

Developing Spiritual Strength that Lasts

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If you have ever watched a marathon, you know there is a big crowd of runners at the starting line. As you get toward the finish line, it thins out. Ministry is like a marathon. Many people start out great but do not make it to the finish line. I want you to make it to the finish line.

What are the keys to ministry that help people thrive over a lifetime?

The life of Samson shows us a negative example of what *not* to do. He had everything going for him—a great start, abilities, good looks, and strength. But one day, he lost it all. His strength had left him, and he ended up a broken man.

Here are lessons from Samson’s life that can help you maintain spiritual strength throughout your ministry.

Discipline your desires.

When we begin to make decisions based on pleasure rather than principle and live out of convenience rather than out of conviction, we risk losing our spiritual strength. Even good things—like food, money, sex, and sleep—can zap our spiritual strength if taken to the extreme.

God says, *“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”* (Galatians 6:7-8 TLB).

Samson lived to please his own desires. In three different chapters, he had relationships with three different women. Judges 14 tells the story of his desire for a young Philistine woman. Even his parents warned against the relationship, but Samson would not listen. Samson would fit right in with our culture today, which often encourages self-indulgence.

First Peter 4:1-2 says, *“Strengthen yourselves with the same way of thinking that [Jesus] had . . . Live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires”* (GNT).

Just because we want something does not mean we should have it. Self-indulgence will sap the strength out of our lives.

Restrain your reactions.

People will hurt you in ministry. It's easy to get resentful. People will let you down and disappoint you. They will break promises.

Samson lived in a constant state of anger that stemmed from resentment. He reacted violently to everything. His primary motivation in life was to get even. One time, he killed 30 men just to get even on a bet.

The Bible says, *"Samson said to them, 'This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines. I will really harm them' . . . Samson said to them, 'Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you' . . . 'I merely did to them what they did to me'"* (Judges 15:3, 7, 11 NIV).

Three times in just that one chapter he talks about getting even. Resentment is self-defeating. It will poison your ministry if you let it. You cannot simultaneously hold on to grudges and follow the will of God—no matter what people do. I have seen godly people in ministry who were hurt by a situation and who allowed that hurt to fester until they lost all their effectiveness.

Leaders are easy targets. Whoever calls the shots takes the shots. It's part of being a leader. Get used to it and learn how to deal with it in a sweet spirit.

Keep your commitments.

Carelessness, whether it is in your time, money, or relationships, will eventually sink your ministry.

Samson's strength was a gift from God. It came from a Nazarite commitment he'd made that involved three parts: no alcohol, a special diet, and never cutting his hair. God wanted Nazarites (and he wants us) to be different. Samson continually compromised his commitments to God. He toyed with temptation as he tried to get as close as possible to the fire without getting burned. But eventually, he did get burned.

We see this in his relationship with Delilah in Judges 16. She was hired to test his strength. Three times she tried to find the secret of his strength. Finally, he told her his secret—and it ended up destroying him.

Samson's inability to keep his commitments to God produced devastating consequences for him. Your spiritual life is only as strong as your weakest spiritual commitment.

What happened to Samson? You know the end of the story. He lost his power, his potential, and his freedom. He lost it all! Fortunately, in prison he repented and recommitted his life. God gave him a second chance. Aren't you glad?