

AN ANGRY GIANT

By Steve Zeisler

Today we're going to continue our study of the life of Samson in the book of Judges. I'd like to read you a paragraph that I clipped out of this week's newspaper as an introduction to Samson's life.

Say goodbye to John Wayne. American men today say they do not want women to think of them as rugged and masculine, because they are really sensitive and caring fellows, according to a newly released national poll on men and male attitudes. According to a Roper poll made public this week, the man of the '90s sees himself as being friendly, trustworthy, and kind. He still loves sports and sex, but he also thinks that he needs to be more attuned to the needs of women and family.

An obvious description of our friend Samson.... (I would expect my kids to yell, "Not!" at this point if they were here.) This poll asked men what their impressions of themselves were, and they are giving us their opinions, telling us their world view, if you will. But it's interesting to me that at the same time that men are describing themselves as more sensitive and caring, attuned to the needs of women and children; the incidence of rape is going up dramatically in this culture, abuse of children is rampant and growing, the streets aren't safe, relationships are dissolving at a terrible rate, and in the real practice of ordinary people relating to each other, we see deterioration rather than improvement. Samson, who is the antithesis of everything the men of the '90s say they want to be, can instruct us as we look at why people do what they do and what makes us act contrary to our values.

We began considering the life of Samson last week in chapters 13 and 14, which talked about his birth and ended with the story of a marriage feast. In his young manhood, Samson saw a beautiful Philistine girl and said to his father, "She looks good to me. Get her for me as my wife." He thought of her the way a man might think about the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated; he was physically attracted to this woman. His father tried to talk him out of it to no avail. During the wedding feast he made a bet with the Philistine men there that they couldn't guess a riddle. They pressured her to get the answer out of Samson. He ended up losing the bet, killed thirty Philistines in Ashkelon to pay off the bet, and stomped off in a rage. That's where we ended the story last week. Now verse 1 of chapter 15:

But after a while, in the time of wheat harvest, it came about that 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. And 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."

After the Wedding

This young woman was shamed horribly in being abandoned by Samson at their wedding feast. Her father hastily arranged another wedding for her so she wasn't left without a husband. So now the father said to Samson, "I thought you hated her---You've been gone!"

Samson then said to them, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm." And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes [jackals is a better translation] 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.

Presumably, they burned their house to the ground while father and daughter were in it. They had threatened to do so at the wedding feast (Judges 14:15) if she didn't find out the secret of Samson's riddle. Now in revenge they carried out their threat. Verse 7:

And Samson said to them, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit." And he struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.

This account reminds us that insisting on one's rights and demanding revenge, bring about troubles that can't be contained. It's significant to me that Samson started a fire. He set these poor animals ablaze to start the standing grain on fire, and the fire leaped to the vineyards and the olive groves, destroying everything in sight. It's a metaphor of what was taking place between Samson and his Philistine enemies. A fire was being stoked; it was getting worse, and things were raging out of control.

It's also worth noting that Samson's acts of revenge were not just the passionate outburst of the moment. If he'd been furious at losing his wife, you might have expected him to flatten the father with one punch. That would have been an act of passionate anger. But he did something much more calculating than that. He was furious, but he also determined to perform the very difficult task of catching 300 jackals and setting them loose to destroy the economic base of his enemies. He was taking his revenge on the people who had originally "plowed with his heifer," to use the phrase at the end of the previous chapter.

We can joke about Samson not being a '90s kind of guy who is sensitive to the needs of women and children, thoughtful, friendly, and kind. (About the only way Samson would fit into the '90s is that he would probably look good in the gym working out with the other guys!) He did not in any sense have the cultural values of today. But he didn't even live by the values of his own culture. First his father and then his father-in-law tried to stop him; they both tried to tell Samson that his activities went against every convention of their age. Yet he did what he wanted anyway concerned only with satisfying his own desires.

The simple point I want to make here is that widely held cultural values by themselves do not predict how people will act. Perhaps the women's movement and the subsequent men's movement in our culture have changed the standard of what is considered correct behavior between men and women. But we know by looking around us that many men will assent to some idea of what they ought to be like, yet treat the women in their home badly, threaten their children, and treat one another in personal relationships with the same attitude of selfishness as Samson, if not with the same ability to endanger one another. It's interesting to me to note that some of the public figures who hold the most liberal, cutting-edge, progressive political attitudes about women's rights in theory treat the actual women in their lives terribly.

Rights and Revenge

What insight into these matters can we gain by looking closely at Samson's story? The story began with the simple physical longing he had for a particular woman. "She looks good to me." Then the fact that she looked good to him meant that everybody else had to get in line with his desires. His father's objections didn't matter, and neither did anybody else's. He wanted what he wanted. Next, it eventually became his right to have what he wanted. She became his wife, then at the marriage feast Samson stomped off in a rage, acting on a whim. Again his whim became his right which led to a conviction that revenge equaled justice. Do you recall how he argued later on when he came back to see his wife, after he'd gotten over his anger? She had been given to another, and so, defending his actions beforehand, he said, "This time in what I do to the Philistines I will be held blameless. I have the right to do what I'm about to do."

That same psychology is at work in us as it is in every age. We identify something we want, and eventually we translate our desire into our right—we have a right to have what we want. When our rights are transgressed, we turn to revenge, but it's not revenge, it's justice because our rights were violated, after all. When we strike back, we're only doing what anyone would do, what ought to be done.

At the end of this story, Samson was trying to stop the fire from spreading. After he destroyed the crops of his enemies, his enemies struck back by killing his wife and her father. Then he struck back with a great slaughter of Philistines. And he said, "This time it will stop. This will be the last act of vengeance." But the problem is that they, too, had their rights, which Samson had violated, and they believed they were establishing justice. Samson was now to be dealt with by them on the same basis. You can't unilaterally declare an end to the battle when you're ahead. That's what Samson was trying to do, but the battle wouldn't end until either Samson died or all the Philistines died. The cycle of demanding that we have what we want can't be stopped by merely succeeding in getting what we want or by wreaking revenge on those who oppose us.

This has been sort of a hard week at our house. Our youngest son is seeing a medical specialist for some difficult issues in his life, and the process of getting him the kind of medical help he needs has been very frustrating. In the midst of that he got very sick, perhaps as a result of some of the treatments he was getting. The sickness was treated by medicine that made him even worse. So he was horribly sick and miserable, and we were miserable ourselves, frustrated, and a bit frightened for awhile. His sickness ran the life of our house for a good bit of the week.

On top of that, the hard disk in my computer crashed. A lot of information evaporated into thin air. One night I was working fairly late trying to restore all this information in a hard disk, and I woke up the next morning tired and irritable. I thought, "I not only feel rude and irritable today, but I have the right to treat people with rudeness and irritability because all these terrible things have happened to me. Yet the people that I treated rudely and irritably didn't see it that way. They assumed that I now owed them something because I had detracted from their lives by being rude and irritable. You can see how the process escalates.

I was listening to a car radio driving somewhere, and the old Jim Croce song came on, Leroy Brown:

Bad, bad Leroy Brown,
Baddest man in the whole darn town,
Badder than old King Kong,
Meaner than a junk-yard dog.

That's Samson. He had nothing but his own interests, his own anger in mind; and he assumed that he could end the process by slaughtering a host of Philistines and saying, "Okay, we're even." But let's see what happened in verse 9:

The Frightened Men of Judah

Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi.

This was near the area where he was hiding in the cleft of Etam, and it was inhabited mostly by men of Judah. An army of at least a thousand Philistines, probably many more, came looking for Samson.

And 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." And 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.

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 is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey,

so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it.

Samson was brought forward by the men of Judah. They were frightened because of the Philistine presence among them, and they urged Samson to come down and face the consequences, whatever they might be. He met the force of Philistines and single-handedly destroyed a thousand men, presumably sending the rest, if there were others, to flight.

I'd like to comment on the role of the men of Judah in this story, because their behavior was the wrongful opposite of Samson's. Samson was somebody who insisted on having his rights at all costs. We've already described the process that takes place with this kind of thinking. The men of Judah, on the other hand, just folded their hands and timidly went along with the presence of the Philistines, acquiescing to the pressure. We can imagine them appealing to Samson in squeaky little voices saying, "The Philistines are rulers over us, Samson. We don't want to antagonize them." They lived their lives without any sense of their own worth in relation to the Philistines. They just went along with whatever oppression that the Philistines visited on them. Samson fought every inch of the way, but these men quit at every point on the way.

When we're faced with conflict or circumstances that are hard to live with, neither an angry insistence on our rights nor a doormat-like acquiescence is what God intends for us. But think of all the kinds of conflict in which one or the other of these solutions suggests itself: In marriage, husband and wife may be relating to each other in deep pain, and one or the other can be very dominant. Some men bluster, stomp, yell, and insist, usually behind closed doors where no one outside can see, miniature tyrants in their homes. Conversely, other men have given up the last shred of their self-respect and are unable to contribute anything at all to their marriages. Sometimes women are dominant, manipulative, angry, vocal, and insistent. Others are doormats, having lost any sense of their own value. The conflict in these situations is never resolved because neither approach brings health or life.

The Forgiveness Cycle

What ought to happen? What is the Christian alternative to what we see in this story? The Christian alternative is to invite the power of the One who is greater than we are to change the situation. The power of God, available to us in Christ, can issue in forgiveness. Forgiveness is the one element that is nowhere in Samson's story. When a person of tremendous value, who has had the love of God fill his soul, is wronged, he can turn to his tormentors and forgive them. The cycle of one set of rights clashing with another set of rights and one act of revenge being followed by another is broken. That's the option that we who know the Lord must choose; to look outside ourselves to the Lord for help, to realize how much he cares for us and that we don't need to insist on our rights and protect ourselves at every point, because the Lord is greater than we are and is protecting us.

It's interesting to note that later on in the biblical drama of the Old Testament, the roles are reversed; the angry giant in the later story is the Philistine Goliath. Goliath is the strong and terrorizing individual, and the one who defeats Goliath is not someone who meets him strength for strength or who fights like Goliath fights. He is the shepherd boy with the slingshot, having no armor and no background in warfare. He understands that the power of God is the only hope for him and his people, and when he strides forth and meets the enemy, the Lord's purposes are accomplished.

But even greater than defeating an enemy is seeing the power of the love of God change foes to friends. Forgiveness can lead to reconciliation and reconciliation to new life. The capacity to forgive our enemies, supremely demonstrated in Christ, is the greatest power of all.

Verse 16:

Then Samson said,
With the jawbone of a donkey,
Heaps upon heaps,
With the jawbone of a donkey
I have killed a thousand men."

And it came about when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place Ramath-lehi. [Roughly translated, that means Jawbone Heights.] Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, "Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of Thy 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.

We are seeing Samson for the first time recognize that he was not capable of doing everything he wanted. The battle was over, everyone else was gone, and finally awareness of his own depletion descended on him. You can imagine how much emotional and physical energy it took to fight as he's fought, single-handedly, against incredible odds. Finally it drained him, so that for the first time he had to speak to God in the context of weakness.

Samson prayed, "Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of thy servant." On a positive note, God got the credit to begin with: "You've done it--but let's not forget the important role of the hand of your servant...and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Samson's prayer was at bottom more of an accusation than anything else, wasn't it? He was saying, "God, you're not treating me fairly!" Again, Samson was back to asserting what he deserved, even to God. Faith was not entirely absent from the prayer, but Samson himself was still the major subject of it. It is important to note that the prayer came after he sang a song in his own praise. "With the jawbone of a donkey I have killed a thousand men."

It was an act of God's mercy both to make Samson thirsty and then to slake his thirst. The Lord gave him a glimpse of himself that is going to become very important before the end of his story. Samson will not be a great man of faith until he has suffered indignity, loss of strength, and failure. He was getting a hint of it here, the first glimmering of insight.

Achieving God's Righteousness

What can we learn from observing Samson take vengeance on his enemies? It might be worth noting that his story is one of a man who was always alone. We find no record of any real friendships in his life. He was a widower at this point and would never marry again. His relationships with women were with prostitutes, as we'll see in the next chapter; that was the only kind of relationship he was able to sustain with a woman. He had no children of his own. The people of his own community, his fellow Israelites, didn't know what to make of him. His enemies were terrified of him. He judged Israel, we're told, but he judged them not with wisdom or articulation of the things of God, but only with his raw power. He was so frightening to the Philistines that they backed off for twenty years, but that was the only contribution he made as a judge.

Samson was a man, as we said last week, who had very little on the inside and very little personal success in either knowing God or changing the world he lived in. He won every battle, but he accomplished almost nothing. He was someone who was gripped by the cycle, to review again, of having desires that became rights, which in turn allowed for revenge to become justice in his thinking. Over and over again he had to strike the last blow, and as a result, he was isolated, a man having very little to offer anyone except the terror of his strength.

Let's read James 1:16-18 to close:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures.

Our heavenly Father is a gift-giver. He has given us new life in Christ and has showered every good and perfect gift upon us from heaven. We are the recipients of incalculable mercy, and blessing. We've been given

everything that is worth having, and every day is filled with new ways to see and rejoice in his goodness to us. It is precisely for that reason that we don't need to defend ourselves. It is because the Father of heavenly lights cares so deeply for us that we can let go of the need to assert what's best for us, let go of all the language of rights, of entitlement, of what I deserve, the sense that justice is getting what seems to benefit me. That whole way of looking at life can be set aside in favor of looking at life as someone who is infinitely cared for by a heavenly Father. Because that is true, the directive of verse 19 follows:

This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

We are quick to listen, quick to understand. We easily put ourselves in the shoes of another and see life from their perspective. We are not so overwhelmed by our appetites that we insist on everything going our way. We become quick to care and to walk alongside someone; that becomes our enthusiasm. We're much slower to contribute our two cents' worth to everything, and we're even slower to become angry. The righteousness of God is our concern because he loves us so, and man's anger doesn't achieve the righteousness of God.

Catalog No. 4316
Judges 15:1-20
Eleventh Message
Steve Zeisler
March 15, 1992

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.