

July 2/3, 2022

The Right to Revenge
Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series
Judges 15:1-20
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So you hear fighting in the next room, and you go in there. There is little Johnny fighting with his sister. So you say something like, “Johnny, don’t hit your sister.” What does little Johnny say? “She hit me first!” So you look at little Johnny’s sister, little Susie, “Is that true?” What does little Susie say? “Well, he started it!” Right? We learn this value system really early in life. As long as I didn’t start it, then it’s not my fault. I have a right to retaliate. Sadly, a lot of people never outgrow that, and the consequences to themselves and the people around them are devastating. That’s what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to the book of Judges, Chapter 15.

If you’re visiting with us this morning, we’re working our way through the Old Testament book of Judges, and we’re partway through the Samson story. Chapter 13 is the grandest introduction of any of the judges in the book of Judges. It’s full of hope. It’s the only judge where the text tells us the Lord blessed him. But chapter 14 is a real disappointment. Samson is not at all what we thought he would be. He’s selfish. He’s reckless. He’s arrogant. He’s lustful. He’s just not a likable person at all. Against the wishes of his parents, he chooses a Philistine girl to marry. They go down to a week-long Philistine wedding feast, which is a week-long drinking party. Foolishly, he offers a riddle and a bet if you can solve the riddle. The Philistines solve the riddle, but they have to cheat to do it, which makes Samson really mad, so he kills thirty Philistines, and then he goes home full of anger. That’s where the story ends. Oh, and one more detail: The Philistine girl’s father, since Samson left without consummating the marriage, gives her to the best man. Chapter 15 verse 1:

But after a while, in the time of the wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, “I will go in to my wife in *her* room.” But her father did not let him enter. (*NASB, Judges 15:1)

To which we would say, “Oh, boy!” (*laughter*) So we don’t know how much time passed. Wheat harvest would have been the end of May, early part of June. And true to Samson’s character, he just decides he’s going to go back down, and it’s obvious what he wants from his wife. So he takes a young goat. That would be the ancient world’s equivalent of flowers or a box of chocolates. (*laughter*) And he’s in typical Samson fashion: He’s going down and he wants what he wants, and that’s what he expects. You can imagine the father in that moment; Samson is not someone you want angry. But he has to stop Samson. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but I gave your wife to your best man.” His statement when he says, “*I really thought you hated her intensely,*” grammatically is what we would call absolutes, which tells us he really did think that.

If you're familiar with the story of Jacob and his father-in-law Laban, Laban was a schemer. He was a liar; he was a deceiver, and he was messing with Jacob. That isn't this story at all. He really thought Samson was gone, and he was never coming back. So now he has a real problem.

Her father said, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead." Samson then said to them, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm." Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned *the foxes* tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards *and* groves. Then the Philistines said, "Who did this?" And they said, "Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire. Samson said to them, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit. He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam. (Vs. 2-8)

So the father says, "I didn't think you were ever coming back, so I gave your wife to your best man. But look at my younger daughter. She's even more beautiful." The father has a clear sense of Samson's value system. "Look at how beautiful she is. I'll give her to you." Now for us, as 21st century readers, the legalities here, in terms of who's right and wrong, are very confusing. But they were not confusing to Samson. "**This time I will be blameless when I do harm to the Philistines.**" The language is interesting. He seems to be implying that perhaps when he went home angry, perhaps his mother and father said, "Samson, you know part of that was your fault. You made so many foolish, reckless decisions. You have to share in the blame," because he's saying, "This time...this time I'll be blameless. I have the right to revenge."

So Samson captures 300 foxes. When the text gives us numbers, they're really approximations. Nobody's sitting there saying, "295, 296, 297." It's like us saying several hundred. Probably they were not foxes; they were jackals. The Hebrew word means either a fox or a jackal. Jackals ran in packs. They were more like a dog, and they were much easier to catch.

Now oftentimes, when you see this story illustrated, like in children's materials, you have the two tails pulled together and the torch and the tails are tied like a rope around the torch. That's not what it's saying. It is saying that the two animals were put basically with the tails coming together. And then you lay the torch in the two tails and bind it with some sort of rope or twine, and it drags the torch as the animals run. So Samson lights the torch and the jackals run through the wheat, through what's been harvested, what's still in the field. It also mentions **the vineyards and the olive groves.**

Now this part of the region was actually very fertile. As a matter of fact, most of the crops were grown there. So this would have been it: wheat, olives, vineyards. These people didn't have Plan B, like you can go down to the store. These people barely survived year to year. This was all of their harvest, and it's gone. This would have been absolutely devastating! So the Philistines want

to know, “Who did this?” “Well, Samson did it—the son-in-law of the Timnite.” “Well, why did he do it?” “Because the Timnite gave his wife to the best man and made him really angry.”

At this point, we would probably expect them to go after Samson, but I think they’re really afraid of Samson. They’ve got to exact revenge on someone, so they go after the Timnite and his daughter, and they literally burn them to death. In chapter 14, this was the threat that Samson’s wife was trying to avoid. In chapter 15, the Philistines carry this out. But this, of course, makes Samson really angry, so now he’s going to make them pay. But the text says, “*I’m going to devastate them. I have the right to revenge. But then I’ll quit.*” But of course we know there will be no quitting, because it’s then time for the Philistines to pay back, and then Samson responds to that. And this is just going to keep going until a lot of people are dead.

When Samson says, “I will surely take revenge on you, then I will quit,” **He struck them ruthlessly.** That Hebrew word translated *ruthlessly* is literally *leg on thigh*. It’s a wrestling cliché that basically meant imagining a wrestling match, and someone is lying on the ground, basically unconscious, and the victor has his foot up on their thigh, and it’s evidence of total domination. That’s the word that’s used there. Samson totally dominates; then he leaves, knowing retaliation is coming.

Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi. The men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” And they said, “We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us.” 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 I have done to them.” (Vs. 9-11)

So the Philistines come up to Judah, and they’re looking for Samson. And the people of Judah want to know, “What’s the deal? Why have you come up here, obviously come up here with an army ready to do battle?” And the answer is because they want revenge—pay back for what Samson has done to them. So the men of Judah muster 3000 men, and they go find Samson. And they want to know, “Samson, did you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? I mean, what were you thinking?” Samson says, “Hey, I didn’t start this thing. They threw the first punch. I’m just paying them back for what they did to me.”

Now one interesting note: It says they **spread out in Lehi** in verse nine. That’s the Hebrew word that literally means *jawbone*. This is a hill that, at the time of this story, was not named that, but the first readers would have known it as Lehi. The reason that’s important is because, in a little bit in the story, we learn why it’s named Jawbone Hill. So think of it like this. If I said to you, “The Oregon Trail in Nebraska primarily runs just south of Interstate 80,” I’m not implying that Interstate 80 was there when they went down the Oregon Trail. I’m just trying to give you a point of reference today. Well, that’s the same thing they’re doing here. The first readers would have understood this is called Jawbone Hill, but they’re about to find out why it’s called that. Verse 12:

They said to him, “We have come down to bind you, so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not kill me.” So they said to him, “No, but we will bind you fast and give you into

their hands; yet surely we will not kill you.” Then they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. (Vs. 12, 13)

So these 3000 men tell Samson, “We’re going to handcuff you, and we’re going to deliver you to the Philistines. Samson seems to be willing to go along with this, as long as they give him the assurance that they are not going to kill him. Basically, I think the idea is Samson knows, in the right moment, he’s going to bust the restraints, and he’s going to do war with the Philistines, but he doesn’t want to do war with his own people. That’s what he’s basically asking for. They agree to that and they bind him with two new ropes—handcuffed and delivered to the Philistines.

Everything in that paragraph is just pathetic. You have to understand that these are the people of God. God led them to the Promised Land. God gave them the promised land—this was their land, with the promise that, “If you obey Me and follow Me, I will bless you. This will be a land flowing with milk and honey; I will bless you so much, that the neighboring nations will see the greatness of your God that they, too, will bow and serve the God of the Hebrews.”

In all of the other Judges stories, at some point, the people finally cry out and ask God for a deliverer, and God raises up a judge to deliver them. But it never happens in the Samson story. As a matter of fact, you see in this story that the men of Judah are willing to accept that the Philistines—these pagan idol-worshipping people—are our rulers. They are in charge, and we’re willing to do whatever they say. There’s only one time in the Samson story where the people of Israel rally and gather together as some sort of a great army, 3000 strong! The only time is when they rally together to capture their own judge, to turn him over to the Philistines!

Now think about this: Gideon defeated the Midianites with 300 men. This is 3000 strong! There would not have been one single one of those 3000 who would have had the slightest doubt that the intent of the Philistines was to torture Samson, then put him to death. This isn’t like we’re turning him over to the police, and he’ll have a fair trial. Every single one of them would have known exactly what was coming. Everything about this part of the story is just pathetic. Verse 14:

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as they met him. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that has burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it. Then Samson said,

**“With the jawbone of a donkey,
Heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
I have killed a thousand men.”**

When he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place, Ramath-lehi. (Vv. 14-17)

...*Jawbone Hill!* So the men of Judah bring forth Samson; he’s bound with two new ropes. The Philistines shout; it would have been a shout of victory! Finally they have this guy! But the Spirit

of the Lord rushes on Samson, and Samson breaks the ropes like they're nothing. As a matter of fact, the imagery is *like flax*, and the fire burned it, and it just melts away.

One of the interesting things about this story is the repetition of *fire*. So you have in chapter 14 that the Philistines are going to burn Samson's wife and family with *fire*. But that gets delayed. Then Samson lights a *fire* with the jackals and sets everything on *fire*. Then the Philistines turn around, and they end up burning Samson's wife and family with *fire*. And now it's an imagery that the *fire* just melts these ropes away.

Most of the time in the Old Testament, fire is symbolic of judgment. Maybe it's just a picture of all this judgment that's happening when everyone is seeking revenge. It's just all these people whose lives are devastated by this behavior. So Samson finds a fresh jawbone, meaning it's not brittle. He's up on this hill, so it's not like they're on a flat surface and everybody is piling on him. The Philistines have to work their way up this hill, and one by one he's taking them out with a jawbone.

It's a little bit like Shamgar in chapter three. You remember Shamgar killed 600 Philistines with an ox goad, basically a glorified garden hoe. But the difference is, Shamgar was jealous for the glory and reputation of God. He delivered Israel. Samson is fighting a personal battle of revenge back and forth with the Philistines. But he takes out 1000 men; again, these numbers are approximations.

Verse 16 then is a little poem, **“With the jawbone of a donkey, Heaps upon heaps...”** The Hebrew word for **donkey** and the Hebrew word for **heaps** are almost identical. There's one tiny little difference, so it's probably a play on words. In these ancient cities, when the donkeys died, they took them outside the walls of the city and piled them up, especially after a war where some of these animals would die. So, they'd have these piles of donkeys outside the city walls. This is probably the imagery that Samson is referring to, that he has piled up Philistines like these piles of donkeys, because he's won this great victory. At the end of his poem he says, **“I have killed a thousand men.”**

Now compare that to Judges chapter five and the song of Deborah, the beautiful poem she writes all about God and His glory and His power and His deliverance. But Samson isn't like that. He declares, **“I did this.”** It's just true to this picture of Samson. When he's done, he throws the jawbone down and he names this Jawbone Hill.

Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, “You have given this great deliverance by the hand of your servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” But God split the hollow place that is in Lehi so that water came out of it. When he drank, his strength returned and he revived. Therefore, he named it En-hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day. So he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines. (Vs. 18-20)

So Samson has won this great battle. The rest of the Philistines have fled, but now he fears he is going to die of thirst. This is the first time in the Samson story he ever cries out to the Lord, and honestly, it's kind of a whiny cry. “I do all this for You as your servant, and now You're going to let me die of thirst?” The fact that he refers to himself as the Lord's **servant**—like at what point

has he been serving the Lord? This has all been about Samson. It's about Samson's lust. It's about what Samson wants. It's about Samson's revenge. It's about Samson's desire to get even. It's about Samson wanting somebody to pay. But now he needs water from God. "So, God, here I am as Your servant, and You're going to let me die here!" God responds and delivers water out of the rock, very similar to the children of Israel and the story of Moses.

It is interesting that Samson refers to the Philistines as the **uncircumcised** Philistines. Do you remember a discussion he had with his parents? All the way back at the beginning of chapter 14, when Samson came back and said, "I want to marry this Philistine. Get her for me, for she looks good to me." And mom and dad said, "You know, Samson, maybe you need to rethink that. We're not supposed to marry the idol-worshipping Philistines. How about a nice girl from the tribe of Dan? Or maybe somewhere in Israel? There's got to be a nice girl you can marry. Why choose one from the **uncircumcised** Philistines?"

Maybe at this point, Samson is finally realizing why that wasn't the best decision. But God faithfully delivers water to Samson. He drinks and he recovers, and he names it *The Caller's Spring*. It's interesting that the text tells us even at the time of the first readers, the spring would have still been there, still had water, and was still called *The Caller's Spring*. Samson didn't name it *God* provides. *God* is gracious. *God* is good. He named it after himself. You have this water because **I** called out, so it's *The Caller's Spring*. Again, it's just indicative of who Samson is.

Verse twenty is a little bit of a puzzle because, typically, you only see that language, *Samson judged Israel for twenty years* at the end of the story. So, we would expect a new judge in the next chapter. But the reality is, there's a lot of story still to go. So why does the writer put it here? I'm not completely sure. The story hasn't been very encouraging so far. Is it going to get better? Does Samson straighten out? Is there good news ahead? I guess we'll have to find out.

As we wrap it up this morning, there's no question that the writer wants us to think about this right to revenge, and where that leads. The repetition of that language throughout this chapter is clearly the evidence. When the operating morality of the day is *everyone did that which is right in their own eyes*, then you have the right to revenge. "I didn't start it. I didn't throw the first punch; it's not my fault." Samson even says it: "*I'll be blameless when I do harm to all these people; I have the right to retaliate.*" But where does that end? How does it stop? Samson says, "*Then I'll quit,*" but he's not going to quit, because it just keeps going back and forth until thousands of people's lives are devastated.

This *is* the culture in which we live. The guiding morality of the day is *everyone does what is right in their own eyes*, and with that comes the right to revenge. I have the right to retaliate; I have the right to get even. So what drives so much of the anger in our culture? Think about this over the last decade. How many times has something tragic happened and all of a sudden you have riots all over the country, and people are breaking property? They're devastating people's lives. They're exacting violence on people that had nothing to do with the incident and yet, in their mind, they have the right to do that. They have the right to revenge. So then, somebody else is going to rise up to give pay back, and it just goes back and forth, and back and forth.

It's easy to see in this angry culture. Somebody gets on the internet, and they say something provocative. They say something stupid. They say something harmful. They say something ignorant. Then people feel the need to fight back, and this anger just builds and builds and builds. I was talking to a friend of mine that works on the campus at the university with students. The first thing he said is, "I can't believe how angry these students are." This is the thinking behind road rage. "You cut me off? Now I have the right to get even. I have the right to pay back." It's all justified: "It's not my fault. I didn't throw the first punch. I didn't do it." But it just keeps accelerating. This destroys communities. It destroys neighborhoods. It destroys families. It destroys churches. It destroys friendships.

But shouldn't we of all people understand a different operating system? As Christians, everything that defines us is rooted in the understanding that when we were rebellious and sinful, what we got was grace and mercy and forgiveness and salvation. We were God's enemies when He sent Christ to die for us. He's made it possible to go from enemy to friend. If God operated on the same value system as the culture, we would be in so much trouble. If we received justice, we would receive condemnation. We would have no hope. Everything that defines us as Christians is that what we receive in return for our sin is grace, mercy, patience, and forgiveness. So shouldn't that be what defines us as a people in the culture? Who is going to offer people a different way? Who is going to step away from all this anger and say, "There's a better way to live? There's a better way to be neighbors. There's a better way to be friends. There's a better way to live in a community." Then there's this constant anger and desire for payback. Shouldn't it be us as the recipients of so much grace and mercy and patience and forgiveness? Isn't it possible we can at least create pockets of flourishing that represent a better way to live?

There will always be people on social media that will say hurtful, stupid, ignorant, thoughtless, provocative things. There's nothing you can do about that. But here's what I would ask. If you do not have enough Christian character to walk away from that and not respond, then do one of two things. Either get off social media altogether, or please keep it a secret that you're a Christian, because you do so much damage to those of us serious about trying to accomplish the mission. Your anger on social media does not change anything. Think, what does this look like in our community? What does this look like in our families? What does this look like in our churches? What does this look like in our schools, in our friendship groups? Can I be the person that chooses not to pay back, to turn the other cheek, not to retaliate, not to join in the anger, but to demonstrate to people there's a better way to live? Otherwise, we're going to consume ourselves.

Speaking of grace and mercy, what is the deal with God choosing Samson? Why Samson? Really, in all of Israel, there's not a better choice? We have found nothing really very likeable about Samson. And what is the deal with the Spirit of the Lord rushing on him in these key moments in the story? Why Samson? I guess my best answer is God is free to use whomever He wishes. He's God, and if He wants to choose Samson, He can choose Samson.

As a matter of fact, when you read through the Bible, it's a bit of a pattern. God chooses some of the most unlikely people to do some of the most remarkable things for Him. If God wants to use a particular church, if God wants to use a particular business, if God wants to use a particular preacher, God can choose whoever He wants to do amazing things. And who knows? Who

knows? God may even choose to use someone like you to do something remarkable, if you're willing to trust Him.

Our Father, we celebrate this morning Your grace and mercy. Lord, we gather as Your people only because of Your grace and Your mercy and Your forgiveness and Your patience. God, we of all people should understand there's a better way to live. Lord, may we as Your church rightly represent Your grace and Your mercy, Your patience and Your forgiveness to an angry and needy world, that others might come to know Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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