiar words, "And what more shall I say for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Samson who through faith subdued Kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quench the violence of fire, escape the edge of the sword, and out of weakness we're made strong.

Now there are many more who would be included in that list, but the book of Hebrews does mention Gideon and Samson. And they are two of the most fascinating and unique, if not even bizarre characters in holy Scripture. Gideon and Samson are brought together in our discussion tonight because they are stories of weakness and strength. Gideon goes from weakness to strength; and Samson goes from strength to weakness. But in both cases, they are useful to God in very, very important ways.

Now both of these men, Gideon and Samson, are identified in the Bible as judges, judges. In fact, the story about them is in the book called Judges, and you might want to turn to that book right now because that is where we're going to be spending our time, the book of Judges.

When we talk about a judge, we immediately have images of the courtroom in our mind, don't we? We think about a bench, we think about a court of Law, somebody who is instructing jurors, somebody who is hearing cases, who is working with attorneys, ensuring defendants have a fair trial when they've been accused, and promises to uphold the law of the land. We have that view of a judge, and rightly so.

But that is nothing at all like the judges in the biblical book of Judges. So we need to divorce ourselves from that. And I suppose we could wish that the Hebrew word translated judges had been

translated a different way. There were some options, but we had the word judges, so we just have to redefine it a little bit.

In the Old Testament, in the history of Israel, after the time of Moses; and we went through the amazing story of Moses from the vantage point of his sister, Miriam. But after the time of Moses and after the time of Joshua who led the people of Israel into the land of promise after their four centuries plus of captivity in Egypt, but after the time of Moses and Joshua, but before the reign of the kings, beginning with Saul and then David and then Solomon, and then the divided kingdom. So in that window, in that period of history between Joshua and Saul, is a period that the Bible identifies as the period of the judges, the judges.

The Hebrew term that is rendered “judge” can be rendered “judge,” but it is a word actually that means deliverer, deliverer. The kind of judge that we’re talking about here was someone who was chosen by God to protect, to preserve, and to deliver or rescue Israel from its enemies. When the nation of Israel went into the land of Canaan, you, of course, know that it was it was occupied. It had been promised to them by God, but it was occupied by many different nations. Five of them are identified in the book of Judges as being the most formidable and the most potentially dangerous nations that Israel would need to confront.

In order for them to survive in that land, they would have to be delivered from the power, the devastating potential power of these resident enemies. So the judges aren’t legal experts; they aren’t lawyers who were elevated because they were better than the rest. They really were known for their military feats. They were known for their ability to, by the power of God, conquer and protect--conquer the enemies and protect the people of Israel. That is the way we are to understand the judges. They are saviors; they are deliverers; they are warriors. They do some governing and some leading and some directing, but more like the general of an army than any politician or monarch. That is to say, they have leadership over the troops at the point of conflict, at the point of protection, at the point of battle. They’re not national judges, as if appointed to rule the nation in some way. They are simply men. And in one case a woman by the name of Deborah is raised up for a period of time to be a deliverer in Israel--who are used by God to ensure the perpetuity of Israel. God made a promise to preserve His nation, and through that nation to bless the world, and through that nation to bring the seed who would be the Messiah. God made that promise. God will fulfill that promise even through the history of an apostate, unbelieving nation--God keeps His Word. The story of the judges is a story of God’s protection of a very wicked, sinful people--the people of Israel. But God keeps His promise.

The good news is, if God keeps His promise to preserve the people of Israel who are ungodly, who are disobedient, who are rebellious, we can be certain that God will keep His promise to those who are His own redeemed, who are faithful and who are obedient to Him.

This then is the story of God's faithfulness to promises made to Abraham about the perpetuity of His people Israel. The book of Joshua then ends with the Israelites. They've just entered the Promised Land. And they are pledging to the Lord, at the end of the book of Joshua, that they're going to do everything that the Lord asks of them, everything the Lord wants them to do, they're going to do it. Joshua 24:24, the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and we will obey His voice." That's what we're going to do. We're going to be a faithful people to God who has brought us out of captivity through 40 years in the wilderness and now into the Promised Land in marvelous ways, including the amazing story of Jericho.

Now years earlier, Moses had instructed the people when they were on the edge of going into the land that if they served the Lord faithfully, they would be blessed. And if they did not serve the Lord faithfully, they would be severely punished. So I need to remind you of what the Lord said through Moses in Deuteronomy 30, verses 15 to 18. Here's the word from the Lord, to that people as they stand on the brink before they went into the land: "See, I've set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His commandments, His statutes and His judgments that you may live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear and are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish, you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess."

So, at the very point in which they are going into the land before they actually arrive, they are warned. And initially they come back with the response that I read you from Joshua 24:24, "We will serve the Lord and we will obey Your Word." And the good news is, according to the opening of Judges, Judges chapter 2 and verse 7, is a good word. We might be encouraged by this. "That generation of people serve the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel." All that generation that saw what God did, all that generation that was part of the miraculous wandering in the wilderness and the entrance into the land served the Lord faithfully. But that generation died off and another generation appeared.

The next generation committed the ultimate evil in God's sight. The next generation began to worship idols. And there were idols all over the place in the land of Canaan, which is why God had instructed them, when you go into the land, put the nations out, conquer them, eliminate them, drive the idolatrous Canaanites and all their tribes and people groups, drive them completely out of the Promised Land. God commanded them to do that for the sake of their own preservation. They did not do that. Consequently they were living shoulder to shoulder and side by side with idolatrous, immoral, pagan neighbors. And those neighbors had a terribly negative effect on Israel. Israel fell into all kinds of forms of idolatry by the influence of those pagan neighbors. They are warned in the second chapter of Judges not to make alliances with these pagans. They did make alliances with those pagans, both

formal and informal.

And so the book of Judges then records what happens over a period of 350 years of living side by side by with idolaters. The book of Judges records centuries of Israel's repeated failure to obey God, to honor God. It is the old adage of history repeating itself, generation after generation after generation. To put it simply, it was a cycle that went like this: rebellion, punishment, deliverance; rebellion, punishment, deliverance. And in the book of Judges, that happens seven times, seven times. It happens to every generation. Over and over Israel falls away from the Lord; they are punished by the Lord. And the agency of that punishment are the enemies that are surrounding them. They come and oppress them. They are the agent of God's judgment. In the midst of that judgment, they desperately cry out to God and God raises up a deliverer. And that deliverer comes, a gracious gift from God to deliver His people. That is the story of the book of Judges. You see it laid out in chapter 2, verse 18, when the Lord raised up judges for them. The Lord was with the judge, or the deliverer, and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the deliverer, for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, or the deliverer died, they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers in following other gods to serve them and bowed to them.

They did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and here it goes again. And so comes the punishment again until they cry out in some kind of penitence for a deliverer, one cycle after another--a time of peace brought by the deliverer, until a new generation rises, forgets the Lord, becomes idolatrous, and the whole story of punishment is repeated.

During those four centuries, there are fourteen judges identified, fourteen of them. They are at different times strung out over that period of time, and they are in different locations. As I said, they don't rule the nation. They're not political leaders. They're not monarchs. They're simply generals, if you will, of a sort who lead at the point of conflict, at the point of battle, at the point of defending the nation from its disastrous enemies coming to attack and to kill. They were appointed not by men. They weren't voted on. They didn't get their position by inheritance. They didn't inherit it from their family. They didn't get it by conquest. They didn't move up the military ranks. There was no man-made selection whatsoever. They were not limited to a special time. They were not limited to a term. They are random as to their identity and as to their location and as to their time--random from the perspective of the viewer, not from God's perspective. He raised them up at the point that He wanted them to rescue Israel from His own judgment through the nations.

Now you will remember the names of the judges. In case you will remember some of them, here are the rest, here are the judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, Samson, Eli, and Samuel. The Lord raised up these fourteen people, and by the way, Deborah was accompanied by a man named Barak, who is also mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11.

These were human deliverers the Lord raised up to maintain His covenant faithfulness with Abraham so that the Jews were not wiped out. It is an act of faithfulness on God's part, as well as an act of compassion and an act of grace against the backdrop, the horribly black backdrop of pitiful human compromise and twisted acts of sin and idolatry.

There is sort of a characterization of the whole period given in the last verse of Judges. The last verse of Judges, 21:25, says this: "In those days there was no king in Israel." I told you this was between the time of Moses and Joshua and Saul and David. There was no king. And then this, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

This is a bizarre time when people are, in a sense, running amuck. There's no uniform, unilateral control system. You would say, "Why would God allow that?" Because it should have been a theocracy. God was the reigning king. God was the rightful king, and had they obeyed God, they would have had the blessing God had promised in Deuteronomy 30. But they did not, and so it is an epoch history of chaos and bizarre, complex scenarios of behavior and conduct.

Two of the men among those fourteen are Gideon and Samson. If I remember right, Gideon is the sixth in the line and Samson would be number 12. So they're separated by some years. These are men with serious faults, serious flaws. They probably would have been rejected for leadership by any committed if a committee had been given the responsibility to pick someone. They had serious faults.

Gideon was too weak to be of any use. And Samson was too strong to be of any use. Gideon didn't believe that he could accomplish anything, and Samson believed he could accomplish anything. Neither of those kinds of people make very good leaders. The man who feels that he has nothing to offer and the man who feels that he has everything to offer, in either case, you would avoid such.

Well let's begin by looking at Gideon, and we'll try to tell the story of Gideon, followed by the story of Samson. Judges 6, all right? Go to the sixth chapter of Judges; let's pick up the story of Gideon. I'm just trying to whet your appetite a little bit, to dig into these portions of Scripture and read for yourself.

Sufficient to say at the very beginning was the characterization of Israel, chapter 6, verse 1: "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord gave them into the hands of the Midianites for seven years."

For seven years they were bordered by the Midianites, by the Amalekites, by Midian and Amalek, and for seven years there had been this constant terrorizing onslaught coming from these two groups of people. They raided Israel's land. They destroyed their crops. They stole their livestock. They killed people. They were so formidable a threat that the people wound up hiding from them, hiding from them. They would hide in the mountains; they would hide in the caves. They would have to do their almost daily work in some hidden place because they would be raided by these people. And this

perpetual dread had gone on for seven years.

Finally they cry out to God for help. “We need help.” And help comes--chapter 6, verse 11, “The angel of the Lord came.” That’s help; that’s help at the highest level. The Lord selects a man named Gideon to be the answer to deliver Israel from the Midianites and the Amalekites. And the Lord appears to Gideon in a bizarre place. He is beating out wheat in the winepress. What? A winepress is an enclosed area, a deep pit where you stamp out grapes. You don’t beat wheat in a winepress because you beat wheat on a hilltop, on an open area because the winnowing is to throw it in the air and let the wind drive the chaff away. What is he doing trying to sift wheat in a winepress?

He’s doing it in order to save it from the Midianites. They are so constantly a terrorizing potential that he doesn’t even want to do his work where he can be seen or he will be raided and they will steal his wheat. So he goes down into this winepress and tries to do his work, fearing enemy marauders who are always on the horizon trying to spot him, and come, and if need be kill him and take away his wheat.

As he works in the humdrum fervency and fear in this place, an astonishing event happens. The angel of the Lord appears to him. Whenever you see an appearance of the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, he appears as a man. He appears as a man. He is identified by the writer of Scripture as the angel of the Lord. But Gideon would have seen him as a man, and all of a sudden, a man appears in the winepress.

We know that the angel of the Lord appears as a man because there is not the shock and the panic that would happen if the angel of the Lord appeared as the heavenly entity, the angel of the Lord. And since the angel of the Lord is God, is a preincarnate appearance of Christ, if He were to appear in full glory, there would be terror, the kind of terror experienced by Ezekiel, and the kind of terror experienced by Isaiah when he saw the Lord, or when John on the island of Patmos had a vision of the glorified Christ.

Gideon doesn’t panic. He’s not terrified. He doesn’t fall into traumatic sleep. Instead, he has a conversation because the angel of the Lord appears as a man. What startled him wasn’t the visual of the angel. What startled him was the fact that this man was there in this winepress. In verse 12, “The angel of the Lord who appeared to him, said to him, ‘The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.’”

Now that surely got a snicker out of him, “O valiant warrior.” Aren’t you a valiant warrior? You coward, you won’t even winnow wheat on a hilltop. You’re so afraid of the Midianites and the Amalekites that you’re trying to do a job that can’t be done in a pit, O mighty man of valor. The sarcasm. It’s nice to know that even the angel of the Lord can be sarcastic.

Well, Gideon doesn't get it, so he says in verse 13, "O my Lord, if the Lord is with us"...He just said the Lord is with you..."if the Lord is with us"--then why has this all happened to us and where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about? You know, the miracles of Egypt, the plagues, the miracles of the parting of the sea, the miracles of water out of the rock, the miracles of manna? Where are the miracles? Now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian. If the Lord is with us, something isn't right here.

And then he says in verse 15, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the weakest in my father's house?" This is not a man with great faith. This is no noble warrior. This is no valiant, courageous soldier. This is a man of weakness; yet the angel calls him a man of valor, not because of what he was, but it's what he would become. And in verse 16, "The angel of the Lord says, 'Surely I shall be with you and you will defeat the Midianites as one man.'" In other words, collectively, all of them as one, you will defeat.

Here then is what God does through the Judges, he raises up a judge at the time when the attacks have gone as far as they can go and the people have begun to cry out for God to intervene. The Lord comes; He comes on this faithless coward, and He tells him He's going to accomplish these incredible feats of bravery and He's going to deliver Israel and he's going to literally eliminate Midian as an enemy, collectively.

Well, this is a doubting coward, so he demands a sign, a sign from God. In verse 21 the Lord graciously gives him a sign, you can kind of follow along in the text; I won't read all of it to you. He offers bread and meat to his heavenly visitor because again he's talking to a man, and he offers bread and meat and it's consumed with fire. And then the man disappears. That's a sign. That's a sign.

It is then, according to verses 22 and 23, that Gideon gets it. We read, "Now Gideon perceived that He was the angel of the Lord." So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God, I've seen the angel of the Lord face to face." Then the Lord said to him, "Peace be with you, do not fear, you shall not die." Whenever anybody has a vision of God, the fear is that they will die. It was Gideon's fear. It was Isaiah's fear. It is always the fear of any sinner when the sinner sees God. He knows God sees him, and that is the trauma of holiness. If I see God in all His glory, He sees me in all my sin. I cannot survive this. And so he is told, "Peace be with you, do not fear, you shall not die."

All the way to biblical evidence indicates this is the second person of the Trinity, a preincarnate appearance of Christ called a Christophany; that's another study. But the angel's appearances through Israel's history are strong testimony, listen, to the Old Testament evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ. And passages like Isaiah 9:6 and Daniel 7:13 provide that strong Old Testament evidence of His deity.

So that night, the preincarnate Christ, the second member of the Trinity, the Lord Himself, came to Gideon and He gives him some instruction, verse 27. He gives him instruction and He tells him to tear down an altar to Baal, which is near his father's house. They should have done that already. The reason they were getting attacked was because they weren't dealing with idolatry. So He tells him to tear down this altar to Baal near his father's house. He is frightened, but according to verse 27, Gideon took men from among his servants, did as the Lord said to him 'cause he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day; he did it by night. He's a coward. He gets ten men in the middle of the night when nobody can see, and he sneaks in and he destroys the altar. Courage was an unfamiliar virtue to Gideon; nevertheless he does what he's told because he knows he's had a divine visitor.

When he hears that the Midianite invaders have returned, Gideon summons the men of Israel to fight and the story becomes very, very interesting. He destroys the altar and, of course, the Midianites eventually come back, and he calls the men of Israel. Now he's starting to take on the responsibility of leadership and so he says, "We need to fight." And this is a volunteer army, 32,000 men respond, 32,000 warriors. And Gideon is still afraid.

Look at verses 36 to 40, "Gideon says to God, 'If You will deliver Israel through me as You have spoken,'" and he's going to ask for another sign. This is a silly thing, but this is him. "'I'll put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor, if there's dew on the floor only and it's dry on the ground, I'll know that You will deliver Israel through me as You have spoken.' And it was so. And he arose early the next morning, squeezed the fleece, drained the dew from the fleece a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Don't let Your anger burn against me, could You just do one more?'" Let's do the opposite of this. Let me make the test once more with the fleece; let it be dry only on the fleece and let there be dew on the ground. "And God did that night that very thing and it was dry only on the fleece and dew was on all the ground." His faith is so faltering; he's such a coward; he's so fearful; he's so afraid. And the Lord consents to his request.

Now look, there's nothing noble about this; this is doubt. Gideon's action is not the pattern for believers to follow. We don't test the Lord. We don't attempt to ascertain the validity of His Word by asking Him--listen--for miraculous confirmation. We accept His Word, do we not? We accept His Word. We live by believing His Word, obeying His Word.

"The Lord had said to Gideon, 'You will be victorious over the Midianites and they will flee as one unit.'" The revelation had been sufficient; he didn't need to have God do all of these things to validate what He had said. God graciously condescends to his doubt and does them.

Once these signs have come, he has a little more faith and so he collects his army of 32,000 men to face the Midianites. No doubt they had some men who worked out a battle strategy; he was a farmer,

after all. But he is going to be the general of this occasion because God is going to put him in that position and mightily strengthen him. God has a different strategy, however. I don't know what they planned, we don't know; it's not revealed in Scripture. But they are camped across the valley from their enemies. I've been in that very location in Israel, the scene is vivid in my mind--the valley between where Gideon and his men were and where the Midianites were.

The Lord, however, comes to Gideon, now we get into chapter 7. Let's look at verses 2 and 3. "The Lord said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands.'" You have too many soldiers. What? You have too many soldiers. "Lest Israel claim glory for itself against me saying my own hand has saved me." If you win this battle, you're going to think it's because you had so many soldiers.

"Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people and say this, 'Whoever is fearful and afraid, go home, go back, depart at once from Mount Gilead." Listen to this, 22,000 returned, 22,000. You say, "Why did they come in the first place?" Probably peer pressure. Father and his sons, brothers, uncles, relatives were all going and when they were given an out; 22,000 of them took it and 10,000 remained.

So now God is limiting the army down from 32,000 to 10,000. Downsize the army and get ready for victory. Strange strategy. Gideon would have been helped if he remembered the words of Moses who told the Israelites way back in Deuteronomy 20, "When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots, and people more numerous than you, don't be afraid for the Lord your God is with you." By reducing the size of the army, God had made it very clear that Israel would not win by conventional victory strategies. Only ten thousand warriors are left. God says that's too many. Judges chapter 7 and verse 4, "People are too many, bring them down to the water I'm going to test them there." Take them down to the water; and verse 5, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue as a dog laps, he shall set apart by himself, likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink."

Of the 10,000 remaining warriors, 9,700 of them knelt to drink, and so, in verse 7 of chapter 7, it says, "By the three hundred men who lapped, I will save you and deliver the Midianites into your hand, but all the other people go home. Send the ninety-seven hundred home." Again, this is a very strange way to divide the crowd.

What is the significance? I have no idea. I don't think it has any spiritual significance. It doesn't have any military significance. It doesn't have any kind of significance. That's all I can say. The point is not what that meant; the point is that there were 300 people who didn't do it the conventional way, and that's how God got down to the 300.

Well, Gideon is seriously terrified by this. His power has been reduced from 32,000 to 300. That's a significant kind of reduction. So a third time God gives him a sign to calm his cowardly nerves. Here's

what God tells him to do: Sneak into the Midianite camp. Whoa! That is asking a lot out of this guy, this farmer. Sneak into the Midianite camp. It's a frightening demand but he does it and he overhears two enemy soldiers, and they're having a conversation in the dark. First soldier tells about a dream, a dream he had the night before in which a loaf of bread--a weird dream--a loaf of bread rolls down into the Midianite camp and knocks down a tent. That's what he dreamt about. And the second soldier gives an interpretation. That's in chapter 7, verse 14. Here's the interpretation. This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel into his hand, God has delivered Midian and the whole camp. Wow! He's articulating his fear because, look, they were camped opposite each other and they probably knew well; they probably had enough reconnaissance to know that there were 32,000 people to start with and they must have heard that the leader of this is Gideon. And so they're living with normal military fear. Any soldier about to go into a combat in which his life is on the line may dream about the worst-case scenario.

After hearing the dream and the terror in the enemy soldier's voice, Gideon sneaks back and now begins to really believe the Lord is going to give them the victory. In the deep darkness of the night, Gideon's 300 men are divided into three companies of one hundred, one hundred and one hundred, and they're instructed, Here are their weapons, trumpets, torches and empty pitchers. And they are to surround the Midianite camp on the hills above them, blow the trumpets, smash the pitchers to the ground, and hold up the blazing torches in the night. And then they are to shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

And they did it. And with the cry, the silent stillness of the black night is shattered with blasting trumpets, smashing pitchers, blazing torches, yelling soldiers. And it appears to the Midianites as if every one of those 300 is at the head of an entire battalion. Beyond that, the noise, the shock in the middle of the night--they are dazed; they are disoriented; they are half asleep; and the Midianites panic and they think the soldiers are pouring into their camp. And in the depth of the darkness of the Midianite camp, unable to distinguish friend from enemy, they grab their swords and they slash the path of escape through their own army and they slaughter their own army.

Judges chapter 7, verses 21 and 22, "The whole army ran and cried out and fled. When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp." And that's what happened. The confused Midianite army destroyed itself. Some managed to escape. Gideon's 300 gave chase, called on other Israelites--maybe some of those who were starting on their way home--come back, join the chase. And the rest of Judges 7 and Judges 8 describes the victorious pursuit of Gideon—listen--and he and the three hundred had driven the Midianites out of Israel for good, for good.

As a result of this, the Israelites wanted to make Gideon king. But Gideon refused and said the Lord is the true King. All the credit goes to Him.

For the rest of the lifetime of Gideon there was peace for the Hebrew nation. In the words of Judges 8:28, “Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel so that they lifted their heads no more and the country was quiet for 40 years in the days of Gideon.” Amazing what God did with a weak coward, isn’t it? Amazing, amazing. A very weak man made strong in the Lord.

Now let’s talk about another very strong man who became weak--Samson, Samson--that wonderful superhero, the first superhero, a real superhero. Several generations go by, the cycle continues. And the Lord raises up another deliverer by the name of Samson, and he is a very unlikely man, very unlikely.

The beginning of the story of Samson is sort of like the beginning of the story of Gideon. Gideon and Samson, as far as personal dispositions are concerned, couldn’t have been more opposite. Gideon was timid and weak and cowardly. Samson was brash and reckless and indomitable. Gideon saw himself as inadequate. Samson saw himself as invincible.

Let’s go to the thirteenth chapter of Judges. Some time passes. The Israelites once again are under the constant marauding, attacking power of another enemy, the Philistines, the Philistines. And after years of oppression by the Philistines, which is the judgment of God upon their apostasy again, the angel of the Lord comes back. This preincarnate appearance of the Son of God comes to commission a new deliverer because the people are finally crying out to God to be delivered from the Philistines. The angel of the Lord shows up, in chapter 13, at a home, and there’s a husband and a wife there. The husband’s name is Manoah. He is the father of Samson. God comes to him in the form of the one called the angel of the Lord, just as He had come to Gideon. And Manoah makes an offering, realizing that he needs to honor the Lord for this visit.

Samson’s mother never had any children. She was barren before the visit of the angel of the Lord. And the angel of the Lord tells Manoah the father--he appears to Manoah--that he and his wife are going to have a son, and he’s going to be a very special son. And he tells Manoah to tell his wife some very, very important things.

During her pregnancy she is not to drink wine. She is not to eat anything ceremonially unclean. So she is to be detached from both wine and any unclean food. After the child is born, she is to treat him in a very unique way. She is never to cut his hair because Samson is going to be a Nazarite. “Nazarite” comes from the Hebrew word “to separate,” “to separate.” Numbers 6 specifies what the Nazarite vow was--no drinking of alcohol, no cutting of the hair, no touching of a dead body. This was to symbolize the life of separation, the life of commitment to holiness. Nazarite vow could be for a period of time, or it could be for life. In the case of Samson, it was for life.

Samson then, from his birth, was instructed by his parents that he was to live that Nazarite life. However, during his life he violated all three of those things. He touched a dead body in Judges 14. He drank at a wedding feast, also in Judges 14. And he allowed his head to be shaved in Judges 16. He didn't keep his vow, the symbolic part of his separation, and he certainly didn't live a separated life. He was a man driven by fleshly desires—illicit, unrestrained passion, particularly for pagan women. He had a stubborn will. He had irrational desires. He had a violent temper. He had a volatile, combustible personality. He had a wild disregard for the commandments of the Lord. And all of that combined to make his life a legendary tragedy, with the very center of that tragedy being his infatuation for Philistine women.

I guess you could say Samson is the only person who crashed his own wedding. In spite of Samson's flagrant sin for which he paid a horrific price, God still had a purpose for him when he got his spiritual act together at the very end. God used him to rescue Israel from Philistine oppression and aggression.

There were times in his life when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he had strength that was supernatural. And it was always related, every time in the Scripture. In the book of Judges we read about the exploits of Samson; they're always against the Philistines, always against the Philistines.

Well, it all began when as a young man he insisted on marrying a Philistine woman, a union expressly forbidden by God in Deuteronomy 7. But he's going to marry this Philistine woman, this idolatrous woman because he liked the way she looked. That's what it says in Judges 14; if you're in Judges, go to the fourteenth chapter. He saw the young woman; she was pleasing in his sight. What does that tell you?--that his interest was superficial. His parents tried to dissuade him from disobeying God. He ignored their counsel. He got his way. He decided to marry her.

So, he starts in Judges 14:6 to go to the town where she lived. And he's ambushed by a lion. That was not uncommon in ancient Israel. There were mountain lions there, as there are around here. The odds would normally favor the predatory cat, I think, with sharp claws and ferocious fangs. But this lion was about to be a victim. Judges 14:6, do you see it there? "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Samson. He tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand." Wow!

Several months later, Samson was passing that way again. He saw the lion's carcass there and went to investigate. I think he probably thought that it would be full of flies and maggots. Instead he found inside the lion a colony of bees had taken up residence, and they were producing honey. Avoiding the dead body was supposed to be consistent with his Nazarite vow, but he ignored that, reached into the carcass, collected honey and ate it as he walked along the road, even offering some to his parents.

The betrothal period came to an end and it was time for him to go marry this Philistine. The wedding preparations were made. They notified Samson and he traveled back to his fiancée's hometown for the feast, and the feast would last for seven days. It consisted among the Philistines primarily of a drunken brawl--seven days of drinking.

The biblical text tells us here in this chapter that Samson was joined by thirty Philistine young men. The bride had her bridesmaids, and these were the best man's attendants--thirty pagan, idolatrous Philistines were going to stand alongside Samson. They...I think they are more than participants in the wedding. I actually think they're most likely guards to watch Samson because he would be viewed with suspicion, his exploits being known to them.

In an effort to embarrass these thirty Philistines, show them up, Samson, who was likely drunk himself, challenged them to an impossible riddle about the lion killing and the honey. Remember that? Samson said to them, this is in Judges 14:12 to 14, "Let me pose a riddle to you. If you can correctly solve and explain it to me within seven days of the feast, I'll give you thirty linen garments, thirty changes of clothing. If you can't explain it to me, then you give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothing." And they said to him, "Pose your riddle that we may hear it." So he said to them, "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet." For three days they couldn't understand or explain the riddle. They get frustrated. They corner his wife in the middle of the marriage event. And they tell her, "If you don't tell us the answer to the riddle, we will burn you." They didn't mean with a curling iron. "We will burn you to death and then we will burn your father's house with your family in it. Tell us." And they relentlessly pled and she gave in.

So the Philistine men, the thirty men, come back, and they give the right answer. Samson is furious. He knows his new bride has betrayed him. He is so enraged that he travels to Ashkelon, a Philistine city, twenty-three miles away, as a very long cooling off period. He walks twenty-three miles. When he gets to Ashkelon, he kills thirty men and he strips them of all their clothing in order to make good on the promise to give clothing to thirty men. And he trudges back, still fuming after a fifty-mile round trip. And he is still so infuriated that he leaves the wedding and goes home.

That night wedding occurred in early springtime. After some months of sulking, he decided to return to his wife around the time of wheat harvest, chapter 14. He's going to go back now and make things right. Unknown to him, his father-in-law, who assumed the angry groom would never return, has given his daughter to someone else. She's already married to someone else. Verse 20 of 14, "Samson's wife was given to his companion who had been his friend." Samson shows up at the house, "I'm here. Can we pick up the wedding where we left it off?" He even shows up with a goat, like a peace offering. His father-in-law won't let him in. Reconciliation was his hope. Rage becomes his response. The father-in-law, chapter 15 verse 2, says, "I really thought you hated her, so I gave her to your friend. Can I give you her younger sister, please? You want her?'" This is some father. "Take her, she's even better. Please take her."

He’s so furious. He takes his anger out on the Philistines again. These are Philistines now. So he takes his anger out. He captures 300 foxes (the word is actually jackals), and jackals were more familiar--it’s kind of like a cross between a wolf and a coyote. They had a long tail. So he ties their tails together, and he’s got then 150 pairs--yelping pairs--of jackals. And he torches their tails, sets them on fire, and sends them frantically zig-zagging through the Philistines grain fields. And they set everything on fire, destroying everything in the path from grain fields to vineyards to olive groves.

When the Philistines find out what he’s done to their crops, they blame his father-in-law-to-be. So they go burn him, and they burn the woman that he was going to marry as well. So the very thing she tried to avoid--getting burned--in the first place ends up happening to her.

When he hears that they have burned the woman that he decided he really wanted to marry, who had already been married, he is angry again. This man is so out of control; it’s almost incomprehensible. He accepts no blame for the circumstances leading to her death and the death of the father-in-law. He is so angry with the Philistines. God uses his anger providentially to be the instrument of judgment continually on the Philistines. Judges 15:8, he attacked them hip and thigh with a great slaughter. Then he went down and hid in a cleft of the rock at Etam. “Hip and thigh” is simply a sort of a colloquial expression--top to bottom, a violent assault and attack; again his rage is amazing. But God uses his rage and his anger in judgment on the Philistines.

With their field scorched and their kinsmen slain, the Philistines had had enough, so they get an army. Go down into chapter 15 at about verse 10. They get an army and they come toward the men of Israel. And the men of Israel say, “What are you doing? Why are you coming at us?” And they said, “We’ve come to arrest Samson. We want Samson.” Chapter 15 verse 10, “And we want to do to him what he’s been doing to us. Give us Samson.” The threat is if you don’t give us Samson, we’re going to do to you what has been done to us. His reputation was such that even his fellow Israelites were afraid of him. So they say, “Okay, we’ll go get him.” And they take 3,000 men to get him--3,000 men to bring him back, to deliver him to the Philistines.

He agrees to go. I think out of curiosity and knowing the strength that he had, he was afraid of no one. In some meager effort, they decide to tie him up with some new rope. And they bring him up, tied up. Verse 14 of chapter 15, “The Philistines came shouting against him. Then the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands.” He snaps the new ropes; he faces his attacker like a superhero for sure. Picks up the nearest object lying on the ground, which happens to be the jawbone of a donkey lying on the ground, and he goes after them. With the jawbone of a donkey, he kills 1,000 of them--1,000 of them with a 9-inch jawbone. At least that’s what I’ve heard is the average donkey jawbone, ancient donkey jawbone.

And then he gets all the bodies. He not only kills them all but he piles them all in a heap and he calls the name of the place Ramath-Lehi, which means “Jawbone Hill.” And then he claims credit for himself, and in verse 16 of chapter 15 he sings a song to himself: “With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps. With the jawbone of a donkey, I have killed 1,000 men.”

Well, it was some kind of an effort to kill 1,000 men and pile up their bodies. So he’s exhausted. And verse 18, he’s very thirsty. And he calls to the Lord--he knows the truth--he called to the Lord and said, “You’ve given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant, and now You’re going to let me die of thirst and fall into the hands of these uncircumcised?” “I’m thirsty”; he’s thirsty to the point of death. He does acknowledge that God had given this great deliverance, and God does something wonderful, gives him water out of a rock to this very, very bizarre, complex, angry man.

But after all of this, there is the recognition: “God, You did this,” and verse 20, He judged Israel twenty years. He delivered “Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.”

The Lord delivered him from life-threatening dehydration. For the first time in his life he experienced weakness. There were no Philistines around, and he was weak when God didn’t give that power to him; and He only gave it to him when the Philistines were there. For two decades they were given a reprieve from the Philistines. Although they would continue to trouble Israel long after Samson’s lifetime, he broke the back of their early dominance. And in his death, he struck them with the final blow.

The closing drama of Samson’s life you all know. It is an incredible story. The final chapter begins when he does what he does; he starts looking at Philistine women again. And he finds one named Delilah; now we’re in chapter 16. And the story is even more sordid than that. Even before he met Delilah, the text says he visited a prostitute in Gaza. Prostitute? Sixteen: 1 to 3--while he was with the prostitute the men of Gaza were informed that he was there with a prostitute. Now remember, he has for twenty years been protecting Israel. And so they decided, “We’re going to capture him.” That was fruitless because the Spirit of God comes upon him. He uproots the city gates, the gates of the city of Gaza, carries them--the gates--on his shoulders to the hills of Hebron, thirty-eight miles away.

So you see his superhuman strength and his super-sinful weakness--fatal attraction was his life. He fixes his lust on this woman Delilah and disaster is inevitable. The Philistines put her in his path so that he sees her, he wants her. And it’s a plot. She’s going to get close to him and she’s going to find the secret to his strength.

They tell her, “We will give you 5,500 shekels of silver, 5,500 shekels of silver. Biblical scholars have said that the average yearly wage was ten shekels of silver. Fifty-five hundred shekels of silver. That’s 550 times that amount. That would be 550 years of wages, a fortune. No amount was too high

to eliminate the deadly enemy. She was well paid. With a fortune at stake, Delilah was happy to seduce this Hebrew strong man. She manipulates him and manipulates him over and over again in chapter 16, verse 6, 8, 10, 14. Finally, in Judges 16:16 and 17, “It came to pass when she pestered him daily with her words, pressed him so that his soul was vexed to death, he told her all his heart and said to her, ‘No razor has ever come upon my head for I’ve been a Nazarite to God from my mother’s womb. If I’m shaven, my strength will leave me and I’ll be weak and be like any other man.’”

He would be weak like any other man. So they say, “All right, we’re going after him.” They arrive; the Philistines arrive. He’s helpless, shorn of his hair. The harrowing words of the text are these, “He didn’t know that the Lord had departed from him.” He didn’t know. The breach of his life, the sin of his life reached the turning point with God. Long blinded by might, long blinded by arrogance, long blinded by lust, he is now blinded by his captors who, according to verse 21 of chapter 15, gouge out his eyes at Gaza. And he’s now a blind grinder, like a mule tied to a wooden grinder that goes in a circle, grinding grain--utterly humiliated.

The Philistines give credit for Samson’s demise to the god Dagon. They have a great celebration in the temple; they’re celebrating that Dagon has defeated the great Samson. The festivities escalate; the madness increases; they demand to see this man, this strong man, humiliated. Judges 16:25, “They say, ‘Go get him, bring him in, let’s mock him, let’s laugh at him.’” He stumbles blindly in to the scornful jests. He asks what seems like a small courtesy since he’s blind, and he’s only gone wherever they have forced him to go; and he says, “Could you put me in a place between the two central pillars so I can steady myself?” Archeological evidence indicates that the whole roof--literally, its power, its force--came down through those two main pillars and transferred to the foundation. From an engineering perspective, the weight of the perimeter would be drawn to those pillars and down to the foundation. Without those pillars, the entire roof would collapse and bring down the entire building.

Samson, without seeing anything, knew where he was as he felt the two pillars. And he asks the Lord for strength. In one climactic, self-sacrificing, heroic act, according to Judges 16, verses 27 and 28, “Now the temple was full of men and women.” All the lords of the Philistines were there, about 3,000 men and women on the roof watching while Samson performed. Then Samson called to the Lord saying, “O Lord God, remember me, I pray, a broken man now, a penitent man, a humble man, strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes.”

Personal vengeance was always an issue with him. Even in this great moment, he couldn’t completely divorce himself from his personal vengeance. But there was something larger than that that moved his heart, because he was now willing to give his life to protect his people from their deadly enemies. The Spirit of God heard his prayer. In a flash of divine energy, supernatural strength poured into his body. With one hand on each column he began to push; those monolithic columns

began to move. He knew God had empowered him. As soon as he felt them move, in an explosion of unimaginable power, he dislodged the columns in a catastrophic crash. The massive wood/stone/plaster structure crushed everyone; all 3,000 were killed--more than he had slain in his whole life. He had slain hundreds. So Judges 16:30 says, “The dead that he killed at his death were more than he killed in his life.”

Samson died penitent, broken and humble. He died for the cause of his nation and the cause of his God. His God had said, “Remove the Philistines, remove them from the land.” People had not done that.

In a final act of faith, he cries out to God to be an instrument by which he can do the will of God and destroy the enemies of God. And God hears his prayer. One of the people I want to talk to when I get to heaven is Samson.

Two men; opposite extremes. One is weak and becomes strong; the other is strong and becomes weak. Do you understand that God uses all kinds of people? He uses the weak and makes them strong. He uses the strong and makes them weak and then makes them strong. He uses the humble, the fearful, the timid, the cowardly, empowering them through faith; and he humbles the mighty, the audacious, the bold for His own purposes.

Hebrews 11:34, where we started, says this, “Out of weakness, they were made strong.” And we look at our lives and we wonder, “Can God use us in our weakness?” Oh yes He can. He has no other people to use.

Listen to a final word from Paul. In the midst of his suffering and his terrible agony, praying that the Lord would remove the thorn in his flesh, he says, “I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me and He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in’...What?...‘weakness.’” It is only when we see ourselves as weak that we can be made strong in the Lord. Gideon was weak, weak enough to become strong in the Lord. Samson was strong, too strong to really be everything God wanted him to be. His greatest feat was the strength that came out of his weakness; so says Paul, “I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me, therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecution, distress for Christ’s sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Let’s have a word of prayer together.

Father, we thank You again for the wonder of the testimony of Your grace in the life of Gideon and Samson. The reminder again that You’re not looking for perfect people because there are none. You’re looking for those that are broken and weak, that they may be strong in You. We thank You that You’re a faithful God; You protect Your people; You keep Your covenant. You made a covenant to

preserve the nation Israel. You've done it up to this day, and You have made a covenant in Christ to save and redeem those who believe in Him, and You will continue to keep that covenant as well. We thank You that You are a faithful God; we have sung it tonight, "Great is Your Faithfulness." And may these truths be encouraging to our own hearts that You can use us, even with our flaws. We thank You in the Savior's name. Amen.

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