

“It’s just one! It’s no big deal! It’s just a little thing. What harm could it cause?” At least, that’s what you might think. Actually, “just one” can cause immense harm! A 2018 study in the British Medical Journal reports that men who smoke just one cigarette per day had a 48% higher risk of heart disease than non-smokers. It’s even grimmer for women. Just one cigarette a day more than doubles a woman’s risk of heart disease. That’s profound, because many people assume that “social smoking,” just one or two per day is a relatively safe practice compared to smoking a pack a day.

And yet, the study found that one-a-day smokers are still half as likely to contract a deadly disease as those who smoke 20 per day! The point being, although one cigarette a day might not seem like a big deal, it can lead to destruction.

We think the same way about sin sometimes, don’t we? It’s just one night of binge-drinking; just a one-night stand; just a little white lie; just one peek at a porn site; it’s just one...fill in the blank. But as much as we’d like to think that these seemingly “small” sins are no big deal, those sinful compromises are small steps towards big destruction. Because even shuffling baby steps towards a cliff eventually lead you to plunge off the edge. As the saying goes, ***If You Play With Fire...*** eventually, you get burned.

That’s basically the theme of the part of Samson’s life we’re exploring today. If you remember from last week, Samson is remembered for his great physical strength. But his disobedience to God’s commands showed his spiritual weaknesses. Today, a couple chapters later in Samson’s life, we still see the physical strength, and spiritual weaknesses of this flawed servant of God.

“Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her.” Samson obviously has a lustful weakness for women. But there’s something else this sinful action of Samson teaches us. Samson thought he was invincible.

The city of Gaza was the southernmost city of the Philistines, Samson’s enemies. Samson went as deep as possible into enemy territory to visit this prostitute, and it’s not like there weren’t any closer. Samson was making a statement to his enemies, “You can’t beat me!”

Certainly, Samson had plenty of reasons to think that. Time after time, God gave Samson miraculous strength to defeat and destroy the Philistines power, as God called him to do. And although Samson was in Gaza for reckless, sinful reasons, God still allowed him to escape unharmed—not sneaking out the back gate, but by literally picking up the entire gate system and carrying it up a hill! Samson once again got away unscathed, but his feelings of invincibility numbed him to the reality that he was playing with fire. And when you play with fire, eventually...you get burned.

A little later in Samson’s life--shocker! He gets himself into trouble, because he never met a woman he didn’t like. This one, Delilah, would ultimately lead to Samson’s downfall.

Aware of their enemy Samson’s weakness for women, the Philistines saw an opportunity. They said to Delilah, ***“See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him.”***

Notice that the Philistines wanted to know the SECRET to Samson’s great strength. I think that means Samson didn’t resemble The Incredible Hulk, like we sometimes picture. If Samson was massively ripped, wouldn’t the Philistines assume his bodybuilder muscles were the source of his strength? But instead, they wanted to know what other force made ordinary Samson miraculously strong. There was no secret. It was God!

We see how much Delilah really loved Samson though! With the offer of 15 years wages on the table, she immediately tries to pry the truth out of Samson. ***“Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”***

Not very subtle, right? Samson didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know what his girlfriend was doing, or who was pulling her strings. But Samson was confident that he couldn’t be beaten, so he played with her like a cat with a mouse. Three times he leads her down false trails—“Tie me up with 7 fresh bowstrings.” “Tie me up with new ropes that have never been used.” “Weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric of a loom.” Each time, Samson easily escaped, and with each “triumph” over Delilah and the Philistines, Samson’s illusion of invincibility increased.

Until finally, after years of playing with fire, Samson got burned. Delilah nagged him until he was ready to pull his hair out, finally telling her the truth. ***“No razor has ever been used on my head, because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me.”***

What was Samson doing? Why would he tell Delilah the truth, when he knew what she was trying to do? Was he naive? Was this a dumb mistake? Did Delilah just finally break him?

Samson knew what he was doing. He just truly believed he was invincible. His strength had saved him from his enemies so often, that he was confident he could escape any harm. But I think Samson was also testing God here. He'd sinned in the past, but had suffered no visible consequences. He'd even broken two of the three restrictions God established for Nazarites, but Samson just kept winning! So now, he also dabbles with the third condition—no cutting his hair.

Samson was so overconfident in his physical invincibility that he thought he was spiritually invincible too. With each rejection of God's commands, Samson took steps further away from God, and closer to spiritual destruction. It wasn't that Samson didn't know better. He explained to Delilah the Nazarite vow God had called him to. But in the moment, he just didn't care.

And in Samson's weakness, we can see ourselves, can't we? It's not that we don't know the Ten Commandments God gave us to follow. It's just that, in the moment, we don't really care. You see, Satan attacks us the same way he attacked Samson. In the moment, he tries to convince us that our sinful compromises and small steps away from God are no big deal.

When we're alone, vulnerable, and tempted, Satan tells us, "No one knows about it! No one else is being harmed by it! It's not a big deal." When we're tempted to repeat our pet sins, Satan tells us, "You've done it a bunch of times, and nothing bad ever happened. It's not a big deal!" When we feel ashamed of our sins, Satan tells you, "You're a Christian! God won't do anything, so do what you want!" Satan wants you to feel so spiritually invincible that you wander deep into enemy territory, complacently thinking your sins are no big deal.

But every sin ultimately leads us away from Jesus! Even seemingly small steps away from God will lead to eternal destruction. Imagine you're on a plane at LAX, headed for New York City. I read recently that if you altered the heading of that plane by just 3.5 degrees at takeoff, you'd end up in Washington D.C. instead of New York. It's just 3.5 degrees, a few feet shift in a different direction. You wouldn't even notice it waiting to take off, but that shift would lead you over 200 miles away from your destination. In the same way, even seemingly small compromises of sin ultimately lead us far from our eternal destination.

In the moment, we might think our sins are small and insignificant. But imagine that every time you sinned, you had to slap your mom in the face, as hard as you could. That would hopefully change the way you thought about the seriousness of your sins, right? Consider that sinning is about more than just breaking some rules. Sin is about breaking a relationship--our relationship with God. Every time we sin, we're telling God that we think we're more important than him... like slapping God in the face.

We're not spiritually invincible. There are no inconsequential sins, because each sin is a step away from God, and towards destruction. As Paul tells us, and as this example from Samson's life warns us, ***"If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."***

The secret to his strength revealed, Samson takes a nap on Delilah's lap as she calls in the barber to shave off the seven strands of his hair. And the Bible tells us, ***"His strength left him."*** As he wakes up and stretches, hearing the Philistines have returned, we see how much Samson had coned himself into thinking he was invincible from his words, ***"I'll go out as before and shake myself free."***

And the man who was so overconfident in his strength that he thought himself invincible, found out that he was very much beatable without God. ***"The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison."***

It's pretty ironic. Gaza, where Samson so casually entered to visit a prostitute to tell his enemies, "You can't beat me!" is where his enemies marched him off to in chains. The man who terrified every Philistine who saw him, now had no eyes to see. The hero who'd killed 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone, was now doing a donkey's work.

But here's the thing. It wasn't about the hair. Samson's hair didn't have some magical quality. Samson's strength left him because ***"the LORD had left him."*** Samson had taken so many steps towards spiritual destruction, pushing God away, that God finally left him, and the strength God had continually given him left too.

And that is the danger of every one of our sins, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant we might think them to be. Every sin is a step away from God, and a step towards destruction. If you continue to play with fire, eventually, you will get burned. If we continue pushing God away, eventually he'll give us what we want. This account of Samson's downfall is a sober warning for us. If we think we're standing firm, be careful that we don't fall!

The fact is, there's not much good news in this account of Samson. And yet, there is comfort here for sinners like us. As Paul told Timothy, ***"If we are faithless, [God] remains faithful.*** Even when we haven't been faithful to God, he never stops being faithful to us.

And if you come back next Sunday to hear the final account of Samson's life, we'll see that even though God and his strength left Samson, the faithful God didn't give up on him. Here's the cliffhanger to tide you over until next week: ***"But the hair on Samson's head began to grow again after it had been shaved."*** Samson's story isn't over yet. Neither is yours.