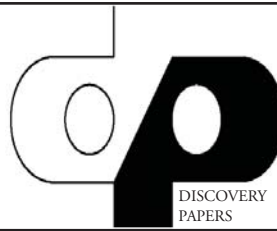


THE SACRED PATH

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Scott Grant
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I was enjoying my lunch while seated at a table outside a restaurant on a summer afternoon in Palo Alto. Suddenly, without warning, water came streaming from above and drenched a man who was walking by. Stunned, he removed his glasses and looked around for answers. It rarely rains in Palo Alto in the summer, and no clouds were in the sky. I got up from my table to help him solve the mystery.

We surmised that the water could have come from any of ten windows in the six-story building he was walking near. Someone—without sinister intent, I presumed—must have poured water out of his or her window. But which window? When we looked up, all the windows were closed.

After composing himself, the victim said, “I’m going to do the civilized thing and not throw rocks.”

“Even if you threw rocks,” I told him, “you wouldn’t know which window to aim at.”

“Oh,” he said, “I have a lot of time.”

He restrained himself, however, and walked on.

In what direction will we walk? Being wronged is inevitable; it comes with being human in a broken world. The question posed by Judges 15 is what path will we take when wrongs are done to us? We would be wise to take a path other than the one taken by Samson.

Samson tries to kiss and make up

Judges 15:1-5:

¹Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, “I’m going to my wife’s room.” But her father would not let him go in. ²“I was so sure you hated her,” he said, “that I gave her to your companion. Isn’t her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead.” ³Samson said to them, “This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them.” ⁴So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs.

He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, ⁵lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

Samson, who had left his Philistine wife because he was angry with the Philistines in general, concludes that the time has come to kiss and make up. He brings the woman a gift, a young goat, to soften her heart, but her father tells him the bad news: he has given Samson’s wife to a “companion” who had served as a sort of attendant at his wedding. The companion was part of the cohort that solved Samson’s riddle in underhanded fashion. First, from Samson’s perspective, the guy stole thirty sets of clothes from him; now he’s also stolen his wife from him.

The woman’s father offers Samson a consolation prize: her supposedly more attractive sister. Samson was originally interested in the Philistine woman because she looked good to him; perhaps her better-looking sister will please him. Samson, though, will have none of it. He may be a man of his eyes, but he is also a man of anger, and in this case, his anger wins out. “This time,” Samson claims, he has a right to get even with the Philistines, all but acknowledging culpability for his previous act against them, the slaying of thirty men to make good on his debt.

Samson makes use of foxes and torches to devastate the Philistines’ grain and crops. Whereas Gideon, an earlier leader, used three hundred torches to deliver the Israelites from the pagans, Samson uses three hundred foxes and some torches not to deliver the Israelites from the pagans but to exact revenge against them. The law instructed the Israelites to leave vengeance to the Lord, but Samson takes matters into his own hands (Deuteronomy 32:35). The Lord limited punishment to “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” lest the lust for revenge overwhelm the desire for justice (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20). Samson, quite clearly, is not a man of the word.

What are our rights?

In our culture, individual “rights” have become sovereign. From a biblical perspective, however, God is sovereign; therefore, we might want to consider what he

says before pressing our so-called rights. For example, we don't have a right to "get even" with anyone, no matter what's been done to us. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone," and alluding to Deuteronomy 32:35, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:17, 19 convert). We might, therefore, want to catch ourselves before saying something like, "I have a right to get even."

If anyone had a right to get even with his enemies, it was Jesus, who was innocent, but instead of getting even, he loved his enemies, prayed for them, and entrusted his cause to the Father (Matthew 5:4, Luke 23:34, 1 Peter 2:23). He sublimated his rights to his calling; in fact, he took the form of a servant and refused to exploit his equality with God (Philippians 2:5-7).

Samson, on the other hand, is just beginning to assert his "rights."

Samson strikes back

Judges 15:6-8:

"When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion." So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. ⁷Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I swear that I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." ⁸He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

The Philistines get back at Samson not by striking at him directly but by making scapegoats of the woman and her father. The Philistines fight fire with fire, literally: Samson torched the Philistines' produce, so they torch his wife and father-in-law. The Philistines had earlier threatened to burn the woman and her father unless she helped them win their bet with Samson (Judges 14:15). She cooperated with them back then, but they find another reason to do away with her and her father.

If Samson has a right to be angry with anyone, he has a right to be angry with his father-in-law, who gave his wife to another man, yet he takes out his anger not on his father-in-law but on the Philistines in general. If the Philistines have a right to be angry with anyone, they have a right to be angry with Samson, but they take out their anger on Samson's father-in-law and his wife—those who

provoked Samson to anger in the first place. This game of revenge makes no sense.

Samson thinks he owes the Philistines one more licking. Literally, he says, "after that I will quit." If that's the case, if he only has one more shot at the Philistines, he better make it a good one, so he unleashes an especially vicious slaughter against them. Samson thinks everything's even now, but he suspects that the Philistines think otherwise, so he heads for the hills of the south and finds a hole to hide in.

Quittin' time

If we actually think we're going to satisfy our anger with one last outburst, then we're likely to spend every last drop of venom on it. Especially if we're spending all our venom in one last bite, there's liable to be substantial collateral damage, as in the case of Samson, who took out his anger on innocent Philistines. In worldly thinking, others become guilty by association, or they just happen to get in the way.

When we nurse our anger, our lust for revenge becomes insatiable. We might envision, in the manner of Samson, quitting after one more outburst, but one more outburst never satisfies us, just like "one more hit" never satisfies the addict. We might, therefore, want to catch ourselves before saying something like, "After that I will quit."

Think back to the man who got drenched on his walk and told me that he had "a lot of time." The thought of breaking ten windows to retaliate against one perpetrator had obviously crossed his mind. If he had proceeded with such a plan, he wasn't going to quit after breaking just one window: his lust for revenge would have become insatiable. Furthermore, though his dispute was with one person, nine innocent people would have suffered simply because they happened to be in the vicinity.

Jesus used similar language to that of Samson, but unlike Samson, he meant what he said. Samson said, "After that I will quit"; Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Jesus died without ever taking his own revenge. He would not let innocent men, women, and children pay the price. Samson, on the other hand, endangers his fellow Israelites.

Samson and the people of Judah

Judges 15:9-13:

⁹The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. ¹⁰The people

of Judah asked, “Why have you come to fight us?” “We have come to take Samson prisoner,” they answered, “to do to him as he did to us.”¹¹ 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?” He answered, “I merely did to them what they did to me.”¹² They said to him, “We’ve come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.” Samson said, “Swear to me that you won’t kill me yourselves.”¹³ “Agreed,” they answered. “We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you.” So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock.

Samson, who hailed from the tribe of Dan, had fled to the cave of Etam, in the land of the tribe of Judah. The Philistines demand that the men of Judah hand Samson over so that they can—what else?—“do to him as he did to us.”

The men of Judah, earlier in the book of Judges, vanquished the pagans, but they have since lost their nerve (Judges 1:1-20). They tell Samson that “the Philistines are rulers over us,” forgetting that the Lord is their ruler. They accuse Samson of provoking the Philistines, but Samson throws up his hands and says he was just paying them back. Even though Samson has been simply bent on revenge, he is nevertheless the Lord’s deliverer, and the men of Judah, now aware of Samson’s prowess, might well ask him to lead them in battle against the Philistines. Instead, they marshal three thousand men, a veritable army, to hand Samson over to the Philistines. Of course, if Samson had assumed his role as a deliverer of Israel instead of giving in to a lust for personal revenge, he might well have gone to the land of Judah to recruit warriors instead of running for cover. Everything is backward.

Samson consents, but not before extracting from the men of Judah a promise that they won’t kill him. Sure, they say, failing to mention, of course, that the Philistines plan on doing away with him. Presumably, Samson doesn’t put up a fight because he likes his chances better against the Philistines than the men of Judah. After all, his divine appointment is to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, and the Spirit of the Lord earlier came upon him when he killed thirty Philistines (Judges 14:19).

Compromising our calling

What’s our calling? Is it not, like Samson, to participate in God’s deliverance of this world from evil? We are called, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to implement the

victory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ until he comes to complete the mission. Anger, as we nurse it into revenge, causes us to forget—and compromise—our calling. We wed our calling to bring God’s justice to the world to an obsession with personal vengeance. Then those who are victims of evil, who were supposed to be in the spiritual trenches with us, also become confused, just like the men of Judah, who lost track of who they were and what they were supposed to do. Those we were supposed to be shoulder to shoulder with might even say something like, “What have you done to us?” We might, therefore, want to catch ourselves before saying, in response to such a question, or at any other time, for that matter, something like, “I merely did to them what they did to me.”

Jesus, though tempted by the devil in the wilderness, refused to compromise his calling as the Son of God (Mathew 4:1-11). Like Samson, he was bound by his enemies, but he brought salvation not by breaking the bonds of men and not by doing to them what they did to him (John 11:47-50). In fact, Jesus lived what he preached: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Thus, he broke the bonds of Satan for all of us (Colossians 2:14).

Will the bonds of the Philistines hold Samson? Let’s see.

Samson breaks free

Judges 15:14-17:

¹⁴As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. ¹⁵Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. ¹⁶Then Samson said,

“With a donkey’s jawbone

I have made donkeys of them.

With a donkey’s jawbone

I have killed a thousand men.”

¹⁷When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.

The Philistines shout, like warriors at the outset of a battle, as they prepare to take custody of Samson, but, once

again, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, this time to free him from his bonds. He turns a nearby jawbone of a donkey into a deadly weapon to kill a thousand Philistines. However, in that the jawbone is fresh, Samson again touches a carcass, in violation of the law. If the Spirit has indeed come upon him, he need not use unlawful means to achieve a successful end.

Samson's feat echoes that of Shamgar, who killed six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, a long stick (Judges 3:31). But whereas Shamgar "saved Israel," nothing of the sort is said of Samson. In fact, Samson is unconcerned with either Israel or the Lord as he celebrates his victory with a poem. He boasts of what he has accomplished (the slaying of a thousand with a makeshift weapon), to the exclusion of the Spirit of the Lord, who empowered him for the accomplishment. By contrast, Deborah praised the Lord in her poem of celebration after Israel's victory over the Canaanites (Judges 5). Mission accomplished, Samson flippantly tosses the jawbone aside and gives the place a name that memorializes his accomplishment, not the Lord's accomplishment: Ramath Lehi, which means, colloquially speaking, "Jawbone Hill."

Taking credit

We love taking credit for things, even if we do so silently. The validation that God offers—the only validation that matters—isn't enough for us, so we take credit for our accomplishments in order to say, if only to ourselves, "I'm somebody." God is responsible for our creation, our gifting, and our circumstances, but we are wont to credit ourselves, not him, because we're insecure. We might, therefore, want to catch ourselves before beginning multiple sentences with the first-person pronoun "I," in reference to our accomplishments.

If anyone deserved to take credit for his accomplishments, it was Jesus, but he credited the Father. He said, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing," and he prayed, "Father, glorify your name!" (John 8:24, 12:28) Jesus took up not the jawbone of a donkey to defeat human enemies but a cross of wood to defeat spiritual enemies. The bindings didn't drop from his hands; instead, two nails pierced his hands. The site of his victory was not Ramath Lehi, Jawbone Hill, but Golgotha, Place of a Skull, a hill outside Jerusalem. And, as a result, we sing a different sort of song than the ditty Samson composed: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, / to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength / and honor and glory and praise!" (Revelation 5:12).

Finally, in the next section, Samson at least acknowledges the Lord.

Samson works up a thirst

Judges 15:18-20:

¹⁸Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" ¹⁹Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.

²⁰Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

After killing all those men, Samson has worked up a mighty thirst, and only now does he see the need to involve the Lord in his affairs. In fact, verse 18 is the first time in the story of Samson that the name of the Lord is found on his lips. He acknowledges that the Lord is responsible for literally "this great deliverance"—the Lord's deliverance of him, not Israel—and fears that he would die and fall into the hands of "the uncircumcised." Of course, his parents tried to dissuade him from taking a wife from "the uncircumcised" Philistines, but back then he insisted and fell into the arms of one of them (Judges 14:3). All in all, Samson's prayer rings of hypocrisy, but the Lord responds to it nonetheless, even if the narrator at this point refers to him generically as God (Elohim) and not by the covenant name of the God of Israel, the Lord (YHWH).

Samson calls himself the Lord's servant, along the lines of Moses, and the Lord, remarkably, provides water for him, just as he provided water for Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:10-13). The Lord continues to empower Samson and provide for him despite his lawlessness and hypocrisy. Whereas Moses memorialized the Lord, Samson again memorializes himself, calling the place "En Hakkore," which means "Spring of him who called."

Turning on the piety

Some of us, like Samson, can turn on the piety when we need to, praying for deliverance from the painful part of what we've let into our lives while at the same time holding on to the enjoyable part. Samson wants to sleep with pagan women and be delivered from pagan men. Similarly, we deceive ourselves by splitting off our life, defending immorality in one compartment and praying for God's help in another. We might, therefore, want to catch ourselves, if we're playing fast and loose with biblical

commands, before praying something like, “Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” (i.e., “Deliver me from my enemies.”)

In contrast to Samson’s hypocritical prayer for deliverance, Jesus, in Gethsemane, with authenticity and purity of heart, prayed, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Samson identifies himself as a servant of the Lord; the Scriptures, on the other hand, proclaim Jesus to be the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Samson thirsted and prayed that he wouldn’t die and fall into the hands of his enemies; Jesus, on the other hand, knew he was being “delivered into the hands of sinners,” accepted his fate, and thirsted as he was dying at the hands of his enemies (Mark 14:41, John 19:28). God opened up a hollow place in Lehi, and Samson drank of the water that came from it; a Roman soldier pierced Jesus with a spear, opening up a hollow place in his side, and water and blood poured out of it—blood, for the forgiveness of sins and water representing the Holy Spirit, who satisfies spiritual thirst (John 19:34). When Samson drank the water that God provided, he was revived; when Jesus drank the sour wine a soldier offered him, he died, so that he might offer us heavenly wine at the Lord’s Table (John 19:29-30). Samson led Israel for twenty years; Jesus has led the Israel of God, the Jews and Gentiles who believe in him, for almost two thousand years, and he will lead us forever.

Walking with Jesus

What path will we take when wrongs are done to us? Two paths diverge before us: the one that Samson took and the one that Jesus took. Do we walk down the path of holding grudges with Samson, or do we walk down the path of forgiveness with Jesus? The path of Samson offers instant gratification but provokes lust for revenge, hurts innocent parties, and compromises our calling.

In the end, the path of holding grudges is self-destructive, as Frederick Buechner observes:

To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

The path of Jesus does not offer instant gratification; on the other hand, it neither provokes lust for revenge

nor compromises our calling. Neither does it lead to self-destruction. Instead, it offers ... well, it offers Jesus. There has never been a more innocent victim than Jesus. He was tortured, ridiculed, and crucified, yet he forgave. Therefore, if you have been wronged and you choose the path of Jesus, seeking to forgive, take your shoes off, for you are walking on holy ground. Because it’s his path, he walks with you in it. There is no deeper way to relate with Jesus than when you have been wronged. He felt what we feel, and he feels what we feel. As he walks with you, he helps you walk down the path: “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). If you try simply to follow the example of Jesus, you will not get very far along his path. In fact, you will not be walking on it at all. It is insufficient to simply follow the example of Jesus; we must walk with Jesus.

Bruce McNicol, president of TrueFaced, explains:

About two years ago, someone deeply offended me, damaging friendships and reputation and causing a loss of funds, among other things. At that point, I had a choice: forgive or not forgive. If I decided to forgive, I had another choice: to will myself into forgiving because I’m supposed to or to trust the vision and counsel of Jesus, rest in His wisdom, and let Him determine the outcomes. Remember, Jesus is standing with me whenever I sin or am sinned against. Even if I decided not to forgive, Jesus stayed with me through all my resentment and bitterness. Jesus was close enough for me to hear Him say, “If you ask Me—and I hope you do—you will forgive this person as I have forgiven you. Trust Me with this advice, and I’ll heal you, restore you, and free you with the truth it brings to you.” Since I trusted Jesus, I forgave. This did not come from willpower, which for me is like no-power, but out of trust. ... Thus, I participated in God forming me. Yet even before I decided to forgive, Jesus was still standing with His arm around me. Because I chose to forgive, I’ve experienced genuine freedom from any residual bitterness.¹

Because he took the path of forgiveness, McNicol experienced Jesus in a powerful way.

What if you walk down the path and Jesus isn’t there? What if he’s not walking with you? What if you can’t find him? Fret not, and rest assured you’re still on the right path. Walking in uncertainty and doubt is part of the journey of faith. Jesus himself felt abandoned by God when he went to the cross to forgive. Keep walking. Jesus will join you eventually. Or your eyes will be opened to see that he’s

been walking with you all along.

Walking down the path of Jesus does not mean submitting to abuse. The apostle Paul was wrongly accused, but he stood up for himself and appealed to the law of the land. Nor does walking down the path of Jesus mean that we sacrifice our desire for justice. In fact, we are called to speak up for victims and be advocates for justice. The desire for justice is good. The desire for revenge is a good desire gone wrong.

God validates our desire for justice and assures us that he will make everything right. Listen to what he says about his Son:

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice through to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope.”

Matthew 12:18-21

Wrongdoing, under any circumstances, can never be justified. But God, who turns evil into good, can use even the wrongs done to you for your benefit and the benefit of others, if you'll just start walking down the sacred path with Jesus.

NOTES

¹Bruce McNicol, *The Kingdom Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2011), 75-76.