

Week 17 - Getting Even - Judges 15:1-20

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 32:34-38

Introduction

As we return to the Samson narrative after having a week off, let's take a moment to review

Samson was born a child of promise and given a special status by God from the moment of his conception

Then Scripture fast-forwards to Samson as a young adult who had traveled down to the Philistine village of Timnah, where he saw a woman who caught his eye

He was instantly smitten and had to have her, so he returned home and demanded his parents arrange to have her become his wife

His parents protested but did so purely based on social and ethnic considerations because Israel viewed the Philistines as inferior - the lowest of the low - and most often referred to them as "uncircumcised Philistines"

And they simply didn't want their son to marry someone so far beneath his status

His parent's arguments did not deter Samson, and he continued to demand they secure the woman as a wife for him

So the trio set out on a trip to Timnah to make the arrangements, and Samson separated from his parents when he ducked into a vineyard for a quick snack only to be rushed by a young lion which he tore in two with his bare hands

Sometime later, probably months later, we saw Samson and his parents again head to Timnah to finalize the wedding and the whole affair of the bees who had surprisingly made honey in the dried-up carcass of the lion

Of course, Samson, a man of sensual appetites, didn't resist the temptation of the honey and he disregarded his Nazarite status by scooping some out with his hands

And he shared the tainted honey with his parents thereby making them as ritually unclean as he had made himself

Once in Timnah, we then saw Samson host a seven-day drinking orgy complete with an unsolvable riddle that his Philistine "companions," in fact, did solve through subterfuge and threats against Samson's wife

We then saw the Holy Spirit rush upon Samson as in the case with the young lion, and Samson marched off to Ashkelon, where he slew 30 Philistine men to provide his "companions" with the garments he had promised them

And the last image we had of Samson was of him stomping off in anger back to his father's house in Mahaneh-dan

As we went through chapter 14, we noted that verse 4 serves as the pivotal verse for chapters 14-16, so let's look at that verse together again [**Judges 14:4**] -

His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

God intended to force a conflict between Israel and Philistia and thus begin to deliver them from the rule of the Philistines despite his people's seeming complacency

And all of the events in chapter 14 were leading up to this coming conflict, even as everyone involved acted according to their natures and personal desires -

God was using Samson in spite of Samson and he, his parents, the Philistines, and even the lion and the bees were all agents of God as God ratcheted up the tension

And in the final verse of chapter 14, we see Samson's father-in-law do something perfectly natural in his culture that will set off a chain reaction of retaliation and counter-retaliation

Believing that Samson had abandoned his daughter, he gave her to the Philistine young man who had served as Samson's best man at the wedding

I doubt that Philistine father was any more thrilled to have his daughter married to an Israelite than Samson's parents were about Samson marrying a Philistine, and he no doubt jumped at the chance to see her hitched to a countryman. But, as we will see in our passage today, that decision will have far-reaching and devastating consequences for him and all of Philistia when Samson eventually returns.

I. Samson returns and burns

Now, as chapter 15 opens, we see Samson arrive back at his father-in-law's home.

Apparently, the flower shops and candy stores were closed because, instead of showing up with a dozen roses and a box of assorted chocolates, Samson is carrying a young goat to impress his new wife, whom he had left behind in a huff.

We aren't told when his marriage took place and how much time had passed before Samson returned, but the impression of the account seems to indicate it may well have been early springtime when love is in the air.

And we know that Samson returned for his wife in May because that's the traditional time of the wheat harvest in that climate.

So it's May, and Samson comes strolling up to the house with a young goat tucked under one arm, and his father-in-law meets him at the door.

Samson announces he intends to go to his wife in the inner chamber, which is a somewhat ambiguous statement.

We don't know if he means simply to visit his wife or if he has come to consummate the marriage - an event that may well not have occurred during the seven days of the drinking fest.

Either way, it's clear that Samson had not intended to break off the marriage - or at least he was going to pretend that he hadn't - and he had now returned to collect his wife.

However, it turns out that he didn't need to bring the goat along to soften up his wife because she wasn't the problem.

Her father refused to let Samson enter his home as he explained how, given Samson's actions, he had concluded that Samson had fallen out of love and he was no longer interested in his daughter and had abandoned her.

So he solved the problem by giving her to Samson's best man.

Then he offered what he saw as an equitable solution that would extricate him from the whole mess and suggested Samson settle for his wife's younger sister, who, he claimed, was better looking anyway.

If nothing else that speaks to how the Philistines viewed the women of their culture, as it seems like her opinion on the matter was inconsequential.

It might be supposed that a man like Samson, who operated according to what seems right in his own eyes and was lured by what he found attractive, might well go along with the scheme, but we quickly learn differently.

And in verse 3, we see Samson walk away muttering to himself [**Judges 15:3**] -

"This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm."

And while we don't know at this point what Samson has in mind to do, we have the first instance of getting even, but our author is quick to tell us - and Samson's actions are rather bizarre.

Let's look at verses 4-5 [**Judges 15:4-5**] to see what Samson did to get even for how he had been treated.

So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchards.

Once you get past the terrible nature of what Samson did here to the people of Philistia over the slight he had suffered, the imagery is somewhat humorous - at least it would have been seen that way by the original audience.

We aren't told how Samson wrangled 300 foxes, but apparently, he had the help of the Holy Spirit again

And we aren't told why he sent them out tied together in 150 pairs instead of individually

One commentator suggests a fox with a torch tied to his tail would run in a straight line and not do much damage, whereas a bound pair might run a zig-zag course and stop to fight a bit, giving more opportunity to spread the fire

In any event, Samson saw fit to devastate the agricultural economy of the area over personal harm just to get back at his father-in-law, and his retaliation resulted in all the wheat, the vineyards, and the olive groves going up in flames

Just a wee bit of overkill if you ask me

As one would expect, the community was up in arms, and, when they investigated what had happened, they discovered it was Samson who had committed the act

And blaming Samson's father-in-law, they killed him and his daughter, presumably by burning down his house with them inside, just as they had threatened to do over Samson's riddle - so it turns out she didn't escape their threat after all

Thus we have the second attempt to get even - this time at the hands of the Philistines, and things have escalated from simple arson to murder by arson

Of course, the Philistines underestimated Samson's commitment to his wife - just as her father had done - or, at the very least, they underestimated Samson's readiness to retaliate against any slight or harm

And Samson's verbal response to justify what he is about to do is classic - Look with me at verse 7 [**Judges 15:7**] -

"If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit."

This is the third instance of getting even, making the score Samson 2, Philistines 1

We'll find out as the narrative continues that Samson was naïve to believe that he could end a firefight by igniting one last blaze, and it's kind of amusing to see him decide that he should have the last word in the matter

But in verse 8, we see Samson do battle with those who burned his wife, and he achieved total victory over them, leaving them in a tangled heap - that's what the cryptic phrase "hip and thigh" seems to mean

Then, discovering that his getting even again wasn't the last word but instead only served to stir things up further with the rest of the Philistines, he fled to lay low for a while in a cave

But the retaliation isn't over yet as we next see that the Philistines expect that they should have the final word in the "get even game."

II. Philistines rave and Judah caves

The Philistines sent a contingent of the armed forces to set up camp in Judah, and they made a raid on Lehi to confront the Judahites for harboring Samson

Lehi means "jawbone," and the name of the place serves as a foreshadowing of the action to come

This is the first action that expands the whole affair of back-and-forth retaliation from a personal matter between Samson and some of the Philistines into a national conflict

Of course, the Judahites are alarmed as they interpret the action of the Philistines as a declaration of war

But, instead of calling on Samson to lead them into battle as we likely would have seen in an earlier judge cycle, they try to negotiate for peace -

But they didn't know that God had instigated the Philistine aggression to disrupt the status quo, and there wasn't going to be any brokered peace

The Philistine answer to the question of "why" they have marched against Israel is straightforward; they have come to take Samson captive so they can get even with him

The Philistines practiced the lowest level of morality, and they twisted the Golden Rule into “Do unto others as they have done unto you”

Both Samson and the Philistines would have fit right in with the “I don’t get mad, I get even” crowd today - each believing that they had the moral right to get even and the last injury they would inflict would balance the books

In any event, Samson’s flight to the cave in Judah has elevated his personal beef into an international crisis - and, as we know, that’s precisely what God wants

Still, even knowing that secret, the response of the Judahites is disappointing

Remembering back to Judges 1, it was Judah who God chose to take the lead in fighting the Canaanites, and in the book of Joshua, it’s recorded that Caleb was from the tribe of Judah - they have historically been brave warriors

But now, instead of rallying their troops to defend one of their fellow citizens - perhaps even calling on Samson to lead the battle - they go hat in hand to Samson, looking for a way to cave to the Philistines

Notice in verse 11 [**Judges 15:11**] that they muster 3,000 troops

But rather than sending them against the Philistines, who it appears they outnumber by a factor of 3 to 1, they send them against their own countryman

And in the conversation between Samson and those troops, we see very clearly the current state of affairs that God is working against

First, the Judahites show their subservience to the Philistines

Think of how far Israel had fallen just since the days of Gideon when Gideon declared that “The Lord will rule over you” to now when they are content to be ruled by their Philistine masters and to sacrifice one of their own to maintain peace

Second, Samson’s response shows that he has thoroughly adopted the Philistine ethic of payback, saying, “As they did to me, so I have done to them.”

It’s the petulant response of a perpetual adolescent whose moral code is based on payback

So there is no hope of a resolution in this conflict - when enemies with this mindset meet, a final solution is required

III. Samson complies and Philistines die

So it’s surprising to read how, after negotiating with his countrymen and securing the promise that they would not kill him themselves, Samson allowed himself to be bound with three new ropes to be handed over to the Philistines

And we see them, with their captive in tow, approach the Philistine camp only to have the Philistine troops come rushing out to greet them with a roar reminiscent of the young lion that attacked Samson in the vineyard

Here’s the thing, we can’t be sure that Samson knew that he was going to get out of this tight spot when he agreed to be bound and turned over - let me explain

Let’s look at verse 14 carefully together [**Judges 15:14**] -

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.

I want you to notice that God took action here to intervene on Samson’s behalf

The Spirit of the Lord once again rushed upon Samson - and, as we will see, it gave him the characteristic strength Samson is noted for

But notice that Samson didn’t break the three new ropes like we’ve all seen illustrated since we were kids

Samson didn’t flex his muscles and send the burst ropes flying in all directions - that’s not even close to what happened

The Spirit of God caused the ropes to disintegrate like burned flax, and the bonds simply melted off his hands

There is no mention of Samson's strength being involved in him being set loose at all - that was all God's doing

But that was about to change as Samson, once he was miraculously set loose, went on the offensive with an improvised weapon that reminds us of Shamgar, who killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad

Samson saw a fresh jawbone of a donkey lying close at hand, so he picked it up and used it to slaughter 1,000 of the Philistines

When he was finished, Samson, ever the poet and ever the narcissist, composed a little poem to commemorate his deed

We miss a good deal of the spice of the song when it's translated into English because, as Hebrew poetry, it relies heavily on parallelism and the fact that the words for "donkey" and "heap" are spelled the same in Hebrew

And Samson's song is a bit spicy in what it actually says, which is:

'With a jaw-bone of the ass -- an ass upon asses -- with a jaw-bone of the ass, I have smitten a thousand men.'

But perhaps what is even more striking is how, in contrast with the victory song of Deborah and Barak, Samson gives all the credit to himself - he doesn't utter a word about God or God's empowerment

It's enough to make us legitimately wonder again if Samson is even aware of God's involvement in his affairs and the Spirit of God rushing upon him as the source of his strength - it appears doubtful

Because, after singing his little song, Samson named the place of the event Ramath-lehi, which means "Jawbone Hill"

A name that likely referred to the pile of bodies Samson left behind rather than to the topography of the place

In other words, he gave the scene of the battle a self-honoring name

And when he had finished speaking, we read in verse 17, he cast the jawbone aside, and it seems as if Samson's revenge was finally satisfied - in his mind, he had gotten even

We would typically expect the account to conclude with the end of the battle, but we aren't finished, and what comes next, in verse 18, seems sort of surprising

IV. Samson cries and God supplies

All of a sudden, we see Samson call out to the Lord because he is thirsty

This is the first time in the narrative that we see Samson speak directly to God, and although it has hints of the crying out that Israel has done before, it is different

Our author has subtly changed the word he used in those instances from "cry out" to "call out" to show that, whereas those instances reflected a national emergency, this one is all Samson - he's having a personal crisis - he's thirsty

Kathy and I just spent ten days with our four-year old grandson and it's amazing how quickly a four-year old can go from being a sweet boy to a crying tyrant who sees himself as completely deprived when a want or need arises

Samson's behavior here seems like that to me - he pitches an instant fit as his worldview is centered on himself and his needs and he believes he will die if his thirst isn't satiated immediately

I suppose we should pause for a moment and give Samson credit for considering God at all and especially for calling out to him in his need - at least it shows some amount of recognition of his dependence upon God

And at first glance, his prayer seems pious enough, and he does acknowledge God's role in his victory and refers to himself as God's "servant"

But his tone is all wrong as it comes across more as a rant against God than it does a humble appeal to God

It feels like an accusation that God is negligent in supplying him with what he needs

And his need is the focus of the prayer - it's a "gimme prayer" that focuses on Samson alone

Look at all the mentions of himself that Samson includes:

You have granted this great salvation **by the hand of your servant** - as if he truly deserves the credit - and shall **I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?** - as if his defilement and demise are the most important things

Wouldn't it be a shame if he, such a worthy individual, would suffer such a fate?

Amazingly, God answers his prayer, and he does so miraculously

God answered Samson's plea for water in the same way he answered Moses when the people of Israel cried out with a similar self-centered plea in the desert

God split open the rocks and caused water to flow forth for Samson to quench his thirst

And while we might hope that Samson would wake up and take the opportunity to memorialize such an obvious provision and honor God who had answered his prayer, we are once again reminded just who we are dealing with. Samson chose instead to leave his mark on the place and the event by naming it En-hakkore, which means "the spring of the caller" emphasizing himself as the one who asked rather than on God as the one who provided

And the narrative that began at the beginning of chapter 14 is brought to a close in verse 20 as we read only that Samson judged or ruled Israel for twenty years

We've seen this conclusion at the end of many judge cycles by now - it's part of the formula we've come to expect

But this statement is different in a couple of respects

First, there is no mention of peace or rest coming to Israel

And although this isn't the first omission of it, it is still striking to note its absence

Then to compound matters, we see a contradictory note appended to Samson's judgeship as we read it occurred "in the days of the Philistines"

That illustrates how the Philistines remained large and in charge during the days of Samson

And we are reminded, once again, that Samson was never intended to fully deliver Israel from their clutches but only to begin the deliverance as we read in **Judges 13:5**

Israel's complete deliverance from the rule of the Philistines won't occur until King David comes on the scene

Conclusion

I'm often struck by just how similar our present world is to that of ancient Israel

I guess that serves to illustrate how people are people wherever and whenever you find them, and the more things change, the more they stay the same

Samson was a judge who, instead of relying on God's standards and principles, relied on whatever appeared right in his own estimation - he did what felt good to him, whether that was choosing a wife or getting even with his enemies

And we are encouraged by society to do the same - YOLO, you only live once - is the mantra of the day, and everyone should therefore do whatever it takes to satisfy their urges

Therefore, many a Christ-follower is tempted to live more like Samson than Jesus

We, too, want to do what is right in our own eyes, and there are plenty of people, authors, and religious authorities to support those tendencies and cheer us on

History tells us that scientists used to believe the universe was geocentric, that the earth was at the center and everything revolved around it until Copernicus came along, and our understanding shifted to recognize that it is heliocentric, that the earth and planets in our solar system revolve around the sun

That was a seismic shift in understanding

And now we seem to be living in an egocentric world where each person is encouraged to believe the world revolves around them

Pastor and author Rick Warren got at least one thing right in his popular but controversial book, The Purpose Driven Life, and it was the first thing he said in the book, "It's not about you" -

We need to remember that we aren't the center of the universe, and it's not our standards that should prevail

Yes, we are to love ourselves but with a healthy love that acknowledges our position relative to God and our value in his eyes

And then we are to love others as we love ourselves and put their needs ahead of our own - thereby demonstrating sacrificial love to them

We also can fall into society's tendency to get even for whatever slights or injuries we are subject to

"I don't get mad, I get even" is a phrase I have often heard uttered by fellow Christ-followers - sometimes in jest, other times - well, I think not so much

We see this attitude take many forms, from the idea of reparations to those whose ancestors suffered some indignity or injustice to violence and a complete disregard for the life and limb of our fellow citizens, let alone their private property. It's been said that the policy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth applied as retributive justice instead of as a way to limit justice proportionally to the offense will leave society blind and toothless

The funny thing is, like Samson, everyone involved wants their most recent blow to be the final blow of the conflict, so the conflict becomes a vicious cycle of injury and re-injury in a vicious cycle that never ends

Just as we have seen in the Samson narrative

We need to break the cycle by recognizing and accepting that vengeance belongs to the Lord, and he will not allow injustice and injury to go unanswered

God will repay with perfect justice, so we can confidently leave the matter of "payback" in God's hands

But again, our focus needs to be primarily on God and what God is doing through the events of the narrative

And in those events, we see that God is a God of purpose and sovereign will who works out his plan through often imperfect instruments that are only acting in accordance with their natures

We see a God who raises up agents for his use, whether man or beast and allows them to play their part in the drama while they, often unwittingly, further his ends

And we see a gracious, faithful God who acts on behalf of his people even when they are far from him and comfortable with their position

Without God's proactiveness and involvement behind the scenes, it's doubtful Samson would ever have become involved in Israel's deliverance

Left to themselves, Samson and his countrymen would have been satisfied to coexist and intermarry with the Philistines. They were comfortable living amongst and like the unbelievers around them and perfectly comfortable taking on their ways and becoming like them

But God has other plans for his people - both in Samson's day and in ours

And while the end of chapter 15 would typically signal the end of the Samson narrative, God isn't finished with Samson and the Philistines yet

So next week, we will be looking at Samson's final chapter in Judges 16 as Samson goes to Gaza

Let's pray

Deuteronomy 32:34-38 (page 175)

“Is not this laid up in store with me, sealed up in my treasuries?

Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.’

For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.

Then he will say, ‘Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering?

Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection!”