

# JUDGES 16

---

## **Judges 16:1–21. Samson and Delilah**

Samson’s downfall begins in Judges 16 and culminates with his death at the end of the chapter. The narrative starts off with a cryptically short episode that describes how Samson was with a prostitute in Gaza (a Philistine city on the coast of the Mediterranean; Judges 16:1–3). Not much more can be said about this vignette other than perhaps it acts to reinforce the idea that Samson was becoming increasingly reckless and erratic toward the end of his life. In any case, at verse 4 Samson met another woman—this time the one who would finally be responsible for his demise: Delilah.

Not much is known about Delilah—whose name has become synonymous with “cunning seductress”—the femme fatale archetype of countless works of art and literature. (Although note that the biblical account does not necessarily portray her as deliberately attempting to seduce Samson for nefarious purposes.) She was presumably a Philistine, given her familiarity with Samson’s Philistine enemies (verse 5), and probably had experience working with textiles based on her ability to weave (as seen in verses 13–14). Her name means “dangling curls, loose hair,” an appropriate (and not-too-subtle) nod to the cause of Samson’s undoing.

Much of chapter 16 is spent describing Samson and Delilah’s back-and-forth scheming (verses 4–21). Samson misled Delilah as to the source of his strength three times (verses 6–16), with each instance resulting in her feigning love and eventual outrage. Finally, in verse 17, Samson revealed the secret: “There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother’s womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.” The answer links Samson’s downfall with the angel of the Lord’s pronouncement at Samson’s birth as narrated at Judges 13:2–7, thus bringing the story full circle.

Having been stripped of his strength, Samson was finally overpowered by his Philistine enemies (verses 18–21). His sad outcome (having his eyes put out and being cast into exile or prison) was not an uncommon punishment for rebels and war captives in the ancient world. The Judahite king Zedekiah would suffer a similar fate after his failed attempt to rebel against Babylon centuries later (see 2 Kings 25:7). Samson had been reduced to a pitiful figure, having put himself on this disastrous trajectory a little bit at a time.

### **Judges 16:22–31. Samson’s Death**

Blinded and imprisoned, Samson was now totally at the mercy of his Philistine enemies, who used him as an object of sport and mockery (Judges 16:23–25). The narrator, however, begins this final section of the story with a hint as to what was to come: “Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven” (verse 22). As would be expected, Samson’s final act was to get vengeance on the Philistines by, as it were, taking them down with him, proclaiming, “Let me die with the Philistines” (verse 30).

Samson’s prayer, recorded in verse 28, is interesting both for what it does and does not include. Although it has the tone of a prayer of penance, it is more a prayer for vengeance, lacking the sort of deep, introspective repentance one might normally expect in a situation like this one. This, however, was in perfect keeping with Samson’s personality and character. As a final act of mercy, God granted Samson his wish to regain his strength (since his hair had regrown) in order to destroy the Philistines as retribution for his lost eyes. The irony of this is twofold: first, that Samson only fulfilled his divine mission as Israel’s judge by giving up his own life (compare Judges 13:5; 14:4), and second, that his final act as judge was to avenge *himself* rather than Israel as a whole (even if he rescued Israel indirectly through this feat).

Although Samson was a morally dubious character at best, the account of his twenty-year reign as Israel’s judge does end on a somewhat positive, if not also somber, note: that he was at least given a proper burial in his ancestral plot (16:31).

### **Credits**

**Author:** Stephen O. Smoot

**General Editor:** Taylor Halverson

**Associate Editor:** Morgan Tanner

**Senior Editor:** Sarah Whitney Johnson

**Assistant Editor:** Verlanne Johnson

**ScripturePlus Design:** Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye