

JOSHUA 16:4-20 | DELILAH'S TRICKERY

Verses 1-9, see session 9

VERSE 10

Delilah, failing in her initial attempt to uncover the secret of Samson's strength, shifts her tactics in a more overtly manipulative direction. Both her initial question and her follow-up blatantly express her intention to overpower Samson and deliver him into the hands of his enemies (compare v. 6). The transparency of her agenda raises questions about Samson's discernment, or lack thereof. Here, Delilah is employing emotional manipulation as a tactic, using her intimate relationship with Samson to gain potentially lethal information. The clarity of her intentions makes her efforts not just a test of Samson's physical strength but also a scrutiny of his emotional and spiritual resolve.

VERSE 11

For the second time, Samson attempts to mislead Delilah. He proposes that if she were to "**bind me fast with new ropes,**" his supernatural strength would dissipate. The term "fast" in the 17th-century context of the King James Version meant "secure," echoing the Hebrew root אָסַר [asar], which means to bind or restrain. The emphasis on "**new ropes that never were occupied**" can be seen as a deflection, but it also carries layers of religious or cultural significance. New or unused objects in ancient Near Eastern culture—and indeed, in the Hebrew tradition—were often considered pure and worthy of use in worship.

What is especially concerning is Samson's willingness to continue down a perilous path, despite the apparent risks. Most of us would agree that, psychologically, each successive decision to engage in risky or unethical behavior often becomes easier than the last. This holds true for Samson as he finds it increasingly comfortable to get so close to the truth with Delilah, disregarding the gradual erosion of his spiritual and ethical integrity. This pattern should serve as a sobering warning for anyone who finds themselves incrementally drifting away from their convictions.

VERSE 12 -

Once again, Delilah initiated the plan, with men in ambush awaiting in the chamber. Once again, the new rope was of no consequence, being broken "like a thread."

VERSE 13 -

Once again, Delilah feigned dismay at being mocked and lied to, which should win some kind of trophy in the irony olympics, since she is mocking and lying through the entire scene. One wonders why, after a second attempt, Samson did not wake up to the reality of what is happening. Perhaps all of us, from time to time, move forward in defiance of reality, and this is exactly what Samson is doing.

Samson suggests that if his hair, tied in seven locks, was placed as threads of a loom, then he would lose his strength. It is unknown whether his hair would be placed on the roller that makes the warp or woven into the threads of the warp, and thus become the weft. The warp threads are the vertical foundation threads, and the weft threads are woven horizontally through them.

This is clearly not a normal activity. It inches more closely to the true secret of his strength, and it continues in the semi-mystical and religious aspect that each of the other schemes have displayed. It is just enough out of normal that Delilah is willing to try it. The fact that this could be done with his hair gives some insight into the length of his hair.

VERSES 14-15 -

Round three ends just like rounds one and two: Samson has no trouble overcoming the restraint, and Delilah cries. The “triple play” serves to bring about increased tensions both for the reader, who has a growing sense of impending doom, and, no doubt, for Delilah and the Philistines. With each successive attempt they had to be wondering if they were being played or if they were making progress.

One may wonder why Delilah continues with her tactics and why Samson continues to indulge her. It serves as yet another reminder that agenda (love, power, greed, etc.) are powerful forces and cannot be lightly dismissed.

VERSE 16 -

Delilah was persistent, wearing Samson down with her words to the point that “his soul was vexed unto death.” The literal Hebrew is “his soul was short to die.” Similar examples can be seen of Rebekah in Genesis 27:46 who cried, “what good shall my life do me?” Similarly, in 1 Kings 19:4, Elijah asked the Lord to take his life.

The strength of the statement about being “vexed unto death” displays the tremendous emotional pressure Samson was under. He clearly had a love for Delilah, and also clearly did not want to reveal the secret of his strength. This was a “war within” if ever there was one. One could also argue, I suppose, that Delilah must have been under great pressure as well, having her own “war within.” Was she displaying her true intentions or was she worried about her own wellbeing?

I suspect that many stories could be told of both men and women being slowly worn down with words to the point that they have lost all joy and purpose of living. As humans, we should recognize the weakness of our passions on both sides: we may vex, and we may be vexed.

The verse is a turning point. Due to his emotional exhaustion, Samson is about to reveal his secret. Yet again we find a lesson for life, that we should not make momentous decisions or declarations at moments of depression or exhaustion.

VERSE 17 -

Samson finally “told her all his heart” and revealed the secret to his strength. Of course, one wonders why he did so. Was it because he trusted Delilah? There would be no basis for trust in this relationship, so that seems to be a stretch of the imagination. More likely, Samson either had a deep love for Delilah (see v. 4), or he was indeed “vexed unto death” (v. 16). Either or a combination is a possibility. He had been in public life for 20 years, which is emotionally taxing in itself, and possibly the fuel for the liaison with Delilah in the first place. The 20 years were preceded by and filled with challenges and opposition. Could it be that Samson was so “vexed unto death” that he did not care if he lost his strength? This seems to be a possibility.

Some may desire to fix an exact cause to Samson’s demise. I think to do so would most likely result in a reductionistic view of the text, which itself seem to have a reticence to provide straightforward answers.

In this case, Samson’s revelation not only meant his own demise, but would put the nation in jeopardy. At this point the text does not reveal the outcome, but the first-time reader would be filled with worrisome anticipation.