

Playing with Fire

Breaking Up Stony Ground, Part 9

Judges 16

In his book, *The Quest for Character*, Chuck Swindoll quotes from an article published by The United States Chamber of Commerce. It was obviously published years ago – and I mean years ago – but the principles remain true.

The article published by the Chamber came unto the title, *How to Train Your Child to be a Delinquent*

Like I said, it was obviously published a while back – unfortunately, the author didn't footnote it, so we can only imagine. And as I've said already – it must have been a long time ago.

But the truth remains and this article sets the stage, in many ways for what we'll talk about in our study today.

How to Train Your Child to be a Delinquent:

1. When your child is still young, give him everything he wants, when he wants it – this way he'll grow up thinking the rest of the world owes him a living;
2. When he picks up swearing and off-color jokes, laugh along at him – or with him. As he grows older, it won't be funny anymore, but now it's kind of cute;
3. Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is twenty-one and then let him decide for himself;
4. Avoid using the word "wrong". It will give your child a guilt complex. You can condition him to believe later, when he is arrested for stealing a car, that society is against him and he is being persecuted;
5. Pick up after him – his books, shoes, clothes. Do everything for him so he will be experienced in throwing all responsibility onto others;
6. Let him read or watch anything he wants to; never think of monitoring him – sterilize the silverware, but let him feast his mind on garbage;
7. Argue frequently in front of him so that he can know how to take advantage of division in the home;

8. Satisfy every craving he has for food, drink and comfort; every sensual desire must be gratified because denial may lead to irritation or frustration;
9. Give your child all the spending money he wants – don't make him earn anything – why should he have it as tough as you did, growing up?
10. Take his side against your spouse, the neighbors, his teachers and later on, the police;
11. When he finally grows old enough to get into real trouble, make up excuses for yourself by saying, "Well, you know, we never could do anything with him – I guess he was just a bad seed."
12. Prepare for a life of grief and regret for everyone involved.¹

As the biography of Samson opens in the Book of Judges, it opens with a petulant, spoiled, selfish, rebellious young man who by now has brought years of grief, no doubt, to his parents.

While it isn't their fault that he has no interest in the ways of God – by the way, no parent can do anything to guarantee spiritual interest – it is their fault however for helping pave the path that Samson is about to slide down until he ultimately crashes.

His biography opens with a sinful demand in chapter 14 where he effectively stamps his feet with a pouty, immature demand says, "I saw one of the daughter of the Philistines at Timnah, Now get her for me as my wife."

They should have said no . . . you're on your own. We will not subsidize your sin. Instead they more than likely debated in the back bedroom – "It's true she's a pagan Philistine, but who knows, maybe this will settle him down – maybe she'll get him to behave . . . besides, every other family around here has married off one or two of their children to the pagans . . . why fight it?"

Get ready for even more years of grief and regret.

Keep in mind; nowhere in Samson's biography does scripture specifically point a finger at Samson's mother and father.

In fact, the Lord rescues them from their own compromise – which we can only imagine troubled them greatly – because this marriage never ends up consummating.

If you look over at *verse 20*, of chapter 14, you discover that before the wedding ceremony is even over, the Philistines effectively annul the marriage and she is given to be the wife of Samson's best man.

And Samson certainly doesn't settle down either.

In fact, he goes on a rampage of revenge and kills 1,000 Philistine men.

Immediately following that he then complains to God for allowing him to grow thirsty – to which God graciously turns a hollow piece of ground into a water fountain.

Still, there's no mention of gratitude . . . and no repentance either.

We've divided up the biography of Samson into three chapters with one word for each chapter.

1. And I've simply called the first chapter – Sliding.

Samson is governed by his eyes. He's sliding on the toboggan of lust and it will only pick up more and more speed over time.

The next scene opens with Samson sliding even further downward by visiting a prostitute in Gaza.

He's trapped in the city, but picks up the city gates and carries them off on his shoulders.

He's become a legend.

It's "Samson the Invincible" . . . never mind the fact that Samson is immoral.

He might be Samson the Strong man – but he's far from being Samson the Satisfied man.

Anyone on the toboggan slide of lust and immorality is far from satisfied.

Frederick Buechner penned one of the most perceptive definitions of lust ever written; "Lust is the craving for salt by a man dying of thirst."ⁱⁱ

Trouble is, it doesn't look like Samson's dying – or sliding downhill – it looks like he's stronger than ever – one mountain top after another.

And what mattered most to the people of Israel and to Samson, himself, was that he appeared to be the undefeated heavyweight champion of the world.

It's time to watch him introduced to a featherweight named Delilah.

2. We'll call this next chapter in Samson's life by this one word – Crashing.

From sliding into – finally – crashing.

Let's rejoin the narrative here at *chapter 16 and verse 4. After this he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.*

Now this happens to be the first time we're ever given the impression that Samson loved anybody beside himself.

He's evidently struck by her . . . enough to stay longer than one night.

In fact, the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – uses the word here for agape; Samson definitely wants to commit in loyal and faithful love to her alone.

Something's happened over the years!

I think there's more here than immediately meets the eye.

For one thing, she isn't a prostitute – which for Samson is a big improvement. What's more, we're never told that Delilah is even a Philistine. And that's because she isn't.

Old Testament scholars point out that her name is actually Semitic, not Philistine. She happens to be a Jewish woman – with Hebrew blood coursing through her veins.

According to the Biblical record, she's the first Jewish woman Samson has been interested in – and it's his first attempt in a long time to have some kind of lasting relationship.

Keep in mind as well that Samson, by this time, is middle aged. Several decades have passed since chapter 14 introduced us to this hotheaded young Israelite who demanded his parents arrange a marriage with a Philistine girl.

Not now . . . we're not told how much time elapsed between chapter 14 and chapter 16; in fact there is an elapse of time between chapter 16, verse 3 and the next verse.

We're not told how much time, but we do know there has been quite a bit of time in between these scenes from Samson's life.

We also know is that by the time you arrive at *verse 4 of chapter 16*, Samson is middle aged.

So, erase from your mind at this point that Samson looks like Hercules. He's a middle aged and rather worn down.

By now he's judged Israel for 20 years; he's been battle scarred in numerous fights and because of his immoral life he never settling anywhere – all that together has taken a toll on his vitality and certainly his discernment.

But we have every reason to believe that Samson intends to settle down . . . which makes this betrayal just ahead all the more tragic.

Samson has no idea that temptation has been waiting until this round to deliver the knock-out punch and he has no idea he's about to be set up.

By the way, the Devil is more than happy to wait 20 years to bring you down.

Before we get any farther along, let me make a couple of observations about temptation.

First, temptation usually includes some justifiable need.

Samson needed to settle down – this was a good sign. He evidently wanted to get off the road and establish a home – he might have even been struggling with regret that he hadn't glorified God in his past or modeled purity before the nation he served as a Judge.

He not only sees Delilah and then makes a commitment to love her he has chosen to love a Jewish woman. He probably thought – if only mom and dad could see me now.

The probably would have been thrilled.

But Samson compromises virtue even still. From what we'll see, he's clearly moved in with her – there's no mention of wedding ceremony this time. I'm guessing here, but I imagine that if you pulled Samson aside and asked him if the cart was before the horse, he'd probably say, "You know, I tried that marriage thing before and it just backfired. And it cost me dearly. It turned into a big fight and I ended up losing my bride – would you believe it – she married my best man!"

"I'm through with all that legal ceremony – what matters is love, just – just love."

Not only does temptation include some justifiable need – for Samson that represented the need to establish a long-term relationship with a woman from among his people –

Secondly, temptation usually distracts us from any potential disaster.

Temptation is only the commercial, remember?

Temptation doesn't show up with a photograph of what we'll look like in a year.

If you could have shown Samson a photograph of himself a year after he was captured – he wouldn't have believed it – that he was this old weary man, bent over from hard labor, with empty eye sockets

probably still oozing with infection; chained to a mill stone as he walks around and around, grinding wheat inside a Philistine prison.

There's no way.

Temptation never shows you the photographs of things to come.

But at this point Samson is saying, "Look, I'm going to do this my way – no public repentance before God, no return to his people with a public message of regret or apology . . . I'm just going to settle down and choose a Jewish woman," as if to say, get off my back – I'll come as close to the right path as I want, but not one step further than I have to.

Listen, Samson is still accountable to no one, but himself.

Look at verse 5. And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, "Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him..."

By the way, there are five major cities, each ruled by a lord – or a dictator king – and all five of them come to Delilah with a proposal – and they sweeten the pot – ***verse 5b. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver.***

Judas sold Jesus Christ for 30 pieces of silver – the price of a crippled slave in the first century.

Delilah is promised 5,500 pieces of silver . . . which is another way of saying, she's going to be set for the rest of her life.

Never mind love anymore. Her character has a price and they just met it.

She secretly agrees.

Notice verse 6. So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you."

Now before you think, "C'mon, how obvious can she be? Samson is definitely going to be suspicious" think again.

He's been asked this question a thousand times over the course of the past 20 years.

We have every reason to believe that only Samson and his parents knew the vow that had been made between them and God never to cut his hair.

People had been asking for ages – Samson, what's your secret man!

Which implies, by the way, that Samson didn't necessarily look like Mr. Universe – there had to be a secret. He might have very well looked like any other ordinary man who didn't spend his life in the gym posing in front of all those mirrors.

All that to say, this question from Delilah is not unusual. In fact, it's expected. They love each other . . . there are no secrets . . . Samson, you've got a secret – and if we ever want to be what we ought to be, we shouldn't keep secrets from one another. "What's the secret behind your amazing strength?"

Samson responds in verse 7. "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man." Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them.

Once again, we need to correct our mental image.

There's no mention that Samson goes to sleep after each of these experiments – and this first one – there's no mention that she binds him while he's sleeping. In fact, how do you wrap bow strings around a man when he's asleep? I would venture to suggest that Samson isn't asleep.

They are actually playing a game that's going to take several days. One Old Testament scholar called it, "Samson, let's play, "The Philistines are Coming!"

So after the Philistines secretly delivered to her the bowstrings after some time; and perhaps it was after supper one night, Delilah said, 'Samson, I went and bought these bowstrings . . . let's play, "The Philistines are Coming." I'll pretend I'm the Philistine and I'll be able to wrestle you to the ground because you'll be so weak . . . and so he allows her to wrap these bow strings around him – she finishes binding him and says – **verse 9, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he snapped the bow strings as a thread of flax snaps when it touches the fire.**

There's something else to correct. There's no reference to Philistines rushing out to grab him either. They are hidden in an inner chamber and when he breaks the bowstrings they stay hidden.

Samson has no idea that this game is deadly.

Delilah no doubt plays along . . . but pouts. She has a point – the man who says he loves her won't let her into the secret place of his heart and life.

Look at verse 10 – Then Delilah said to Samson, "Behold, you have mocked me and told me lies. Please tell me how you might be bound." 11. And he said to her, "If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man."

Between this verse and the next is at least a day or two. Delilah goes and gets new ropes and then says to him one evening – let's play that game again

. . . I got some new ropes . . . I want to see if you're telling me the truth.

The Philistines are again lying in attic waiting to see if he does indeed become weak and unable to break the ropes. The text reads, "***But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.***"

From the way this narrative unfolds, Delilah immediately now says to Samson – **verse 13 – "Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound."**

In other words, I love you and I really want to know what makes you tick and you keep making fun of me . . . it isn't funny Samson, you shouldn't keep secrets from me any longer if we're ever going to make it together.

Now notice that for the first time, Samson comes dangerously close to the truth as he, for the first time, mentions his hair; **verse 13b. And he said to her, "If you wave the seven locks of my head with the web and fasten it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man."**

Now this time he goes to sleep. Let me paraphrase **verse 14. And while he slept Delilah effectively wound his braided hair into a small weaver's shuttle she had nearby. Then she said, "Samson, the Philistines are coming!" But he awoke and in disentangled his hair from the loom and in the process ruined her sewing machine.**

Verse 15, And she said – watch this – "How can you say, 'I love you', when your heart is not with me? This is why Samson doesn't suspect any other motive. She is saying, "How can you say you love me when the very secret of your heart that governs your life is kept from me? I'm just trying to figure out who you, my beloved, are?"

Look at verse 16. And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.

Listen, let's learn here that temptation resisted does not mean temptation grows weaker; sometimes it grows even more persistent and more stubborn than ever.

Finally . . . **v. 17. He told her all his heart, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man."**

By the way, these Philistines had grown so tired of the game – and all the false alarms – that Delilah had to get them a message to come back – she knew she had finally been told the secret.

More than likely it was the next day when she smuggles a note to the Philistine kings that they need to send their soldiers back to her house – and she wanted to see the money too, by the way.

She gets him to fall asleep with his head in her lap – *verse 19 – and while he sleeps, a Philistine barber shows up cuts off his hair.*

Let’s play the game again, Samson . . . “the Philistines are coming – they are upon you!” And he awoke from his sleep and said, ‘I will go out as at other times and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the Lord had left him.

In other words, I know my hair’s been cut, but so what. I’m still Samson.

And now, for the first time, he’s confronted with Philistine warriors.

I imagine he swings his once powerful fist against a Philistine shield and this time – to his surprise – his hand crumples in pain; he’s grabbed from behind – he strains to free himself – he struggles and bellows – his mind is racing – this can’t be.

Listen, for decades, Samson had kept one part of his vow. He had broken the others, but not this one.

God had remained by virtue of the Nazirite vow, which was now broken.

Notice verse 21. And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison.

One of the most difficult tasks performed only by the lowest of slaves. The Romans and the Greeks would punish their slaves by making them turn the stone grinder in a mill.ⁱⁱⁱ

The great crash has occurred. Sliding . . . sliding . . . sliding . . . crashing!

I remember several years ago reading a journal for pastors and church leaders about a Christian young man who’d become increasingly enslaved to pornography – it was beginning to lead him ever closer to acting out through adultery. He was now in his early 30’s and coming to terms with the fact that he was in bondage to his lust.

He wanted to break free and decided to tell his story to a pastor he knew – a pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches in the country. This article kept both men’s names anonymous.

He finally arranged to have lunch with this pastor while they were both traveling to another state. Over lunch, and with a lot of trepidation at first, this younger man began pouring out his story to this middle aged, well respected leader. He finally

finished his story and sat back waiting for either a lecture or some form of rebuke or perhaps some wisdom and guidance on what steps to take next. Instead, this older gentleman’s eyes filled with tears and he began to weep. Finally, he looked up and said, “You have just described the journey I’ve been on . . . only for me, it developed into adulterous liaison after liaison.

He pulled from his coat pocket a piece of paper and slid it across the table and said, “This is a list of the prescriptions I pick up when I’m out of town to battle a number of sexually transmitted diseases I now suffer with.”

Neither of these men would have ever imagined 20 years earlier how far their slide would take them before they realized that the toys of temptation eventually morph into a trap.

It isn’t long before Samson begins to hear the chanting mob gathering for a great celebration.

Look at verse 23 informs us that the cities of Philistia plan a great feast and sacrifice in celebration of Samson’s capture.

It would be held in the stadium of Gaza – and from all we can tell, this was a massive building with a covered portion, supported by pillars set on stone foundations looking out over a huge arena. The dignitaries would sit under the portico and the general public would be in the stadium seats up above – sort of a slanted roof, so to speak.^{iv}

And they made Samson – *verse 25 tells us – entertain them.*

It’s the same verb translated *dancing in Second Samuel 6* where David is dancing in front of the ark.

But this is no random leaping and jumping . . . it was the war dance of Israel. It was the national dance of victory which we’re told nations adopted in ancient days.

In other words, the Philistine kings and these 3,000 Philistines were forcing blind Samson to go out into this courtyard and dance the war dance of Israel and perhaps even chant the Israelite song of victory.^v

And they laughed and jeered at both Samson and his God.

God is about to bring the house down . . . not just to answer Samson’s prayer request to be used once more in battle, but to judge the blasphemy of these Philistines.

Chapter 1 in Samson’s biography can be called – Sliding

Chapter 2 can be called – Crashing.

3. Chapter 3 can be entitled – Renewing.

Sliding . . . collapsing . . . but the narrative now trembles ever so slightly with hope and grace.

There are two signs that Samson's heart and mind have changed.

1. First, Samson verbalizes genuine repentance

Notice his prayer in *verse 28*. *Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me..."*

Stop there for a moment.

The Hebrew word for remember is important to understand. It's a word linked in the Bible to the idea of forgiving and forgetting sin.

Isaiah the prophet used the same word as he quotes God speaking – *For behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.* (Isaiah 65:17)

Samson is effectively saying, "Lord remember me . . . and in so doing, please don't remember my sins anymore."

This is a heartfelt, broken prayer of repentance.

The wonderful lesson at this moment is to discover that no matter how far we fall in our spiritual experience, we never fall beyond the possibility of God's forgiveness . . . and some form of usefulness.

Samson wasn't restored as a judge, but he was restored once more as a warrior.

2. Secondly, Samson not only verbalizes genuine repentance; he verbalizes genuine dependence.

Further in *verse 28*. *And please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.*

Here's the important thing – Samson now recognizes that his strength doesn't come from his hair – it comes from his God.

Listen, blind Samson can finally see.

Spiritual vision is renewed and, perhaps for the first time, he can actually see what matters most.

And God answers his prayer – *verse 30b and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it.*

This would be tantamount to America losing in one catastrophe, the President and Vice President; his entire cabinet; the Joint Chiefs of Staff, every member of congress, the supreme court – along with all the fortune 500 CEO's . . . in one fell swoop.

All 5 kings are killed – all the dignitaries and luminaries and key citizens – the movers and the shakers of the Philistine world are in the stadium seats and all are crushed in this massive collapse.

The Bible reads in *verse 30* that that Samson killed more at this moment of his death than he had been able to kill in any and every battle combined during his life.

Still, this isn't a fairytale ending.

God forgave Samson, but he lost a full reward and ultimately because of the consequences of his sin lost his life.

And Samson's hair grew back, but his eyes didn't.

Samson was restored by God to a demonstration of power, but not the place of power as a Nazirite judge.

Samson had toyed with sin for 20 years or more; his chief weakness was his eyes – sexual lust and the fornication that followed – the very sin that the Apostle Paul tells us to run from – don't debate it, don't toy with it, don't flirt with it, run from it!

You are playing with fire . . .

- so run for cover . . .
- run for the sake of your family . . .
- run for the sake of your integrity . . .
- run for the sake of your spiritual vitality . . .
- run toward the fullness of your usefulness by the Spirit of God . . .
- run for your church's sake and your own testimony's sake . . .
- run for your future's sake.

You cannot tame a blazing fire . . . run for your life.

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i Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Quest for Character (Multnomah, 1987), p. 105

ii Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (Harper and Row, 1973), p. 54

iii C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume II (Eerdmans, reprint 1991), p. 424

iv Inrig, p. 257

v H.D.M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell, editors; The Pulpit Commentary: First Samuel (Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), p. 340