

**Strength in Weakness**  
**Judges 15: 1- 20, 1 Cor 1:18-25**

Brothers and sisters, I used to have a bit of a weakness for action movies because I am a sucker for sword-fighting. So naturally I've seen all the Lord of the Rings movies and the Pirates of the Caribbean movies – and the best sword fighting movie of all time... The Princess Bride.

Why is it the best sword fighting movie of all time – “*well because I know something you do not know... I am not left-handed!*” 😊

But to be honest now that the Lord of the Rings and Pirates of the Caribbean franchises are finished I haven't really kept up with all the latest Star Wars and Super-hero action movies in the same way...

But there was one action movie recently that did catch my attention... and oddly enough in preparing for this message I discovered that I had actually described this movie a full seven years before it was released!

You see all the way back in 2011 we did our Breakfast Theatre presentation of the story of Samson and this is what I said about it...

*“in my opinion the story of Samson would make a great action movie! It's got all the right ingredients for it. An underdog hero with special rules for his life, a ruthless enemy to fight against, beautiful women and of course lots of action, especially in this third chapter we just saw...”*

*But if Samson was made into a movie would it just be another action flick – full of slow-mo battle scenes showing Samson effortlessly turning aside the spears and swords of the Philistine, his muscles bulging, his long hair is flying about, expertly delivering killing blows with nothing but the jawbone of a donkey...”*

Now watch the trailer for the Samson movie that was just released a couple months ago... (show trailer)

Someone has been reading my sermons!

Now, brothers and sister the truth about our admiration for Samson as a biblical hero is that we love his amazing displays of physical strength; killing a lion with his bare hands, killing 100's of Philistines, killing 1000 Philistine soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey, lifting the gates of a city out of their frame and dragging them away and up a nearby hill.

That is why we like to picture Samson as an Israelite version of "The Rock" with an impressive stature and physique. In our minds He is a biblical "Superman" using his God-given powers to fight against the enemy.

And the way in which we often apply the way God worked in the life of Samson to our own life - is to take his great physical strength and spiritualize it.

If the Spirit of the LORD empowered Samson for great physical strength back then – as Christians we can expect the Spirit of the LORD – the Holy Spirit - to give us great spiritual strength now.

Which may be true - but what if that strength is only available through weakness?

And perhaps as we've been paying attention to the messages in this series about Life through death and Victory through defeat – we've been able to accept those contradictions...

Because even if things get flipped upside down on us in this way, there is still a place for strength.

We can accept that victory can sometimes come through defeat, and life through death... in fact the story of Samson can be seen as a great example of that.

After all it was Samson's defeat and capture that lead to his greatest victory over the Philistines, and in giving his life to win that victory he secured life and freedom again for his fellow Israelites.

You may remember how all the high-ranking Philistines had gathered in their palace for a feast and a celebration and they decided to bring out Samson as their prisoner.

They wanted Samson to put on a show - to make fun of him and mock him – because he was defeated, blinded and weak.

But God allows Samson’s strength to return once more, and he gives the performance of a life-time and literally brings down the house by pushing down main support pillars of the temple.

So – we can be ok with defeat, we can be ok with death... because it can still be an opportunity to display the kind of strength and power that we admire so much.

But we may not really understand how we are able to become strong through being weak... Know what I’m talking about?

But brothers and sisters we actually learn more from Samson’s weakness and failures than we do from his impressive displays of strength.

2 Tim 3:15-17 says “*the Holy Scriptures....are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” And that “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”

So, what are we to get out of the story of Samson beyond being impressed by his superhuman exploits? Well... let’s start by looking at what goes wrong in this chapter.

Of course this story takes place with-in the larger context of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness as the reason they are being oppressed by the Philistines and God has raised up Samson with expectation that he will be their deliverer and Judge.

So in the scripture passage we just looked at, Samson decides that he’s going to go back down to Timnah to be with his wife.

And he brings a goat along – perhaps this was the Philistine equivalent to chocolate and flowers to say I’m sorry – because if you remember the story Samson had stormed off from the wedding in anger when his fiancé/bride had tricked him into giving away the answer to his wedding riddle and lost a bet that cost him thirty sets of clothing...

And in light of this the father of the bride had figured that Samson was done with her and so he had given her to the best man instead.

So when Samson discovers his wife has been given away to another he is angry and insulted and feels he has a right to get even with the Philistines.

So the first weakness that we see here is that Samson has to be motivated to take up his calling through having his ego bruised by losing a woman he’s not even supposed to be with. *(God had forbid Israel to marry into the surrounding nations)*

So Samson sets fire to the Philistines’ crops and this delivers a crushing blow to their economic and agricultural production - sort of like the hero of an action movie striking back at a drug cartel by burning their cocoa fields and production facilities...the Philistine’s strength to oppress Israel will be considerably weakened by having their food and economic resources destroyed.

The second weakness we see in Samson is that he is simply reactionary – he doesn’t think ahead about the consequence of his actions.

In retaliation for their crops being burned, the Philistines do what any self-respecting group of villains do – they kill the people who are connected to Samson – not his parents, but the woman he loved and her father.

And just like in the action movies – when the bad guys mess with the one the hero loves, watch out! All hell is about to break loose – and the text says Samson attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them.

So, in spite of his weaknesses and self-centeredness Samson is standing up to the Philistines and beginning to function as a deliverer of Israel.

The Philistines' operation is being dismantled and weakened and Samson is displaying superhuman strength... so you would think that all this would inspire his fellow Israelites to rise up and claim their freedom as well.

You would think so... but this is where Samson's next weakness shows up. It's quite evident that his actions are self-centered and self-interested so they only inspire his country-men in the same manner. They don't really see God at work in Samson.

So three thousand come to Samson and say *"Hombre, are you loco??? You can't do this to the Philistines, they will make trouble for us and we don't want no trouble"*

Samson's weakness means that his fellow Israelites are left so intimidated by the Philistines and focused on avoiding any

retaliation they would rather hand over Samson than stand up and believe that God is bringing deliverance so they freed and can be obedient to conquer all of the Promised Land.

In spite of the fact that Samson has just killed a thousand Philistines soldiers in front of three thousand of his countrymen – the men of Israel only see an extraordinarily strong vigilante, but they can't see what the Spirit of the LORD is doing in spite of Samson's weakness and they are not roused from their apathy to rise up against their oppressors.

And so this chapter closes with a disheartening sentence – It says for twenty years Samson judged Israel... in the days of the Philistines. (vs 20.)

So there is no deliverance - for all his feats of strength Samson's weaknesses mean that Israel is still oppressed and the Philistines continue to rule over Israel for another twenty years.

And “Samson judges Israel” – and I can’t help but read that as an indictment that Samson’s weaknesses are a reflection of the state of the weakness of God’s people and their faith and trust and their relationship with Him.

And brothers and sisters, we would be deceiving ourselves if we didn’t acknowledge that this situation is similar to how we, as God’s people today, are so often content to live our lives co-existing with the Sin that is oppressing us.

Perhaps we see this most overtly when there is some form of abuse, which is Sin, in a relationship and the abused person puts up with it and stays with the abuser.

But I suspect that for most of us this is a reality in our lives that has to do with what we might call “our guilty little pleasures.” You know those things which we know are wrong but we do anyway...things that we call our “character flaws” or “bad habits” or “our weaknesses.”

Like watching movies which glorify casual sex and violence,

Like participating in the neighborhood gossip,  
Like stretching the truth or telling white lies,  
Like venting our rage by flipping the middle finger at the driver who cut us off,  
Like not being honest with those who have offended us...  
Like giving into the temptation to believe that it’s up to us to decide what’s right and wrong and how we should live.

Like believing the lie that says if we show or admit our weakness then we are worthless, that we’re not enough, and that we need to work harder and be stronger in order to cover it up and impress people and look like we have it together...

You see friends we can become so familiar with having Sin oppress us that we just get used to it and we put up with it... that is our weakness.

even though we may know all about Jesus and who He was,

even though we may have learned that He taught us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul and mind and strength,

even though Jesus demonstrated how to love our neighbor as ourselves...

even though he performed miracles – turning water to wine, feeding four thousand, calming a storm, and casting out demons

And in spite of celebrating his defeating our sin and his resurrection over death each year at Easter...

In spite of all the amazing demonstrations of Jesus' power and strength that we know about... we remain comfortable with Sin in our lives, and we put up with its oppression relying on our strength and efforts to keep it at bay - It's a lot like how things were for Samson and the nation of Israel isn't it?

But friends as I've said before, the stories in the bible are written to reveal the true nature of God to us. Because no matter what goes wrong in the story, the good news is that God always comes in to save the day – but as we've been learning this past month...

The ways in which God works are often counter-intuitive to our expectations and in this case God's actions point to how God uses our weakness to show His strength.

So right from the start of this story we need to understand that God has been working behind the scenes, using Samson's weaknesses to set-up a confrontation between Samson and the Philistines - to demonstrate His power and to show how their gods are powerless, so He can save Israel from them – and from their own apathy.

So when the men of Judah fail to rally behind Samson, the Spirit of the LORD takes over and through Samson - God himself is fighting the Philistine army.

And this so battle is less about superhuman strength than it is about contrasts: one man versus a thousand or more, long hair versus clean shaven, a primitive bone club versus forged iron swords and spears – weakness being used as a strength.

Because this is often how God works, as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:25 *“the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”*

So Samson, one man with a bone club defeats one thousand trained armed soldiers – this is the weakness of God and it is far stronger than human strength.

Now brothers and sisters as we see this dynamic of weakness as strength and strength in weakness at play here it foreshadows how God will work eventually work through Jesus Christ.

As this chapter ends we find Samson was hiding out in the cave of Etam, which is only a short distance from the town of

Bethlehem, where Jesus was born – in a shelter for animals that scholars believe was built into a cave. Weakness...

Samson is rejected and betrayed by his countrymen because he is overturning the status quo and standing up to the Philistines just as Jesus will be rejected and betrayed by his countrymen because he stands up to the sinful self-righteousness which was oppressing God’s people while He claimed to be God’s son – the messiah! Weakness...

And perhaps the most significant foreshadowing in the story is how Samson’s weaknesses in obedience to his calling, his lack of leadership and inability to truly deliver the Israelites from oppression foreshadows that political skill, military strategy or weapons would not truly free Israel from oppression.

When Jesus Christ finally arrives as the Messiah God is working a new solution to the problem of Israel being oppressed and the far older more pervasive problem of human sinfulness.



And Jesus does not bring a political solution, it's not a legal solution, it's not an economic solution, it's not a rational solution, it's not an emotional solution...

It is a heart solution – one that gets at the place where our thoughts, our feelings, our actions flow out of, the core of our human existence. In Jesus Christ God has freed human nature at its heart from the oppression of Sin.

And how did Christ fight this battle, not politically or militarily – but through dying a criminal's death on a cross – an amazing victory achieved in such a lowly way, a contrasting way that at first glance seems weak.

And truth be told this makes the message of Jesus' work difficult to get across to people – both back then and now...

Because we are people who respect and admire strength and we also use strength to try to cover up and deny our weaknesses that come about as a result of sin.

So that's why Paul says *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” ( 1 Cor 1:18)*

So brothers and sisters let us hear these words of scripture and take them to heart.

Because the truth is that in trying to be strong by denying that you struggle with sin, by just steeling ourselves to try and control however it expresses itself - with our will-power... because we're afraid to admit we're weak – will ironically become our biggest weakness of all and we will perish because of it.

Because the consequences of sin is death – and not just death, eternal death in hell should we pass away without having received the forgiveness of Christ – but the way in which sin kills things in our lives right now.

How anger kills trust and make people not feel safe around you, How greed kills your sensitivity to other people's needs,

how envy kills your joy for other people's success, how lust kills your intimacy and relationships and so on..

Additionally, trying to be strong all the time and cover up and suppress our weaknesses becomes exhausting – and it only opens you up to self-righteousness and more weakness...

Because you are so tired and exhausted you begin using substances to boost your energy so you can stay strong – or at least appear strong.... and you become vulnerable to alcoholism and drug usage and all the death that those will bring into your life as well.

Brothers and sisters – we need to understand this and even more... we need to live this out.

When it comes to really appropriating the gospel in our lives... what we think is strength is our weakness - but the good news is that weakness is strength.

Because when we admit our weakness, when we name it as sin, when we stop trying to be strong to pretend we don't struggle with it and we confess it to each other - then the power and the strength of God comes into our lives.

We realize our need for the grace and mercy and forgiveness that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ accomplished for us and the Holy Spirit brings it to bear on our weakness and sin as we confess to Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ becomes real in a way that it hasn't been able to be in our lives before...

So Brothers and sisters – since we admire strength, let us not look our own strength any longer. But look to the strength of the love of Christ, by which He endured the crucifixion in order that our sin might be forgiven and we might receive His strength in those areas of weakness.

Life through death, Victory through Defeat, Strength through weakness. Amen

