

Judges 14:1-15:20
Armed and Donkey-ish
Samson Sermon Series #2
February 21, 2016

A couple weeks ago we began a sermon series on Samson by looking at the announcement of Samson's impending birth. If baby pictures were titled like yearbook pictures, Samson's could have been titled "Most Likely to Succeed." He was born to pious parents, his birth had been announced by God himself, and God had stated that Samson's purpose was to deliver his people from the oppression of the Philistines.

So, did Samson live up to the hype? Was he a champ, or did he end up being a chump?

Our story picks up in Judges 14 after he returned from the nearby Philistine village where he had seen a girl he liked. Samson said to his parents: "*Get her for me as my wife*" (Judges 14:2). Kids, do you bark orders at your parents like that? "Get me some Mac 'n Cheese!" I hope not. It seems that this was a habit of Samson's, however. For even when his parents tried to dissuade him, gently asking if there wasn't a fellow Israelite he could marry, Samson retorted: "*Get her for me. She's the right one for me [literally: she's right in my eyes]*" (Judges 14:3). It appears that Samson was interested in one thing: looks. It didn't matter to him that God had said that Israelites were not to marry their unbelieving neighbors, as his parents lovingly reminded him. What a chump.

Samson's parents relented and agreed to meet the Philistine girl. Samson himself now chatted with the girl for the first time and decided that one date was enough for him to confirm that she should be his life-long partner! It's no wonder there was tension between Samson and his parents. In fact on the way to the girl's village, parents and son had not walked together. That's why when a young lion jumped out at Samson, his parents weren't there to witness what happened. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson so that he was able to tear that lion apart with his bare hands. When Samson returned for his wedding, he looked for the lion carcass and found a beehive in it. From that he casually scooped out some honey, ate it, and shared it with his parents.

As a Nazirite, a special servant of God, he was not supposed to touch anything that was dead. That divine command didn't stop Samson, however. Never mind that God had set him apart for a special purpose! There was honey in that dead lion and Samson wanted some. So he took some--simple as that.

How could Samson, who had been raised by godly parents, do such things? I wonder if in many of these things Samson was simply a child of his times. Yes, he "believed in God", but he'd also accommodated himself to his culture. The time of the Judges is described more than once as a time when "*everyone did as he saw fit.*" (Judges 17:6; 21:25) These were rough times, so Samson somewhat naturally was a rough man--a child of his times.

And before we look too far down our noses at Samson, let's ask ourselves: "Have I become a child of my times, and not even realized it? Are there sins in my life that I almost don't recognize as sin anymore because no one else does? Do I casually do things that God has forbidden--simply because 'I felt like it?'"

As Christians, we are not to be children of our times, but children of God, set apart for a special purpose--to serve and honor him in the way that we live.

But we need to admit that in Samson's casual scooping up of sin, we see too much of ourselves and our own sinfulness.

Things didn't get any better at his wedding banquet. No, I'm not saying that Samson got so wasted that he made a fool of himself. Actually, since God had declared that Samson would live as a Nazirite, wine, like dead bodies, was to be entirely off limits for Samson. (Although, given Samson's track record, drinking and overdrinking wine would hardly have been out of character...)

What we do know about the seven-day wedding banquet is that Samson willingly gave into his covetous desires. He made up a riddle based on his recent experience with the lion and the honey and bet his wedding companions a set of clothes each that they couldn't guess it. The riddle went like this: *"Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet"* (Judges 14:18). For three days his thirty groomsmen pondered the riddle but couldn't solve it. But these were Philistines – the mafia of the ancient world; they knew how to get their way. They approached Samson's bride and said it would be a shame if they weren't able to solve the riddle and her and her family should just happen to get burned afterwards.

Samson's wife got the message. So she went and accused Samson of not loving her because he hadn't told her the answer to the riddle. When that didn't work, she sobbed...for the next four days of the wedding banquet (!) until Samson gave in. The triumphant groomsmen must have snickered as they gave the answer to Samson's riddle: *"What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?"* (Judges 14:18)

Samson knew what had happened. He said, *"If you not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle."* (Perhaps terms of endearment were different back then, but not only do I now question Samson's overall morality, I also question the sanity of anyone who dares to refer to his wife as a heifer!) But a bet was a bet, and no one would be able to accuse Samson of not paying up on a bet.

But neither would anyone be able to accuse Samson of being a good loser. You've heard about people who pay their traffic fines with a bagful of pennies? Samson went way, way beyond that.

Burning with anger he left his bride standing at the altar and went to Ashkelon, one of the big Philistine cities, where he killed 30 men, took their clothes, and gave them to his groomsmen before storming off to his parent's home.

We know that killing 30 men who had nothing to do with the bet in the first place is inexcusable, and if we think about it for a few moments, we'll realize what a horrifying act it was.

After several weeks if not months, Samson returned to his bride's house taking with him a valentine gift of a young goat. ("Sorry I skipped the honeymoon to go on a killing spree—but here's a goat!")

But she wasn't waiting for him. She had married one of Samson's groomsmen instead! (Maybe it was the "heifer" comment...) Again Samson's anger flared up. This time he caught 300 foxes, tied a torch between their tails and let the animals loose. Fires spread across Philistine grain fields and orchards.

When the owners discovered the motive for the arson, they burned Samson's ex-wife and her father! This made Samson so angry that he started killing Philistines left and right

before withdrawing (fleeing?) to a place called Etam where he literally (and perhaps fittingly) lived as a caveman.

The Philistines weren't done with Samson, however. Remember, they were ruling over the Israelites at this time so they brought an army into Israelite territory to put the squeeze on their subjects. They demanded Samson.

"Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, 'Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?'" (Judges 15:11)

Samson's reply? *"I merely did to them what they did to me." (Judges 15:11)*

Quite a spin on the so-called Golden Rule, in which Jesus told his hearers *"Do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12)* Samson had turned it into, "Do unto others whatever they do to you--and then some!"

There's a warning here for us to see how skewed Samson's morality has become. Because the journey from a "little sin" like touching a corpse that was forbidden to a "big sin" like slaughtering people in the name of revenge really isn't a long one. Once I've decided that one of God's commands can be cast aside if I feel like it, there's very little left to stop me from casting aside any of God's commands whenever I wish. Be very careful of "little sins"--not "just because" they are in and of themselves sin, but also because they lead to "bigger sins" and eventually destroy the soul.

As Samson approached the Philistine army, bound with ropes that the Israelites had placed on him, they raised a great shout of victory. But at that moment the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson again with great power so that he was able to snap the ropes which bound him. He then thrust his hand into a dead donkey that was lying nearby and yanked off its jawbone (again touching a dead body!). With this jawbone Samson eventually killed 1,000 Philistines, and he made up a little poem about it too. *"With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them [or "made a heap or two"]. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men" (Judges 15:16).* Armed and donkey-ish, that was Samson.

But now, for the first time, we hear Samson call out to the Lord. He said: *"You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" (Judges 15:18)* It's a bit difficult to know what to make of this prayer (or "prayer"?). He did acknowledge that it was God who had given him the strength to do these things, but his "request" for water comes off more like a demand than a request.

And yet God does grant his request by opening up a spring at Samson's feet from which he drank and was revived. Samson would name that spring En Hakkore which means "Caller's Spring."

Although it is not the end of the story of Samson, it is the end of our reading for today: *"Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines" (Judges 15:20).*

The story of Samson is an interesting story. But if we just wanted interesting stories, we'd pick up a novel from the New York Times bestseller list. What can we learn from this section of Scripture that will make it more than an interesting story? What can we learn from Samson about ourselves? What can we learn about our God?

We've already noted that we have learned that Samson isn't so very different than we are. Our anger may not explode into the field-torching, jawbone-wielding rampages that

Samson's anger exploded into--but mostly because we don't have the necessary strength to do it and because we're afraid we couldn't get away with it.

We've confessed that we've managed to combine white-hot anger with a laid-back attitude about sin.

And what that means is that we deserve to have God smash us like Samson smashed the Philistines with a jawbone.

But God didn't do that to Samson, and he has not done that to us. Instead, just as he sent Samson and other "judges" as deliverers of his people, he has sent us a deliverer in his Son Jesus. Jesus was a deliverer like Samson, but he was so unlike Samson.

He never had a casual attitude about sin, he never scooped up some of the spoils for himself, reasoning that he was "owed it." He never attempted to boss his Father around like Samson did, but instead prayed things like *"Not my will, but your will be done."* (Luke 22:42) He never gave in to the temptation to sinful rage--even when he was wronged far more grievously than Samson was wronged, and far more grievously than we have ever been wronged.

Like Samson, he allowed himself to be bound--bound by temple guards and Roman soldiers, and eventually bound by death.

But he did not stay bound by death, breaking its bonds on Easter Sunday like so many Israelite ropes as he rose from the grave.

Samson may have been armed and donkey-ish, but our Savior was armed and victorious.

Samson found sweet honey in the dead carcass of a lion, but was forbidden to take some. We have found the sweetness of forgiveness in the living, glorious, and risen body of the one spoken of the Old Testament as *"the lion of the tribe of Judah"* (Revelation 5:5)--and we are invited to eat freely.

There is one other thing we note. When Samson decided early on that he must have that Philistine girl, we read: *"His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines"* (Judges 14:14) This doesn't mean that God had prompted Samson to seek a sinful marriage. The Bible says that God *"tempts no one."* (James 1:13)

Nor does it mean that God approved of Samson's actions and attitude any more than he approved of the actions of Joseph's brothers when they sold him into slavery, or of the actions of the Jews when they crucified Jesus--and yet in both cases writers of the Bible say that God was aware that these things were going to happen and that he used them to bring about good for his people. (See Genesis 45:8; 50:20 and Acts 2:23; 4:28).

Rather, it's letting us know that God had decided to use Samson's sinful choice in his divine plan to give relief to the Israelites from the oppression of the Philistines. We see that later when, as Samson indulges his indiscriminate rage by murdering 30 men, we are told that the Spirit of the Lord gave Samson the power to do so. God again uses a sin of Samson to help accomplish his divine plan of deliverance.

The same God who earlier in the Old Testament had spoken through a donkey was also able to use a donkey of a man like Samson to accomplish his purposes, and will continue to accomplish his purposes even if he has to use wicked men to do so.

And yes, he'll even do for us as he did for Samson, and he will hear our imperfect prayers as we thirst for water. He will come to us and give us Jesus, the Water of Life. Amen.