Do you know anyone whose life was filled with great promise when they were young, but they never came close to reaching their potential? Samson—whose story is found in the Old Testament Book of Judges—was a man like that. It’s not easy to make sense of the way his story unfolded. His life begs the question, “How could a man with so much promise fail so miserably to reach his potential?”

Samson’s life began with great promise... An angel of the Lord appeared to his mother—who up to that time had been unable to conceive a child—and told her she was going to have a son. His parents were told to raise this boy as a Nazirite—one fully devoted to God. It was foretold that this boy would begin to deliver his people, the Israelites, from their arch enemies, the Philistines. The boy was born and as he grew it became apparent that he had been blessed with superhuman strength. His name “Samson” meaning “sunny” or “luminous” pointed to his bright future.

But Samson never came close to fulfilling his potential... He adopted a cavalier attitude toward his tremendous gifts and high calling. He carelessly entered a number of romantic entanglements with Philistine women. He used his great strength in trivial and bizarre ways. And on several occasions he foolishly placed himself in great danger, assuming that his strength would bail him out. Samson’s life was marked by crazy shenanigans, a lack of discipline and behavior that raised a lot of red flags. Eventually he experienced tragic failure at the hands of a Philistine woman named Delilah.

Samson is an easy target for our criticism. But as I think about his life, I suspect that behind Samson’s failure is something every one of us can relate to. Samson was aware of the phenomenal strength God blessed him with and he exercised his gift throughout his life. I imagine that from the time he was a boy Samson’s mother told him that he was destined to deliver his people from the Philistines. But Samson missed a critical aspect of his calling. He didn’t understand that his strength came from God and for him to realize his destiny, he needed to remain connected to God.
I can’t relate to Samson’s great strength, but I can relate to his tendency to overlook his need of God. God has called me to be a pastor to the people of this church. He’s also blessed with me a wonderful wife and 3 awesome kids to whom I’m called to be a husband and father. And He’s put a passion in my heart to invest time in people who don’t know Christ in the hope that I can point them toward a relationship with Jesus. But my tendency is to try and fulfill these callings in my own strength. I know I need God to be able to live out what He’s called me to, but it’s easy in the routine of day to day life to forget my desperate need of staying connected to Jesus. The Scripture John read at the beginning of the service today—Psalm 127:1—has become a life verse for me. “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” Psalm 127:1

Think about your life. What’s God’s calling for you? How has He specially gifted you? What passions has He placed in your heart? Do you find it easy to rely on God and to depend on his provisions, or do you find yourself pursuing God’s calling and using gifts you’ve been blessed with in your own strength—forgetting that He is your source of strength?

Jesus knows our tendency well. He understands that it’s natural for us to rely on our strength and lose sight of our need of Him. That’s why in some of his last words to his disciples, just before He was arrested, He spoke these words:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1 and 4 & 5

As we ask the question, “What can I learn from Samson about partnering with God to do his work in our world?,” it’s important for us to keep in mind our propensity to do life in our own strength and to push God to the margins. For Samson, this propensity didn’t just keep him from fulfilling the incredible potential that marked his life, it also led to epic failure—the title of today’s sermon. I invite you to follow along as I read the well-known account of Samson & Delilah found in Judges chapter 16 verses 4-22.

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

Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied." He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man." So 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. Delilah then said to Samson, "Until now, 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 fabric and 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. Then 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." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was tired to death.

So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." When 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. Having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him. Then 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. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

It seems that Samson's life was marked by cognitive dissonance—on one level he understood that his tremendous strength came from God, but he lived as if he was the source of his strength. We see Samson's confusion about the origin of his strength in his interaction with Delilah. When Samson explained to Delilah that he was a Nazirite he said that if his hair was cut, his strength would leave him and he would become as weak as any other man. But after his hair had been cut Samson awoke and assumed that he would shake himself free of his captors just as he had done three times before. At some level Samson understood that the phenomenal strength he possessed came from God, but he lived as if he controlled his own strength.
Verse 20 of Judges 16 is a tragic commentary on Samson's life. “But he did not know that the Lord had left him.” Judges 16:20

Listen to Mark Atteberry’s summary this verse:

“Could there possibly be a more chilling phrase? But it isn’t surprising. Throughout his life, Samson took his greatest blessings for granted: his parents, his calling, his vow, his strength, his security and his God. Things came so easy for him...he was so used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it, that he rarely, if ever, gave a thought to the gifts that made it all possible. Or, more importantly, to the Giver of those gifts. He simply rode the wave, assuming it would never end.” Atteberry, The Samson Syndrome

Samson lived his life from a posture of pride and arrogance, a sense of being indestructible and a lack of awareness of how his actions in the moment affected his long-term destiny. Samson’s posture isn’t one God wants us to mirror in our lives.

As I was thinking about the tragedy of Samson’s life, I thought of another Bible story in which the main character adopted a much different posture—one that every one of us would do well to emulate. If you have your Bibles or electronic devices, I encourage you to find I Kings chapter 3 verses 4-14. This is the account of the Lord appearing to Solomon in a dream at the outset of Solomon’s reign as King of Israel.

The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. “Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.” I Kings 3:4-14

Think about the contrast of King Solomon’s response to his high calling to be Israel’s king with Samson’s response to the gifting and calling God placed on his life. Solomon could have had anything he wanted, but he embraced humility and displayed wisdom well beyond his years. He acknowledged his sense that he wasn’t ready or able to serve as Israel’s king and he desperately needed God’s wisdom. Solomon embraced a posture of humility and dependence
on God. (Those of you familiar with Solomon’s story know that while he had a great beginning
Solomon drifted off course. As he grew older and more successful he too succumbed to pride
and a lack of discipline and moral purity in his life and God’s plans for his life weren’t realized.)

In contrast to Solomon’s promising start, Samson’s pride and failure to understand his
dependence on God led to his epic failure. Summing up Samson’s life, Mark Atteberry writes,
“Perhaps no one in the Bible did so little with so much.” Ouch! None of us want to be
remembered by words like that.

Think about Samson’s failure in the context of “posture”—how we position ourselves
before God. The question I’d like us to consider is: What stance do we take or how do we
position ourselves in response to God’s calling and gifting in our lives? As we look to answer
that question, I’d like us to focus on 3 words: Humility, Dependence on God and Self-Discipline.

Our first response to God’s calling on our lives and the gifts He blesses us with is
Humility. Humility comes from the Latin word humus—meaning “grounded,” “from the earth,”
or “low.” Being humble doesn’t mean that we belittle ourselves or grovel. It means that we
view ourselves in right relationship to God and others. We place ourselves under God. Pride is
stepping out from under our right positioning with God and trying to usurp his authority.
Humility, as it pertains to God’s calling and gifting, leads us to understand that all we have
comes from God and is meant to bring glory to God.

The 2nd word or phrase that’s critical for our correct posture in response to God’s gifting
and calling is Dependence on God. Dependence on God is closely tied to humility. Dependence
recognizes that we can’t do what God has called us to do on our own—even though God has
gifted us. Samson came to think that he was indestructible and that his strength was a natural
part of who he was. Only one time in Samson’s story do we hear of him praying and asking God
for help—and that comes next week. Samson didn’t acknowledge God or rely on Him. He
consistently operated in his own strength.

The 3rd word which is important for us to embrace in light of God’s calling and gifting is
Self-Discipline. Discipline is noticeably absent in Samson’s story. He didn’t seem to receive it
from his parents. And he definitely didn’t live a disciplined life on his own. Self-discipline is our
response God’s blessings of his calling and his gifts—it’s what we do in response to what God
has done for us. Self-discipline isn’t highly valued in much of our culture—it’s viewed as restrictive and confining. We celebrate self-indulgence. And when self-discipline is valued, the goal is usually accomplishing our dreams and gratifying ourselves, rather than positioning ourselves to be effectively used by God.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul has to say about self-discipline as he encourages his son in the faith Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:20 & 21. I’ll read it from the MESSAGE paraphrase:

In a well-furnished kitchen there are not only crystal goblets and silver platters, but waste cans and compost buckets—some containers used to serve fine meals, others to take out the garbage. Become the kind of container God can use to present any and every kind of gift to his guests for their blessing.

2 Timothy 2:20 & 21

“The kind of container God can use to present any and every kind of gift to his guests for their blessing.” That’s a fitting challenge. “Are we the kind of container God can use to accomplish his purposes?”

Samson was blessed by God with a special gift of strength and a high calling to deliver God’s people from their enemies, but his response to God didn’t match God’s calling for him and he failed to realize his God-given potential. Next week we’ll look at how Samson’s life ended, and just like everything else in Samson’s life, the final scene of his life was dramatic.

God has created each of us with a unique calling based upon our gifts, passions, experiences and personalities. And He has positioned us in roles where we have influence with others as parents, students, employees, neighbors and friends. He wants us to resist our tendency to depend on ourselves and instead embrace a posture marked by humility, dependence on Him and self-discipline so that we’ll bear much fruit for Him. As I pray for you and then as we sing together, I invite you to ask God to speak to your heart. What is He saying to you today about his calling and gifting in your life and about your response to Him?