

# Unfulfilled Potential

Destructive Decisions, April 23 & 24 | Judges 13:1-5, 24-25 (Judges 13:1-25, 16:22-31)  
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## HOW DO WE AVOID LIFE-ALTERING MISTAKES?

### **Some destructive decisions can be life-altering.**

Consider some destructive decisions you might make. You could cheat on your spouse, steal money, lie, vent anger inappropriately, become addicted to substances, or behave dangerously.

If you make these kinds of decisions, you will almost certainly face life-altering consequences.

### **Jeff Zucker made destructive decisions that were life-altering.**

Jeff Zucker was the CEO of CNN until February of this year.

Zucker failed to disclose a romantic relationship between himself and another CNN executive.

His ethical violation was ironic considering Zucker had fired one of CNN's most famous anchors, Chris Cuomo, over ethical violations.

More complicated legal issues, strategic interests, and vendettas may have been involved.

However, Jeff Zucker left himself vulnerable when he failed to disclose his romantic relationship. It's a destructive decision with life-altering consequences.<sup>1</sup>

### **We could call these life-altering mistakes moral failures. What is a moral failure?**

- **Moral failure involves breaking a moral standard.** As Christians, we know that God establishes our moral standards. Not all mistakes and not all sins amount to moral failures. For something to become a moral failure, the moral standard has to be important to you, me, or both of us.
- **Moral failure may involve doing something we are expected not to do.** For instance, we steal when we are expected not to steal. We break a rule or transgress a boundary.
- **Moral failure may involve not doing something we are expected to do.** In this kind of moral failure, we fail to do something expected of us, to meet a goal, or to complete a task.
- **Moral failure disrupts our lives.** When our destructive decision is known, the consequences frequently break relationships. We may lose our job, our friends, our marriage, and our family. We lose our ability to fulfill the roles in life that are important to us and may lose our ability to do the job that God designed us optimally to do.

### **How do we avoid these life-altering mistakes?**

For answers, we are going back to the book of Judges. I covered Judges quickly last spring.

This year, I want to come back to the life of one Israelite leader, Samson. His life shows us how destructive decisions are made and the life-altering consequences that follow.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/02/cnn-president-jeff-zucker-resigns-relationship-00004681>

As we study Samson's life, we will come away with help for avoiding destructive decisions and life-altering mistakes ourselves.

## SAMSON'S LIFE ILLUSTRATES MORAL FAILURE

### **Samson's job was to begin delivering God's people from the Philistines.**

Samson lived during the period of time after the Exodus, after Israel settled the Promised Land, and before the era of the kings.

During those years, Israel was spiraling downward. The faith they had when God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and sent them into the Promised Land faded quickly.

They followed a predictable pattern: they prospered, they wandered away from God to worship idols, God sent enemies to get their attention, the people cried out to God for deliverance, God sent a deliverer, they came back to God, they pushed out their enemies with his help, and they prospered for a period of time until the whole cycle started again.

Each cycle, the people fell further, stayed away longer, and resisted coming back to God.

Before Samson led Israel, the people had been under the sway of their enemies, the Philistines, for 40 years. That's a long time!

Plus, the Israelites never cried out to God. God sovereignly intervened to save his people by sending Samson.

### **Samson broke a moral standard.**

Of course, Samson had the same moral standards for his life that we all do.

Samson's life had a special moral standard given to him by God. When he was born, God made it clear that Samson was supposed to observe the Nazirite vow for his entire life.

The term "Nazirite" comes from the Hebrew word for *dedicate* or *consecrate*. The Nazirite is one who is specially dedicated to God for a period of time or for a lifetime.

Nazirites specifically did not touch a corpse, drink alcohol, or cut their hair.<sup>2</sup>

As long as Samson kept the Nazirite vow, God made him strong and powerful.

Samson broke this moral standard.

### **Samson did things he was expected not to do.**

As we'll see in coming weeks, Samson systematically broke his Nazirite vow.

He made specific, multiple destructive decisions.

Most famously, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah.

When he did, the rulers of the Philistines bribed Delilah to discover the secret of his strength.

Delilah worked diligently to get Samson's secret from him.

Samson finally gave in. He told her that his strength came from the fact that he had never cut or shaved his hair. If his head were to be shaved, then his strength would be gone.

Delilah lulled Samson to sleep and had his head shaved while he slept.

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<sup>2</sup> Brand, C., Draper, C., England, A., Bond, S., Clendenen, E. R., & Butler, T. C. (Eds.). (2003). [Nazirite](#). In *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (pp. 1178-1179). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

When he woke his strength was gone, and the Philistines were easily able to capture him. Samson did things he was expected not to do.

### **Samson did not do what he was expected to do.**

Samson was expected to protect and deliver Israel. When the Philistines overpowered Samson, they gouged his eyes out, put him in chains, and forced him to work in a prison grain mill. They kept him alive for their own entertainment.

Rotting away in a Philistine prison is somewhat short of delivering Israel.

### **Samson's moral failure ended his life and work.**

In prison, Samson's hair began to grow again.

At some point, the Philistines decided to throw a party celebrating their victory over Samson in the temple of their god, Dagon, which was filled.

They called Samson out from his prison to entertain them.

Samson asked to be given a chance to lean on the pillars holding up the roof.

Then, Samson prayed to the Lord asking for strength one more time.

When he grasped the two middle pillars and pushed with all his might, the pillars came down and collapsed the temple, killing everyone inside.

The death toll was in the thousands—many were Philistine nobles and leaders.

Samson killed more Philistines that day than in the rest of his life combined.

However, his moral failure ended his life, leaving his work incomplete. There was no peace.

As we examine Samson's life, death, and moral failure, we can learn some big lessons.

## **THREE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF MORAL FAILURE**

### **1. DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY POTENTIAL**

#### **Samson's birth was surrounded by miracles in Judges 13:2-5:**

*There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. And his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."*

Samson's miraculous birth begins with Manoah and his wife from the tribe of Dan in Israel.

Manoah and his wife had no children. That's a plot twist we've seen in plenty of other places. God frequently chose to work through such people to save Israel.

An angel appeared to Manoah's wife to announce that she would have a son.

The angel told her to observe the Nazirite vow herself until she delivered the baby.

The angel also told her that her son should always observe the Nazirite vow, especially the part about not cutting his hair.

This boy would grow up to begin saving Israel from the Philistines.

**Samson's birth was also clouded by ominous signs of problems to come in Judges 13:24-25:**

*And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson. And the young man grew, and the LORD blessed him. And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.*

The trouble really started back at the beginning of the chapter.

When the angel addressed Manoah's wife, he was able to assume that she knew of the Nazirite vow which indicated that she was familiar with the Old Testament Law.

However, the angel had to point out specifically that she should avoid eating unclean food. This was expected of every faithful Israelite. The angel knew that she was no faithful Israelite.

The picture Judges 13 paints of Manoah indicates that perhaps he had a faith as informed by paganism as by devotion to the Lord.

That's confirmed when they name their son. His name, "Samson," honors a sun god worshipped locally. It basically means "son of the sun." That was Israel at the time. Problem.

**However, Samson grew up possessing powerful gifts from God.**

The Spirit of the Lord was clearly with him.

The Lord made him grow up strong and powerful.

He was also naturally charismatic, which came out quickly when he became an adult. People liked him and wanted to be with him.

**Such potential easily clouds our judgment.**

It happened in the case of Samson. People were dazzled by his strength and charisma.

It happens to us. We see people with extraordinary gifts, and we are transfixed. If they deliver results that we value, we easily overlook their flaws.

We can even be blinded to our own flaws by our own potential and gifts.

In our blindness, we fail to perceive the seeds of destructive decisions and moral failures.

The fact that happened in Samson's case should cause us to pause and think:

**Moral failures can happen to even the strongest of us.**

We are all vulnerable to making destructive decisions.

Knowing that we are all vulnerable to destructive decisions and moral failures is our first line of defense against making them.

Don't be distracted by potential. That may be the most important thing we learn today.

## 2. SELF-CENTEREDNESS TURNS POTENTIAL INTO BOREDOM

**Samson became completely self-centered.**

We will see that in the destructive decisions we study for the next few weeks.

We will find him wanting women he shouldn't have.

We'll find him responding out of anger chiefly motivated by his own mistakes and desires.

Samson is the center of his own world and convinced that he can be master of his own life.

### **Self-centeredness is a form of idolatry that comes naturally to us after the Fall.**

The world we were created for is a world where we are in fellowship with God, we long to do what God wants us to do, and God is in charge.

In the Fall, we chose to make our own rules so that we might become the people we wanted to be. In so doing, we pushed God out of his position of authority over our lives.

After the Fall, we are now naturally self-centered. We want to be in charge of our own lives and make our own rules. Getting what we want becomes our ultimate end.

Self-centeredness is an insidious form of idolatry, and we are naturally self-centered.

### **Self-centeredness leads to boredom.**

The writer of Ecclesiastes took self-centeredness to a whole new level.

He was a king of Israel, perhaps King Solomon.

He describes his own escalating levels of self-centeredness.

When wisdom did not satisfy him, he turned his attention to self-indulgence. **Ecclesiastes 2:1** says,

*I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." ...*

He pursued every type of pleasure available, but none of it was fulfilling.

He did great work but realized that he would leave it in someone else's care when he died.

He sought wisdom and stuff. In **Ecclesiastes 1:2** he passes judgement on it all,

*Vanity of vanities, say the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

He's empty. He's bored!

Self-centeredness leads to boredom.

### **People will do almost anything to avoid boredom.**

Harvard University conducted multiple studies seeking to understand how people respond to being alone with nothing to do but think. They found that people do not like being bored.

Before one study, people were exposed to a mild but painful electric shock. If they disliked the shock and were willing to pay \$5 to avoid being shocked again, they went on in the study.

Next, they were put into a room with no distractions and nothing to do for 15 minutes.

The only option of activity they had available to distract them was the same electric shock they had just indicated they would pay \$5 to avoid. They knew what it felt like.

Two-thirds of the men and one quarter of the women shocked themselves one or more times to relieve their boredom. People would rather be electrocuted than be bored!<sup>3</sup>

### **Samson's boredom led to his self-destructive behavior.**

Self-centered and bored, Samson repeatedly went into Philistine territory.

Repeatedly, he sought out Philistine women for company.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://wjh-www.harvard.edu/%7Edtg/WILSON%20ET%20AL%202014.pdf>

Repeatedly, his destructive decisions had life-altering consequences.

**Samson is not alone. Boredom frequently leads to self-destructive behavior.**

We seek to alleviate boredom by looking for something new to do or think.

Boredom makes some of us aggressive and others of us want to quit.

We snack obsessively, pick up our phones for distraction, drive fast, and turn to our addictions.

Boredom leads to impulsiveness.<sup>4</sup>

**British Prime Minister Boris Johnson probably should have thought about that back in 2020.**

As COVID spread, Johnson's government imposed strict lockdown laws across Great Britain.

As it turns out, though, Johnson didn't understand that the rules applied to him as well.

Reports have come out about parties happening at his official residence, Ten Downing Street.

When people were supposed to be socially distancing, Johnson's staff was gathering to party. The controversy over what happened is called "Partygate." The Prime Minister has been fined, his poll numbers continue to drop, and he is now facing a Parliamentary inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

Why would he take such a risk? Boredom.

**Boredom, then, should be a warning sign in life.**

Boredom for fifteen minutes really is no problem.

However, boredom that leaves life feeling flat and purposeless should make us think.

Boredom leads to destructive decisions and life-altering mistakes.

### 3. ONLY PURSUING OUR GOD-GIVEN PURPOSE TURNS POTENTIAL INTO REALITY

**God is the real Savior on mission in history to save his people.**

God is the one who called out the children of Abraham to bless.

God is the one who saved his people from slavery in Egypt.

God is the one who repeatedly saved his people from their persecutors and from themselves.

Saving his people Israel was just the beginning of God's mission in history to save his people.

God is the Savior, not Samson.

**God is the real Savior on mission in history, saving us in surprising ways!**

God offers salvation to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God saves us from sin, rebellion, and eternity in hell.

God saves us from self-centeredness, boredom, and meaninglessness as well!

God saves us TO new life AND new purpose!

When God saves us, we become disciples of Jesus and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God.

We become part of God's mission. That's who we are in Christ. That's our identity!

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<sup>4</sup> <https://theconversation.com/five-ways-boredom-could-be-changing-your-behaviour-for-better-or-worse-155784>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-61177313>

**Consequently, we have a God-given purpose to fulfill and God-given work to do.**

As disciples of Jesus, we have the jobs of learning to obey Jesus and of making more disciples.

As ambassadors of Christ, we represent the Kingdom of God in this world. We show people what the Kingdom of God is like. We advocate for the interests and values of the Kingdom. When possible, we reshape the world as it is into the world as it should be.

You may be thinking, "Wait a minute. That's not me. I can't do that!" It is you! Yes, you can be a disciple of Jesus and an ambassador for the Kingdom of God.

God has given each one of us unique gifts, our own calling, and a specific role to play in his mission to save the world.

Thus, we are all part of God's mission to save the world!

**Imagine what might Samson have done had he pursued his God-given purpose.**

Samson was gifted with supernatural strength, prowess in battle, and great charisma.

Imagine what God could have done through him!

If the life Samson might have lived were ever made into a movie, I suspect that we would need Peter Jackson or George Lucas to make the movie!

**Pursuing anything other than our God-given purpose twists our potential inward on ourselves.**

We slip back into our self-centeredness, and self-centeredness leads to boredom.

Boredom leads to destructive decisions and life-altering consequences.

All the potential God has put in us evaporates and comes to nothing. It's vanity.

**Only pursuing our God-given purpose turns our potential into reality.**

Pursuing our God-given purpose is the antidote to boredom and moral failure.

Pursuing our God-given purpose is the great adventure God created us for.

When we pursue our God-given purpose, our potential shines forth.

Better still, God's power shines through us and changes the world.