

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 12, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JUDGES 16:6
and
EPHESIANS 6:10,11 (Living Bible)

“So Delilah said to Samson, ‘Tell me the secret of your great strength.’”

“Your strength must come from the Lord’s mighty power within you. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand safe against all the strategies and tricks of Satan.”

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

In the 26-mile Boston marathon race, hundreds of contestants take off from the starting line, but only a few cross the finish line. I think that’s a parallel to the Christian life. Many people start out splendidly in the Christian life, but somewhere along the course they get waylaid, sidetracked, or they run out of energy. How can you maintain the strength to keep doing what you know you ought to be doing so that you finish the race triumphantly? That’s what we want to look at today.

Now I want you to notice that Satan has a strategy and a plan to sap your spiritual strength. Today I want you to look at

Three things that weaken your life,

and for an illustration of this, we turn to the life of Samson as found in Judges 13 to 16.

Samson was the Rambo of the Bible physically. Spiritually he was the Pee Wee Herman. He was a moral wimp. To begin with, he had everything going for him – good looks, superlative strength, above average talent, godly parents, and God’s blessing upon his life. And things went very well early in life; but somewhere along the way declension set in, and he ended up a broken man.

I want to look with you at three things that wrecked Samson’s life – things that will sap your spiritual strength, but things that we can avoid. If you and I learn how to deal with these three things, we will be able to make it to the finish line.

1. SELF-INDULGENCE will weaken your life. What I’m talking about here is an un-disciplined lifestyle – living only by your feelings. Now let me ask you – does our culture encourage or discourage self-indulgence? There’s no doubt about it – it encourages it.

You know the ice cream commercial — “You owe it to yourself!” “If it feels good”

(what?) “do it!” Now even good things can become harmful if they’re not controlled — things like food, money, sex, sleep, and work. All these things that are gifts of God can be misused; and if they’re out of control, they’ll damage your life.

Now, Samson’s weakness was women. In three different chapters here, he has three different women. He was continually running out of relationships. He was afraid to make a permanent commitment. Have you ever met anyone like that? We have a society full of people like that. In Judges 14:1-3 we read that “Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, ‘I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife.’ His father and mother replied, ‘Isn’t there an acceptable woman among all our people? Must you go to the Philistines to get a wife?’ But Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me. She’s the right one for me.’” She obviously lit his fire!

Now here was Samson’s first mistake. Don’t make decisions on the basis of pleasure rather than principle, because if you do, you will fall into self-indulgence. You will do the fun thing, the convenient thing, which is not necessarily the right thing. The fact is, God had said, “Don’t do it.” His parents had warned him. He had made a vow himself not to marry an unbeliever; but when he sees this woman, his convictions go out the door. He ignores his plans, and follows his glands; and he says, “I’ve got to have her!”

And his excuse is — “Just this once. It’s no big deal!” Now look what God says in Galatians 6:7,8 (Living Bible): “Don’t be misled; remember that you can’t ignore God and get away with it; a man will always reap just the kind of crop he sows! if he sows to please his own wrong desires, he will be planting seeds of evil and he will surely reap a harvest of spiritual decay and death.” Paul is saying here, “Whatever you plant, you’re going to reap.” It’s just a fact of life.

Let’s say you’re going on a cruise to the Caribbean. You go to Miami, and ten miles out the captain says, “Now folks, don’t be disturbed, but I do want you to know that we have developed a leak in this ship. But it’s not a big leak, and on a ship like this, what is just one little leak?” But the fact is - a leak is a leak is a leak — and it’s just a matter of time before it will sink the ship.

Sometimes Satan tempts us into thinking, “Well, this one error in my life is out of control, but that’s no big deal. It’s just one area of my life and I can handle it.” But a leak is a leak is a leak. And anything that is out of control in your life will eventually sink your ship. Self-indulgence will always catch up with us.

Now here’s the point: “To maintain spiritual strength I must discipline my desires. 1 Peter 4:1,2 (Good News Bible) says, “Strengthen yourselves with (Christ’s) way of thinking... live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires.” What is Peter saying? He’s saying, “Just because you want something doesn’t mean you should have it. Just because you can afford it doesn’t mean that you should buy it. Just because it’s pleasurable doesn’t make it right. Just because everyone else is doing it doesn’t mean you have to do it.”

I’m worried about the fact that we might be raising some very self-indulgent children,

because today, if they want it, and their parents can afford it, they get it. A friend of ours, a minister's wife, is also a professional clown. She gives programs at children's birthday parties, and in the desire to get out of the business she recently set her fee at \$150 for a 45-minute show. But has this daunted parents? In no way – they're perfectly willing to pay that amount so that little Johnny can have a super party! The peril of self-indulgence!

2. RESENTMENT will weaken your life. Samson lived his life in a constant state of anger. He reacted violently to everything. His primary motivation in life was, "I'm going to get revenge; I'm going to get even." In fact, one time he killed 30 men just to get even on a bet (Judges 114:19). I wouldn't want to be around a guy like that, would you? He was a violent, angry, bitter, resentful person. Look at Judges 15:3: "Samson said, 'This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them.'" And again in 15:7, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." And in 15:11 he says, "I merely did to them what they did to me." His excuse was, "They hurt me first."

This was Samson's second mistake. The second mistake that will drain the energy out of your life is when you react, rather than act, towards circumstances. Samson was a reactor. Resentment is always self-defeating. It hurts you more than it hurts the other person. Look at these verses in your outline:

"To worry yourself to death with resentment would be a foolish, senseless thing to do" (Job 5:2, Good News Bible).

"You are only hurting yourself with your anger" (Job 18:14, Good News Bible).

Resentment is a waste. It wastes time, because you're always caught up in the past. It wastes energy because it drains you emotionally. Have you found that to be true? And it wastes creativity. Sometimes we're so creative, thinking of ways to get back at that guy at the office, or that person who hurt you early in life. Samson was a pretty creative fellow. In 15:4 we read how he went and caught 300 foxes and tied them tail-to-tail in pairs. That took a while, I'm sure! He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails. Then he lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves. He was really creative, but what a waste!

Proverbs 29:22 (Living Bible) says, "A hot-tempered man starts fights and gets into all kinds of trouble."

Not only do we live in a very self-indulgent culture, we live also in a very angry culture that says, "Get even if you get the chance." And violence is modeled for us every night on TV. And that is bound to affect us eventually. So, don't allow yourself to get resentful against people who hurt you, and don't waste any time or energy trying to get revenge, because that saps the strength out of your life. It will drain you as quickly as self-indulgence. If you don't believe that we live in an angry culture, just get out on the Beltway!

Now here is the lesson: "To maintain spiritual strength I must restrain my reactions." Proverbs 29:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under

control.” You have only a certain amount of energy. You might as well use it in the right way. Don’t waste any energy on resentment. You know that leaders are pretty good targets. They’re easy targets because they’re visible, and so people take potshots at them.

Some years ago, when we were planning to leave the mainline denomination, I was told time and time again about the outlandish things certain people were saying about me, some of them downright slanderous. At first, I was a bit upset by this nonsense, but I refused to respond to such personal attacks, simply because I had neither the time nor the energy to do that. I was too busy trying to do what I believed to be God’s will. I had neither the time nor the energy to go around defending myself for everything I said or did. And you don’t either. So, you find out what you believe to be the will of God for your life, and you go for it. And if you spend your time trying to get even with people who have hurt you, you’re wasting your time, your energy, and your creativity; and the spiritual strength will drain from your life.

Samson had a problem with this. Mind you, I’m not saying, “Never get angry.” There are times when you need to get angry. Just control it. Sometimes anger is a legitimate response. When you think of 20 million babies killed by abortion, you ought to get angry, but you need to control it.

Self-indulgence will weaken your life, and resentment will weaken your life, and

3. CARELESSNESS will weaken your life. When we’re careless with our health, it weakens us. When we’re careless with our money, it weakens us. When we’re careless with our words -- does that ever get you in trouble?! Look at Proverbs 18:20 (Good News Bible), “You will have to live with the consequences of everything you say.” When we’re careless with our time; when we’re careless with our commitments, it weakens us. You promise to do something, and you don’t do it. Every time you break a commitment, it weakens your life.

Samson made some commitments to God. In fact, that was the reason he was strong. His supernatural strength was a gift from God due to his commitment to God. Early in his life he took a vow called the Nazarite vow. And this was a vow that said, “I belong 100% to God. I’m going to dedicate all my time, energy and effort to God’s work.” And God said, “Samson, you’re special, and in taking this Nazarite vow you will do three things that will make you different from everyone else:

- a. You will drink no alcohol;
- b. You will never go near a dead body, even that of your nearest relative; and
- c. You will never cut your hair.”

It was a daily reminder that he belonged to God. He had made this commitment, and that was the source of his strength because you’re only as strong as what you’re committed to.

And that brings us to Samson’s third mistake – he toyed with his commitment. He was continually compromising his convictions for convenience sake. He toyed with temptation. His

goal was: How close can I get to the fire and not get burned; how close to the cliff can I get without falling off?

Sometimes someone will come to me and say, “Pastor, can I be a Christian and do such and such?” And I always say, “That’s the wrong question. The issue is not how much can I get away with and still call myself a Christian. The issue is not how far away can I get from God’s rules and principles and still claim to be part of His family. The real issue is: How close to God can I get?” It’s not always a matter of right and wrong, black or white. Sometimes you just need to stay out of the gray areas. If it’s doubtful, it’s dirty!

Now, the best example of Samson’s carelessness was in his relationship with Delilah. Delilah was something else! She was the third woman in three chapters, but he was sure this was the right One! When the men who were Samson’s enemies found out that Delilah was his girlfriend, they hired her for \$25,000 to find out the secret of his strength. So, every night she would coax Samson into telling her what the secret of his strength was. And Samson just played along. He was playing with fire, but he kept on teasing her. The first time he said, “Tie me up with seven bow strings.” So, he went to sleep, and in the morning, Delilah said, “Wake up, Samson!” And surprise! - he’s tied up with seven bow strings, and there are strange men in the room. So up got Samson, popped the strings, and threw the men out of the room.

She came back the next night and said, “Samson, tell me, what’s the real secret of your strength.” He said, “If you’ll bind me with new ropes, then I can’t break them.” So, he went to sleep that night, and when Delilah wakened him next morning, surprise, surprise! – he’s bound with new ropes, and there are more men in the room. So, he got up, broke the ropes, and threw those fellows out the door.

You would figure that by now Samson would know that something was going on, wouldn’t you? I have the suspicion that Samson’s elevator didn’t go all the way to the top floor! The lights were on, but nobody was at home! He had more brawn than brains.

So, the third night his girlfriend says, “Oh Sammy, baby... you know a man is never weaker than when a woman is telling him how strong he is! Sammy, you’re making a fool of me.” So, he said, “If you weave my hair into your loom, then I’ll lose my strength.” Do you see what he’s doing? He’s getting closer to the real thing. He knows exactly what he’s doing, and his excuse is, “I can handle it.” Have you ever heard that line? “I’ve got everything under control. I know how far I can go.” Samson was being careless with his commitment.

And so, he wakes up next morning, and he yanks his hair out of the loom, and bloodies a few more noses.

But he was careless once too often. His lifestyle of self-indulgence, resentment and carelessness finally weakened him, and he gave in. Chapter 16:15 says, “Then she said, ‘How can you say, “I love you” when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.’” With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death. So, he told her everything — a tragic phrase (Judges 16:16,17).

Now, folks, in the last few years we have seen dozens of leaders in our nation fall through scandals—financial scandals, sex scandals – you name it: leaders in government, leaders in sports, leaders in business, even leaders in the ministry. And you look at all this and you say, how on earth can that happen? Why do they throw their lives away for a moment of pleasure?

I'll tell you exactly how it happens. They were careless with regard to their commitments. They failed to take God seriously. And it didn't happen all at once. They didn't just wake up one morning and find themselves in a scandal. It was small choices that they made day in and day out. And a gradual slip and slide took place. No one falls off the cliff of character overnight. It starts by little slippages, and a failure to maintain good habits like reading God's Word on a daily basis and doing the things that count in life. And finally, they realize, "I've lost it all" — because of self-indulgence, resentment and/or carelessness.

Now here's the third lesson: To maintain spiritual strength I must keep my commitments, even when I don't feel like keeping them. That's the mark of maturity, I must keep my commitments to God, to my mate, to my children, to my employee or my employer — to all to whom I am accountable. Psalm 15:4 (Good News Bible) tells of the kind of person we need to be: "He always does what he promises, no matter how much it may cost."

There's an old saying, "A chain is only as strong as" (what?) "its weakest link." And you are only as strong spiritually as your weakest commitment. What are you committed to?

Now, what happened to Samson? Chapter 16:21 says, "Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze chains and made to grind grain in the prison." The champion becomes a clown. The superstar hits the skids. And it would be a tragic story if that were the end. But the Bible tells us that in prison Samson had a change of heart, and he recommitted his life to God. His hair grew long again, and God gave him a second chance. And if you know the rest of the story, the last day of Samson's life produced his greatest victory. In fact, it was such a great victory that he is listed in Hebrews 11 in God's Hall of Fame.

Now, I've written a couple of questions at the bottom of your outline. Look at them.

1. What is the weak link in your life? Is self-indulgence your problem? Do you find yourself saying, "Oh, just this once - I can handle it - it's no big deal. I can do, or watch, or read, or eat these kinds of things, and I won't get hurt." That idea comes straight from the pit of hell. Don't base your decisions on pleasure rather than principle. Or is resentment the weak link in your life? Are you still trying to get even for past hurts? Or is carelessness your problem? Has there been some slippage in your commitment to Christ? Never flirt with anything you know is wrong or be careless about spiritual habits. What's the weak link? And

2. When are you going to do something about it? Some of you need to make the commitment of coming to the New Member Class, and then coming into full communicant membership in the Church. Some of you need to get into a small group for support and encouragement. We all need to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

Remember -- God never gave up on Samson, and He will never give up on you or me. You see, it doesn't matter so much where you've been. The important thing is: "What is the direction of your feet this morning?"

And we come to Christ, and we say, "I give You all my life; take it and remake it into something beautiful."

AMEN.