

RESTLESS HEART

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 16:1-22
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I'm a sixth-generation San Franciscan (I lived in the city just long enough to have it listed as my birthplace): my family on my father's side moved here not long after the gold rush. However, there are lots of famous places in the city I've never visited. I've driven over the Golden Gate Bridge countless times, but I've never walked across it. I've sailed past Alcatraz a few times, but I've never set foot on the rock.

Spiritually, our home is with God and with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in Jesus, we are, as the apostle Paul observes on numerous occasions, "in Christ." Have we seen the sites, so to speak? Are we happy with what we're experiencing? Or do we suffer from a restless heart? And how do you treat a restless heart, anyway?

Samson had a restless heart. He was a man who constantly strayed from his geographical home, not to mention his spiritual home, in search of some foreign experience. Between Judges 14:1 and 16:22, Samson traveled round trip between his home in Zorah and the Philistine city of Timnah at least three times; then he traveled from Zorah to Timnah, from Timnah to Ashkelon and back to Timnah, from Timnah to Etam, from Etam to Lehi, from Lehi to Gaza, from Gaza to Hebron, from Hebron to Sorek, and from Sorek to Gaza. None of his travels had anything to do with his calling to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. On the contrary, all of his travels had something to do with his pursuit of Philistine women. This is one restless dude.

Seeking satisfaction elsewhere

Judges 16:1-3:

¹One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. ²The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." ³But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his

shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

Samson strays to Gaza, a Philistine town, far from his geographical and spiritual home. As previously, when he traveled to the Philistine town of Timnah and saw a woman who looked good to him, his eyes get him in trouble (Judges 14:1). This time, he doesn't find a woman to marry, as in the previous episode, but a prostitute to satisfy him. Earlier, after a period of separation, Samson sought to go in to his wife but was blocked by his father-in-law, who informed him that the woman had been given to another man (Judges 15:1). With the prostitute from Gaza, Samson finds another, more corrupt way to find satisfaction.

The Philistines think they've got Samson trapped, but he catches them unaware and escapes in miraculous fashion, uprooting the doors and posts of the city gate and carrying them off. Samson's feat is clearly supernatural in nature, but he again accomplishes nothing but his own deliverance, and his treatment of the doors and posts constitutes a gratuitous display of strength.

Desire seeks satisfaction. Desire is good, not bad. It's a gift from God so that we might seek satisfaction in him. Whatever we want, at the core, has something to do with a desire for God. In this respect, sin can be defined as seeking satisfaction elsewhere. Samson sought satisfaction elsewhere, outside of a relationship with God and outside of the will of God. That's why he traveled so much. When we seek satisfaction elsewhere, we, like Samson, stray from home, so to speak: we stray from God.

After he's through with the prostitute, Samson turns his heart toward a paramour.

Getting in deeper

Judges 16:4-5:

⁴Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. ⁵The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing

you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.”

The close call in Gaza isn't enough to put the fear of God into Samson, for he succumbs to the charms of another woman. For the first time, he falls in love with a woman, so he's getting himself in deeper. Delilah hails from the Valley of Sorek, which means "Valley of Choice Vines." As a Nazirite, Samson is supposed to abstain from the fruit of the vine, so he's skating close to the edge again, as when he journeyed to the vineyards of Timnah (Numbers 6:2-5, Judges 14:6). Furthermore, the Valley of Sorek, like Timnah and Gaza, is Philistine country.

Earlier, the Philistines convinced Samson's wife to use her feminine wiles to extract from him information that allowed them to win their bet with him (Judges 14:15-17). In like manner, the Philistines convince Delilah to attempt to entice Samson to reveal the source of his strength so that they may apprehend him. Earlier, the Philistines blackmailed Samson's wife; this time, they promise Samson's woman a fantastic reward, amounting to more than a lifetime's wages.

Away from home, away from the Lord, we, like Samson, find just enough satisfaction to make us want to venture further. When we feel no ill effects from our first foray, we feel free to keep going, like Samson. In reality, though, we're getting ourselves in deeper. When we fall for someone—or something—like Delilah, we're placing ourselves at great risk, even if we're oblivious to that risk.

How will Delilah respond to the Philistines' offer?

Playing with sin

Judges 16:6-14:

“So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”⁷Samson answered her, “If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man.”⁸Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. ⁹With men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

¹⁰Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied.”¹¹He said, “If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man.”¹²So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.

¹³Delilah then said to Samson, “All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied.” He replied, “If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man.” So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric¹⁴and tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.

Samson loves Delilah, but does Delilah love Samson? Nothing is said in this regard. Whatever she feels for Samson doesn't add up to 5,500 shekels, however, for Delilah immediately goes to work on Samson.

Three times Delilah tries to pry from Samson the reason for his strength, but three times he tricks her, playing with her instead of simply refusing to answer. In each case, the Philistines, hiding in an inner room, are poised to pounce on Samson once it becomes clear that he has lost his supernatural strength. Knowing that Samson has easily dispatched with previous members of their number, they're not about to confront him until they know he's been defanged. Samson probably goes along with Delilah's antics because he thinks they're little more than bedroom games. Because the Philistines never show themselves, he doesn't suspect that his life is at stake.

Although Samson answers Delilah falsely, he nevertheless skates close to the edge again. As an Israelite, contact with a carcass makes him ceremonially unclean, but he says that he'll lose his strength if he's bound with "fresh" bowstrings, the sinews of recently killed animals. As a Nazirite, he's not only bound to abstain from the fruit of the vine, he's also bound to abstain from cutting his hair, but he tells Delilah that he will lose his strength if she weaves his hair into the fabric of a loom and tightens it with the pin. Again, Samson flaunts his status not only as an Israelite but also as a Nazirite.

By the way, the word translated “pin” is the same word that is used in Judges 4:21, when Jael drove a “peg” through the skull of Sisera, a pagan general who was afflicting Israel. The peg in this case is not being used by a woman against a pagan general but against a deliverer of Israel, who volunteers to be afflicted.

Three times Delilah binds Samson, and three times he breaks free. In the last case, he wakes from his sleep to pull the pin from the loom, just as he awoke from his sleep to uproot the doors and posts of the city gates in Gaza. For all Samson can tell, the Philistines are child’s play for him. He’s invincible, right? Or can Delilah take him down?

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have a calling, just like Samson had a calling. We are spiritual warriors whose commission is to bring the healing love of God to the world for the sake of the gospel. But we have spiritual enemies who are trying to stop us: Satan and his ilk. Like the Philistines, our spiritual enemies are lying in wait and poised to pounce: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Likewise, like a wild animal, “sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you” (Genesis 4:7). Demons, like the Philistines, know and exploit weaknesses.

Samson, oblivious to the presence of the Philistines, played with sin. We’re not playing a game; we’re fighting a war. If you’re oblivious to spiritual realities, play with sin, and think you can get away with it, you risk making yourself a casualty. Sure, like Samson, you can get away with it for a while, but just because the enemy doesn’t tear you to pieces immediately doesn’t mean that he isn’t crouching in your inner room, so to speak, waiting for an opportunity.

Delilah, unable to extract the information she wants from Samson, turns up the pressure.

Telling everything

Judges 16:15-17:

¹⁵Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven’t told me the secret of your great strength.” ¹⁶With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it. ¹⁷So he told her everything. “No razor has ever been used on my head,” he said, “because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become

as weak as any other man.”

Finally, Delilah plays the “you-don’t-love-me” card, just as Samson’s wife played it to get the information she wanted (Judges 14:16), and she literally accuses him of refusing to share his “heart” with her. Samson no doubt remembers that his former wife prevailed against him with such an approach, but he also no doubt remembers that he was able to ultimately prevail against her wiles by dispatching with thirty Philistines (Judges 14:19). Up to this point, Samson has been able to transcend his indiscretions. Delilah keeps up the pressure until Samson is—ominously, perhaps—sick to “death” of her nagging. Literally, he tells her “everything in his heart.” The Lord warned his people against entanglements with foreign women, who could well turn their hearts away from him (Deuteronomy 7:3, 1 Kings 11:2).

Samson not only tells Delilah that he will lose his strength if his head is shaved, he also tells her that he is a “Nazirite dedicated to God.” Samson refrains from calling the God of Israel by his covenant name, the Lord (YHWH), and instead calls him by a generic name, God (Elohim), that was also used for pagan deities, demonstrating, perhaps, that in his mind the Lord is simply one among many gods. Nevertheless, he understands that the source of his strength has something to do with the Lord.

Our hearts belong to the Lord, but when we stray from him, we make ourselves vulnerable. Satan wants our hearts, but he knows he can’t get them on his own; therefore, he goes through someone or something like Delilah. Samson gave his heart away to someone who wanted to exploit him and hand him over to his enemies.

But does Samson believe that he will lose his strength if his hair is shorn? He’s flaunted his vow before, not to mention his status as an Israelite, and gotten away with it. Why not this time also? He hasn’t yet violated the part of the Nazirite vow that concerns keeping a razor from his head. So we wonder: is Samson clinging to his strength by a thread—or by the strands of his hair—and will he go down if Delilah is somehow able to capitalize on his confession?

Losing strength

Judges 16:18-22:

¹⁸When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, “Come back once more; he has told me everything.” So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. ¹⁹After

putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. ²⁰Then she called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the LORD had left him. ²¹Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. ²²But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

For the third time in Judges 16, Samson wakes up. On the previous two occasions, he escaped. He assumes that he will be able to escape again, but this time he can’t free himself. What happened? His strength has left him. Why? Because the Lord has left him. Samson, who’s been steadfastly insensitive to the Lord his whole life, doesn’t even know that the Lord, along with his strength, has left him. Why did the Lord leave him? Because Samson didn’t take his sacred vow seriously. Of course, he never took his vow seriously, which begs the question, why does the Lord only leave him now? The answer no doubt has to do with the Lord’s purpose for Samson in the first place: to begin to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines (Philippians 13:5). The Lord, through Samson, was seeking an occasion against the Philistines, and he will be successful with or without Samson’s cooperation.

At the beginning of Judges 16, Samson seized the doors and posts of the gate of Gaza. Now, the Philistines finally seize Samson and bring him back to Gaza. When the Philistines gouge out his eyes, they’re doing him a favor, for his eyes have been his Achilles heel. His behavior, especially his behavior toward women, was based on what he saw, not on the word of God. Samson did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 14:3); now he has no eyes. Samson devastated the grain of the Philistines (Judges 15:4-5), so the Philistines put him to work grinding their grain in a prison. He humiliated them; now they humiliate him.

Game over. Then again, Samson’s hair begins to grow again. Ah, way back when, the Lord said Samson would “begin” to deliver Israel, and the Spirit “began” to stir in him (Judges 13:25). Does new growth portend new possibilities? Can Samson come back?

Spiritually speaking, the Lord is the source of our strength. We grow stronger by nurturing our relationship with him. When we neglect our relationship with him, our strength slips from us. Then one day, perhaps, we wake up, and, like Samson, can’t summon the strength to

meet the day. What the Lord has given is no longer there.

Bring back the Sabbath

Samson fell to the Philistines because he could not quiet his restless heart. He left the Lord to seek satisfaction elsewhere not because he found the Lord wanting but because he never tried the Lord. The prodigal son left home because he was ignorant of his father’s love for him. The prodigal’s brother left home in his mind because he didn’t know that everything that belonged to his father also belonged to him. We seek satisfaction elsewhere, in illicit sex, like Samson, or in money, power, ambition, accomplishment, or security, for example, because we don’t know what we have in Christ. Paul writes, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). We lack no blessing. We lack awareness, however. We lack appreciation. We are not lacking for God’s blessings; we are, however, lacking for the experience of his blessings.

Most of us aren’t like Samson, chasing after this woman and that, but most of us are chasing after something, and that something isn’t God. How do you treat a restless heart? You treat it with rest. If Augustine is right, that our hearts are restless until they find rest in the Lord, then we must set aside time to rest in the Lord. Therefore, may I offer a simple, and entirely biblical, suggestion: bring back the Sabbath. God commanded the Israelites to rest from their work one day a week to remember him (Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:15). In the New Testament, the Sabbath breaks its borders and is no longer confined to a particular day for all, but the New Testament does not retire the Sabbath. On the contrary, the New Testament anticipates the day when the Sabbath permeates all of time (Hebrews 4:9).

We would therefore be wise to find ways, times, and places, in addition to worshiping in a church once a week, to consciously stop running in order to nurture our relationship with the Lord. Set aside periodic days of rest, or half-days of rest, or something of the like, and use part of such days to consciously seek satisfaction in the Lord, to remember who he is and what he’s done, to appreciate what you have in Christ. Give heed to the title of Paul Taylor’s series on the Sabbath: “Remember to Rest; Rest to Remember.” While you’re at it, read his series (www.pbc.org/series/sabbath-remember-to-rest-rest-to-remember).

A few weeks ago, Judy Herminghaus, our women’s pastor, and I invited leaders of our community groups and graduates of our intern program to a daylong retreat. I called it “A Day with the Lord (and His People)”; Judy

called it “A Sabbath.” Throughout the day, we practiced a rhythm of gathering together as a group and going out as individuals in prayer, meditation, and reflection. Although some struggled at first when they were alone with God, most, if not all, caught the rhythm of the day and encountered God in a powerful way. Judy and I didn’t do much; mostly, we just gave people what they don’t usually take for themselves: time. They took the time, and God met them in it. Steve Kurihara, one of the participants, reflected on his experience:

Recently, I had the privilege of attending a retreat that was given the title “A Day with the Lord.” There wasn’t a lot of information beforehand describing what would be happening at this retreat, but from the invitation it was clear that it was scheduled for a Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., and that it had something to do with spending some quiet time with God. To be honest, I was a bit concerned about giving up a full Saturday for this. After all, our weekends are usually pretty full, with work, running errands, working around the house, seeing people, going places, and the list goes on and on. But in the end, I decided to attend and see if I might learn something about what it means to spend time with God and to rest in him.

The pattern of the day as it was laid out was quite simple. First, a short group gathering with some worship music, scripture readings, and questions to reflect on. This was followed by an extended period of quiet time, where we would go out as individuals and just be alone with our thoughts and God for ninety minutes at a time. This pattern took place in three separate sessions throughout the day. I have to admit that the first ninety-minute session felt kind of strange and uncomfortable for me. What was I going to do for ninety minutes, alone? My thoughts were all over the map as I tried to rest and seek the Lord’s plans for me on that day. The ninety minutes seemed to drag on. I found that my good intentions were being interrupted by thoughts about work and what I really needed to get done that weekend.

But during the second and third sessions, I began to feel a little more comfortable in my solitude as I focused on one of the reflection questions having to do with my own fears and not being able to trust God completely. I felt the Spirit leading me to be honest with God and to talk to him about things that were

really on my heart and things that I feared. The Lord showed me how richly he has blessed me, and I offered prayers of thankfulness. The Lord reminded me of friends, family, and others who are dealing with a lot of difficult circumstances, and I brought these all to him. I meditated on the lyrics of some of the songs that were sung during the group time, and I saw what a wonderful and loving God we have.

What I experienced that day with resting in the Lord was, in a word, powerful.

We don’t rest for fear of what we’ll miss out on, or all that will be left undone, but look what we miss out on, look at what we leave undone, when we don’t rest! Steve and the others who gathered that day took the time to rest, to remember the Lord, to appreciate what they have in Christ—to see the sites, so to speak. In one way or another, take the time: find a rhythm of rest that works for you. Bring back the Sabbath to see the sites.