

Judges 15:1-20 – “Samson: The Philistines’ Worst Nightmare”

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Intro: Samson! The weakest strong man the world has ever known. Outwardly a lion; inwardly a clown. Samson was gifted with everything necessary to “begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines,” as we learned in chapter 13. But last week we made another discovery when we studied chapter 14: Samson’s interest was not in doing God’s will, but in satisfying his own lusts. Where does that leave us? Is God’s purpose for Samson stymied? Has God’s intention for Samson and Israel become completely frustrated because of Samson’s unfaithfulness? Not at all! In chapter 15 we watch God weave Samson’s weakness into His purpose. God would use Samson to fulfill His plan, despite Samson’s overwhelming self-centeredness.

Proposition: God’s purpose cannot be frustrated by our foolishness.

Billboard:	(vv.1-8)	The First Blow
	(vv.9-17)	The Philistine’s Worst Nightmare
	(vv.18-20)	The Revived Servant

(vv.1-8) The First Blow – God worked through Samson’s naked self-interest to strike a blow against Israel’s oppressors, the Philistines: **Judges 15:1–8** - **1** *After some days, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat. And he said, “I will go in to my wife in the chamber.” But her father would not allow him to go in. 2 And her father said, “I really thought that you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please take her instead.” 3 And Samson said to them, “This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm.” 4 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. 5 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. 6 Then the Philistines said, “Who has done this?” And they said, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.” And the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire. 7 And Samson said to them, “If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit.” 8 And he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow, and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam.* Samson’s interests weren’t in freeing Israel from Philistine domination. He went to Timnah to consummate his marriage to the Philistine’s daughter. When he got to her father’s house, he discovered that his wife had been given to “the best man” at his wedding – “your companion.” There are two things we should note that will help us understand what was going on here. First, the kind of marriage Samson had entered was peculiar to that age in that the bride was not to be taken to the groom’s home but would remain living with her parents after the wedding. It was understood that the husband had the right to make conjugal visits when he cared to do so, and Samson, according to custom brought with him an acceptable gift for such a visit – “a young goat” (cf. Genesis 38:16-17). Samson came with the appropriate gift, expecting to spend the night with his wife, but her father would not let him, because he had given her to another man in Samson’s absence. Instead, he offered Samson her younger, “more beautiful sister.” Why did Samson’s father-in-law feel compelled to make this offer? That’s the second thing we need to note: Samson and his parents had paid the bride price to his father-in-law. The Philistine was indebted to

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Samson because of this owing him a bride, so under the circumstances he tried a “bait and switch” as Laban later did to Jacob (cf. Genesis 29:21-27). Samson was less agreeable to this tactic than Jacob and took it as a provocation to attack the Philistines. How did that work? Shouldn’t he reasonably have taken it out on his father-in-law rather than on the Philistines as a whole? Why this collective punishment for a personal offense? The answer was given us in **Judges 14:4 – 4...** *It was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.* (cf. Esther 3:5-6 for another example of fury and collective punishment). Samson’s fury overflowed in the destruction of Philistine crops (vv.4-5) and stirred a hornet’s nest, as God planned it would. The result was the Philistines’ reprisal against Samson’s wife and father-in-law, the very thing Samson’s wife had hoped to avoid by telling Samson’s riddle to the Philistines (cf. chapter 14). This produced another outburst of Samson’s wrath and Spirit empowered strength, “*And he struck them hip and thigh*” (v.8). Note this well: None of this happened because Samson intended it to happen. Samson was simply following the path dictated by his lusts and emotions. That was Samson’s weakness. God, wove Samson’s weakness into His plan, fulfilled His will.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God wove Samson’s weakness into His plan and fulfilled His purpose despite Samson’s failings.

[ILLUSTRATION] George Will has written a wonderful book on the craft of playing baseball, “Men at Work.” I commend it to you. It’s a lot of fun to read and is spiced with occasional bits of wisdom. My favorite quote from the book is this one: “In marriage, and baseball, and other difficult endeavors in life, it is good to remember that ‘the perfect is the enemy of the good.’”

[APPLICATION] We are programed in our day to think that we must have the right man and the perfect program if God’s will is to be fulfilled. We’ve missed understanding a truth that is badly needed: God weaves our imperfections into His plan and fulfills His will *in spite of* who we are, not *because of* who we are. Because we don’t realize this, we are forever being disappointed by those we set up as demi-gods in the service of Christ. Further, we constantly undervalue the contribution we ourselves can make in the work of the Lord. Imagining that only special people are used by God – perfect people really – we forget a principle that every baseball player must remind himself of daily: “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” In striving to be perfect, we often neglect to fulfill the good. God doesn’t neglect this principle. God doesn’t need perfect servants to fulfill His purposes on planet earth. He just uses people like you and me, weaving our imperfections into His plan to reveal His glory. In the end, we are just “*old, clay pots.*” But “*old, clay pots*” filled with Jesus’ Spirit can shine a light into the world far beyond what we can ask or imagine. Relax! That’s all He needs to get the job done.

(vv.9-17) The Philistine’s Worst Nightmare – Samson evidently expected that the matter was now closed, but in reality, his actions set off an avalanche among the Philistines who were the occupying power in Judah in those days (vv.9-10). **Judges 15:9–10 - 9** *Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. 10* *And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” They said, “We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us.”* Samson’s collective punishment of the Philistines provoked Philistine collective punishment of Israel. As often happens with

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those under occupying powers, Samson’s countrymen chose to collaborate with the enemy rather than gathering around Samson, their would-be deliverer. Thousands of them banded together to turn Samson over to the enemy: **Judges 15:11–13** - **11** *Then 3,000 men of Judah went down to the cleft of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?” And he said to them, “As they did to me, so have I done to them.”* **12** *And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves.”* **13** *They said to him, “No; we will only bind you and give you into their hands. We will surely not kill you.” So, they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. Samson agreed to submit to this. Why? Again, we see God’s providential hand at work: God did not give Samson His Spirit so that Samson could use force against his own people, but only against the Philistines. The Philistines thought they had achieved their purpose when they saw Samson coming, but in fact Samson’s capture turned into their worst nightmare. The Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson and armed only with the jawbone of a donkey, Samson left “heaps upon heaps” of Philistines lying on the battlefield (vv.14-17). God turned the Philistines’ lust for revenge into their undoing.*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God’s turns the wrath of man into an instrument for man’s punishment.

[ILLUSTRATION] Have you ever been so angry about something that you couldn’t speak coherently? All of us have probably experienced this. Something so outrageous happens, something so infuriating, that all you can do is stammer incoherent nonsense. And what happens when we do that? Instead of sharing our outrage, everyone around us just laughs. In that moment, truly, our wrath turns back on our own heads, making us look very human and silly all at once.

[APPLICATION] Verses 10 & 11 expresses in few words everyone’s motive in this story: *“We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us.... As they did to me, so I have done to them.”* In other words, everyone’s outrage overflowed in the face of perceived injustice. *“An eye for an eye,”* is what men want when they feel a wrong has been done to them, but in this case an eye for an eye only ended up making all of them blind. God is an expert in turning man’s wrath back on himself. The Bible often asks that the wicked fall into the pit they dug for others; Haman was hoisted on his own gallows. Be careful how you handle your anger. Anger legitimately arises in our hearts when an injustice is done, and that is not a sin. But allowing our anger to overflow into wrath, seldom helps the situation. Samson poked the Philistines in the eye, so to speak, and they sought to poke him right back, but God was in it all, intervening to punish the oppressors of His people. And not for the last time. Jesus came offering peace to the undeserving, but many scorn His gift. Someday, He will return to recompense man’s wrath by turning it back on his own head. In the meantime, you and I are called to be men and women of peace in the face of our oppressors. Jesus will settle all the scores when He returns. You and I can live at peace, as much as it lies within our power, until that time comes.

(vv.18-20) The Revived Servant – Though Samson was a highly imperfect instrument, God wasn’t finished with him yet. He revived His flagging servant and preserved him for further service as these verses tell us: **Judges 15:18–20** - **18** *And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the LORD and said, “You*

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have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” **19** *And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day.* **20** *And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.* Like Elijah after the defeat of the 400 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, Samson was exhausted after the battle. To his credit, Samson turned to God in prayer, and God was pleased to answer and revive him. Tragically, this is only one of two instances in the book that we find Samson seeking God in prayer. Here, he sought God’s help, and one final time in his last moments he sought God before pulling down Baal’s temple on himself and the Philistines. Samson only sought God’s face in moments of extreme necessity, but God was pleased to treat Samson as a son, preserving him for future service. Samson was revived and lived to fight another day.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God is faithful to preserve His servants until the work He calls them to do is finished.

[ILLUSTRATION] There are certain people who seem to live a “charmed life.” These people, some good and others bad, seem to be providentially protected from fatal injury until the role they play in history finally comes to its conclusion. Winston Churchill was one of these people, but so was Adolf Hitler. In God’s sovereignty over history, no one passes from the scene until God has accomplished His purposes through them. Samson certainly furnishes us with an illustration of this principle.

[APPLICATION] Samson was a very imperfect instrument, and his imperfections were entirely his own fault. God had gifted Samson with everything a servant of God could ever want. Selfish Samson chose to squander those gifts, but God did not cast Samson away. He preserved him until the task Samson was assigned was completed. That was gracious of God, but here is something even more gracious: God wrote Samson’s name in Hebrews 11’s “Hall of Fame.” This is what grace does, my dear friends. It picks up the undeserving and uses us for God’s glory and then preserves our names forever, as if we were the hero of the story. We’re not! We don’t deserve to have our names “written down in glory,” but because of what Jesus did for us our names are there – by God’s grace! Like all the others in Hebrews 11, Samson did not deserve to have his name there. But God’s grace makes the foolish, wise; the weak, strong; the dirty, clean; the flailing, finishers. The miracle of Samson, and you, and me, is the miracle of God’s grace.

Conclusion: God’s purposes cannot be frustrated by our foolishness. God weaves our weakness into His plan, turns wrath back on the wrathful, and preserves even His most unpromising servants until they complete their assignment, and then writes our names forever in His Book of Life. Only God would write a story like this.