

Sermon 13: Judges 15: God uses sinners

OUTLINE

Samson's vengeance
Samson's gifts
Samson's prayer

INTRODUCTION

You have heard the saying God can draw straight lines with crooked sticks, this is what we have to write over this next chapter. Last week we saw that God's purposes cannot be frustrated by Samson being sinful. In fact we saw God using Samson's free sinning to be the very tool He used. God uses sinners, He can draw a straight line with a crooked stick. The lesson we take from this is that we should want God to work through us as willing partners not despite ourselves and be yielded and holy. Today we continue looking at God using the sinful Samson and I would like us to consider second lesson from God's providence in using sinners. I would like to argue from the greater to the lesser. If God can use a man who is godless, who is not trying to serve Him, who is only interested in Himself and intent on only doing his own will; then God can use a sinful yet sincere Christian, a frail but trying Christian, an imperfect servant. If God's grace abounds even where deliberate and unbelieving sin is taking place, then we can know that God's grace abounds where faltering Christians are imperfectly obeying. We are not saying that Samson is right, we are not saying that his works are the works of a believer, or that God condoned or winked at Samson's deeds; we are encouraging ourselves with the fact that if God can use him He can use us. We will be considering Samson's vengeance; his gifts and his prayer.

Samson's vengeance

We have been saying that Israel is too complacent in its slavery. And that God intends to disentangle the Philistines and the Israelites by driving a wedge between them. The wedge He is using is Samson's sinfulness as it runs after its desires. The lustful, conceited, self-absorbed, angry, vengeful Samson is the prying bar of God to bring Israel back to her mission. The scene has been set for us in Samson having married a Philistine but then ruining the wedding because she ruined his bet. This has resulted in the father giving the girl to another as Samson's anger was so terrible he saw no hope for her to be taken by him 15:2. But once things cool down and Samson has gotten a hold of himself he realises that he would like to sleep with the pretty philistine girl after all, 15:1, '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.' Once again the wilful Samson is frustrated. 15:2, '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.'" The father tries offer Samson a prettier girl, but Samson will not be told what to do. 15:3, 'And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm.'" Samson has to take his anger out on someone, he needs a punching bag to let off some steam so he plans to attack the Philistine's provisions. 15:4, '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.' The word for fox and jackal are the same and it is likely that jackal is intended. They would likely have been tied together by ropes to the tales and a torch attached to this. Seeing the fire the animals would have run in terror and lit whatever they ran past. He then deliberately set fire to their stacked and standing grain and their olive orchards.

The Philistines took their revenge, v6, '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.' And Samson took his revenge, v7, '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.' Striking them hip and thigh probably means he used his strength to mangle them. Samson's words reveal that he is only living for his revenge and matches the Philistine cruelty in his vengeance. Samson was contriving revenge, but God has just burned all the provisions and probably crippled the Philistine presence in the Israelite town of Timnah. If God can use a sinful Samson to bring about deliverance in Timnah, then He can use the poor but trying Christians of Timaru. We are here not to kill Philistines with the physical sword but with the spiritual sword. Samson was not deliberately seeking God's will and was used to do it, we can be encouraged that God will use us to bring His will to pass even though our efforts will seem small.

Samson's gifts

Samson has sufficiently provoked the oppressors that they feel the need to raise an army and seek to crush what appears to be a rebellion, v9, 'Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi.' Lehi was deeper than Timnah into Israel in Judah's territory. The tribe of Judah, the largest tribe who could have offered to follow Samson instead turn him in, v10-11, '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." 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.'" Notice the complacency of Judah they have accepted the status quo, they feel that someone fighting the Philistines is a bad thing and not a good thing, and this is the very reason why God is using Samson as a prying bar. We must stop here and allow this horrible moment to reflect back to us the nature of our own hearts. Judah are institutionalized in their sins, so much like the released prisoner committing a crime just to get back into prison, Judah would rather sell their saviour than be free from their slavery. How often have we wilfully chosen to leave our slavery undisturbed than have the fight that comes with being set free? We might feel tempted to speak of Judah becoming 'institutionalized' by their sins but that description is too kind, it makes it sound as if we are somehow the victims of circumstance and not actually the sinners that we are. How many are unhappy and broken in their sins, yet because of some negligible benefit of peace, or pleasure they do not want to give up their slavery. It reminds me of C. S. Lewis's famous saying, "'It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Telling as well is once again Samson's blatant singlemindedness—revenge. He did the will of the LORD in bringing judgement upon the Philistines, but it was while seeking revenge not God's will.

He agrees to go with them as long as they his own people do not fight him, v12-13, '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.' Once again we must pause and allow what we are seeing here sink in. Isn't this familiar to us, can you think where you have seen this before? The people of God, in particular bearing the name of Judah (Jews) binding the Saviour given by a miraculous birth and upon whom the Spirit rests, and then hand him over to the enemy to be put to death so that they can maintain the status quo. Once again Judah reflects back to us the absolute wickedness of our hearts; the vile ingratitude of our sin. God seeks to rescue us when we do not want to be rescued; He seeks to break us loose from the destructive chains that we have grown to love; He works by His mighty power to send a Saviour, miraculously born; He pours out His Spirit upon Him to fit Him for the task of overcoming all our enemies. But instead of welcoming this Saviour we accuse Him of disturbing our peace; instead of seeing the slavery of our sin that He has come to deliver us from we would rather kill him than be set free. Every person today who rejects Jesus Christ is guilty of this rejection. Look at the extent to which God has gone to save sinners, but we will not see, not receive, not let go of our sins; worse we would gladly hand Him over to the enemy to be put to death.

V14-17, '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. 15 And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men. 16 And Samson said, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men." As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi.' Samson the Nazirite feels the Spirit rush upon him, and what does he do? He grabs the jawbone of a dead animal in violation of his vow. The lesson of us being careful to think that the Lord approves of our adoption of worldly techniques to get results simply because they are blessed to save people is tangible. If something works to bring people to Christ, this does not mean it is right, God can use donkeys and sinners to accomplish His purposes despite us. Results do not determine rightness, that is pragmatism. Once again we see the lesson of God using a sinner, and the encouragement for us, that if God can overcome an army of a 1000 with a sinner using a jawbone, we can be encouraged that He will use us. I am not saying that God will use us because we are better, compared to God's glory we do not merit or deserve the blessing of God. However, we can be encouraged that because God is gracious He can also use us. In fact, because we are dressed in Christ's righteousness, and adopted as children and seek with Spirit enabled ability to do His will, because of Christ we can have a greater expectation of aid in what we do. More than that if we employ the given means, if we speak the truth of God's word we can trust that the Spirit will use that word to save sinners, Romans 10:17, 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.'

Another lesson is the one of gifts and graces. Samson had gifts but no graces. His were spiritual gifts, but there are also gifts we are born with which we can take no credit for. Some people are naturally good thinkers or passionate in their endeavours, and this is a natural disposition that they cannot take any credit for. We are reminded that whatever our gifts we need to temper them with graces. Without love they mean nothing. Without holiness they mean nothing. Gifts do not give us permission to sin; gifts and success are not God condoning our sinful behaviour or personal interpretations; gifts do not replace fruit; fruit must temper gifts; fruits not gifts are the proof of spiritual growth. What this means is that you can be doing great things outwardly, like preaching sermons; leading ministries; having a deep impact upon in the children in the church; have influence with hundreds of people on social media platforms; write books that sell well; etc. but still be poor spiritually. One commentator puts the challenge this way: 'our prayer life, rather than our religious activities, is the best indicator of spiritual health. Is prayer warm, enjoyable, consistent? Are you not only talking but listening and learning? Or like Samson, do you only pray as a last resort, and only for yourself and your own distress?' (Keller). Speaking of prayer let's look at Samson's prayer now.

Samson's prayer

After this massive exertion Samson is thirsty and in his need he prays. This is the first prayer recorded from Samson and only one of two recorded prayers. Let us turn to that prayer, v18-19, 'And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the LORD and said, "You 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.' We can see how spiritually anaemic Samson is in his prayer. Samson realizes that God has done something by his hand, this cannot be disputed but Samson accuses God of not caring and he is demanding, not humble and grateful. The acknowledgement of God's intervention is not mentioned as praise but an attempt to make God look like He is doubleminded because things aren't going well for Samson all of a sudden. Sadly another tendency of the human heart is laid bare. There are many who see God as suddenly inconsistent with Himself when things aren't going well for them. Pain and difficulty expose the God accusing person that we are. It may seem an obvious point but sadly we have to restate it. Can God be blamed? Is God ever guilty of wrong? Can God ever do an unjust act? It amazes me how blind we are in our pain. Our sinfulness takes on such irrational proportions that when things start to go badly for us, even if they are at our own hands, it is astounding that the One who cannot sin becomes the target of our accusation. If ever we needed proof of the fact that we are sinners, that we lie about things that are obviously true, here is the greatest lie: that God could be to blame. This irrationality gives birth to irreverence so that while in the very act of prayer the accusations are brought before Him. Prayer is not a modern technique to vent your feelings. Prayer is coming before the God of the universe, to stop and remember who He is, that He is the Creator of all things, the almighty one who rules all things, the incomparable one who is worthy of all praise, and the perfect one who cannot err. In Christ He is our Father, in Christ He is the judge who is satisfied and will not pour out His wrath upon us, He is the wise Father who uses even bad situations for our good. To barge into prayer as if it was all about our feelings is to forget what prayer is for. Prayer is our approach to God. Prayer is His invitation to us not our entitlement.

Prayer is the place where the truth of who He is and what He wants must reign not our emotions which lie.

I have tried to imagine how Samson is feeling here and what is behind his prayer. He disobeyed God and got unequally yoked with a woman he should not have been with. He has been sulky and headstrong, this resulted in his wife being given to another. He did not control his rage and sense of revenge and this resulted in her and her family being burnt to death. He is on the run, people are hunting him, his own people do not want him, he has just won an incredible victory against the Philistines and instead of humility before God, instead of humbling himself and confessing his sins, and owning what he has done and what he has brought upon others, he accuses. God is not the villain we are.

But God in His grace answers and gives water. Samson had not won this as a reward, his prayer was not a good prayer teaching us a new type of bold faith that we must now imitate, Samson should have been struck by lightning for his attitude, yet God is gracious and doesn't give us what we deserve but often returns good for evil. How much more we who pray in Christ's name should expect God to hear and answer. The encouragement over and over again in God's dealings with Samson is that God operates according to grace. He does not always judge sin when it is happening, He can relent and delay His judgements. So the Christian who is now in Christ, who prays in Christ's name and is seeking God's will. There are several layers of grace that should encourage you in your faith and embolden you in your efforts for Him.

This chapter ends with a summary that Samson judged for twenty years, we can see that he fell into it and did not obey God in pursuing it. Israel did not experience the rest as in earlier days. Samson did not lead Israel into a better walk before God; nor is he described as a good judge who oversaw justice; nor is he described as someone who brought the hand of God's blessing down upon the people, He is not a type of Christ. The rest of the story of Samson leaves us feeling unfulfilled with this unsatisfying ending, but things are going to get worse before they get better.