

DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 12: "SOVEREIGN EVEN OVER SIN"
JUDGES 14:1-15:20

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 12 of our sermon series called "Downward Spiral," where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: "Sovereign Even Over Sin."

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

We wouldn't have the English Bible today if it were not for William Tyndale, who was the first to translate the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into English.

But in 1536, Tyndale was executed, for it was illegal to translate or even read the Bible in English without the Catholic Church's approval.

At the time, the Bible could only be read in Latin, which of course, none of the common people understood.

Before Tyndale's death though, his last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

The King of England at the time was King Henry VIII. He was a devoted Catholic.¹

But then, King Henry started having problems in his marriage.

When he was 17, he had married his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, but she had not born him a son to succeed him as king.

So, King Henry sought to get his marriage annulled by the pope, so that he could marry someone else, and he sought to do it on biblical grounds.

He referenced Leviticus 20:21, which says, "If a man marries his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has shamed his brother; they will be childless." And given the fact that his wife Catherine had not born him a son, King Henry saw that as proof that his marriage was cursed and enough reason for an annulment.

But the pope wouldn't allow it.

At the time, King Henry was also falling for another woman named Anne Boleyn, and so, he broke off from the Catholic Church and thus began the official Church of England.

But by using the Bible to argue against the pope for his marriage annulment, King Henry had essentially claimed that the Bible is a higher authority than the pope.

But when Anne *also* did not bear King Henry a son, she lost favor in his eyes and he later had her executed, and he pursued another marriage with Jane Seymour the very next day.

Jane bore his only son, Edward, and she died while giving birth.

¹ The pope even awarded him the title "Defender of the Faith."

He then married Anne of Cleves, but quickly had that marriage annulled.

He then married Catherine Howard, but had her executed.

And he finally married Catherine Parr, who outlived him.

As you can see, King Henry was quite an impulsive, temperamental man who kind of did whatever he wanted.

But in 1538, just two years after Tyndale cried, “Lord, open the eyes of the King of England,” King Henry decreed that an English Bible be placed in every church and that no one should discourage but rather should encourage every person to read and hear the Bible.²

And because of that, people who had never read or heard the Bible in a language they understood before... now had the Bible in English—and they were reading and understanding it for the first time in their lives.

It was a huge part in the recovery of the gospel during the Protestant Reformation.

And the very fact that we’re preaching from an English Bible today is not only due to William Tyndale but King Henry VIII as well.

The man who made the decree to make the Bible accessible was the *same* man who pursued the death of Tyndale, who had his wives executed, who constantly changed his mind, and who made choices that led to many deaths.

And yet, God sovereignly worked even through King Henry and his many sinful choices to accomplish his redemptive purposes.

The One Thing

God sovereignly accomplishes his redemptive purposes even through sinful choices.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 14-15.

I’d encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon. It will help you follow along more easily.

I’d highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don’t have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I’m sure they’d be happy to share with you.

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“Judges” here doesn’t refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were not kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

Last time we were in the book of Judges, we saw the birth narrative of the *last* judge in the book—Samson.

And by the end of chapter, we had high hopes for Samson.

- The angel of the LORD came to announce his birth.
- He was born from a barren woman, just like the great patriarchs Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were.
- He’s set apart as a Nazirite from the womb, which means that he’s to be holy to the LORD all his life and serve as a godly witness to all the people of Israel.
- He has the LORD’s blessing upon him in his childhood and the Spirit of the LORD stirring him.

² Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009), 122-133.

- And the angel of the LORD said that he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

And that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

Scripture Reading

Let's read Judges 14-15.

^{14:1} Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. ² Then he came up and told his father and mother, "I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife." ³ But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes."

⁴ His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

⁵ Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. ⁶ Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. ⁷ Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes.

⁸ After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. ⁹ He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.

¹⁰ His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. ¹¹ As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. ¹² And Samson said to them, "Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes, ¹³ but if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes." And they said to him, "Put your riddle, that we may hear it." ¹⁴ And he said to them,

"Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet."

And in three days they could not solve the riddle.

¹⁵ On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, "Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" ¹⁶ And Samson's wife wept over him and said, "You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is." And he said to her, "Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you?" ¹⁷ She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to her people. ¹⁸ And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down,

"What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?"

And he said to them,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have found out my riddle."

¹⁹ And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. ²⁰ And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

^{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. 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." ³ And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm." 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁹ Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. ¹⁰ 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." ¹² 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.

¹⁴ 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."

¹⁷ As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi.

¹⁸ 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. ²⁰ And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in five parts.

- I. The woman (14:1-4)
- II. The lion (14:5-9)
- III. The riddle (14:10-20)
- IV. The revenge (15:1-17)
- V. The thirst (15:18-20)

I know that these words may seem somewhat random right now, but as we unpack this longer narrative, hopefully they'll make more sense along the way and give you handlebars for each section.

I. The woman (14:1-4)

Look at chapter 14, verses 1-3.

[^{14:1} Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. ² Then he came up and told his father and mother, "I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife." ³ But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes."]

In verses 1-2, Samson goes down to the town of Timnah and he sees a Philistine woman, so he tells his parents to "get her for [him] as [his] wife."

In verse 3, you can imagine the shock of his parents. Samson is supposed to *save* Israel from the forty-year oppression of the Philistines (13:1, 5), but now he wants to *marry* a Philistine?³

Marrying a Philistine was directly against God's law that forbid Israelites from marrying non-Israelites (Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3; cf. Gen. 24:3, 4; 26:34, 35). For example, in reference to the pagan inhabitants of the Promised Land, this is what God commanded his people in...

Deuteronomy 7:3-4: You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

The issue was not *ethnic*—think of Rahab and Ruth who were *not* Israelites but are in Jesus's genealogy (Matt. 1:5).

The issue was *religious*—the Israelites were not to marry *unbelievers*, those who did not worship the LORD, the God of Israel.

[^{14:1} Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. ² Then he came up and told his father and mother, "I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife." ³ But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes."]

So in verse 3, Samson's parents try to convince him to marry a fellow *Israelite* rather than a Philistine woman.

But Samson didn't care whether it was right in his parents' eyes, or more importantly, whether it was right in the LORD's eyes (Deut. 6:18; 12:25). But he was set on doing whatever he wanted to do, which in this was blatant sin.

Samson's response of "she is right in my eyes" summarizes the attitude of the Israelites all throughout the book of Judges—"everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1).⁴

<pause>

³ Notice how many times "Philistines" is mentioned. In verse 1, the *narrator* mentions that she's a Philistine. In verses 2, *Samson* says that she's a Philistine. And in verse 3, Samson's *parents* question in almost disbelief, "[You want to] take a wife from the uncircumcised *Philistines*?"

⁴ Scripture constantly warns against this kind of "I define what is right" decision-making: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

Look now at verse 4.

[⁴ His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.]

“His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.”

This statement provides one of the most profound comforts we can have as believers in the LORD,⁵ and it serves as an interpretive lens to understand the entire Samson account.

Throughout the narrative, we'll see that Samson makes sinful choice after sinful choice, which he is fully responsible and accountable for. God does *not* approve of any of Samson's sin.

At the same time, none of Samson's sinful choices can undermine God's plan to deliver the people of Israel from the Philistines (cf. Job 42:2).

God is not sitting in heaven constantly surprised by Samson's sinful choices and then frantically reacting to try to remedy the situation to get his plans back on track.

No, God is so sovereign that he accomplishes his redemptive purposes even *through* people's sinful choices (cf. Rom. 8:28).

Let me offer two biblical examples of this and then address two possible questions.

The first example is the life of Joseph.

He was sold into slavery by his brothers, he was thrown in jail for not sleeping with his boss's wife, and he sat in prison for many years forgotten by the one who said he would remember him. But Joseph later rose to prominence in Egypt and then saved all of Egypt and Israel from famine.

And at the end of the account, Joseph says this to his brothers who sold him into slavery in...

Genesis 50:20: As for you, you *meant* evil against me, but God *meant* it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

He doesn't say that his brothers meant evil and then God *reacted* to use it for good. No, they meant evil, but God *meant* it for good. Even their sinful actions were part of his sovereign plan to save the people of Egypt and Israel from famine.

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The second example is the death of Jesus.

Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, the religious leaders arrested him out of jealousy, and the Roman governor executed him out of fear of the people. Yet, listen to what Scripture says about Jesus' death in...

Acts 2:23: this Jesus, *delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men

Acts 4:27-28: for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*.

⁵ Verse 4 should humble and comfort us amidst our own sinful past, amidst our wayward children, and amidst all of our various experiences of living in a broken and sinful world. We don't need to know all the specific details of God's purposes, but we can find incredible comfort in simply knowing that God is so sovereign and good to accomplish his redemptive purposes not in *reaction* to but even *through* sinful men and sinful desires and sinful actions.

So *sinful* people killed Jesus out of their *sinful* motivations, and yet, it was all according to God's definite plan of redemption formed in eternity.

<pause>

Now, let's address two possible questions.

First, if God is sovereign even over our sinful choices, then is God responsible for our sin?

The apostle James clearly answers, No, in...

James 1:13-15: Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

God does not *tempt* us to sin; he does not *make* us sin. We sin because we *want* to sin.

And because of that, we cannot blame God for any of our sin, but we are all responsible and accountable for every sinful choice we make.

<pause>

Second, if God is sovereign even over our sinful choices, then are we free to sin because it's just according to God's plan anyways or since Christ has forgiven all our sins anyways?

The apostle Paul clearly answers, No, in...

Romans 6:1-2: What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

In other words, if we're truly united to Christ by faith, then we have died to sin and now live with Christ in newness of life. The thought of being free to sin, or free to do whatever we want, should not compute for someone who has truly been saved by Christ.

In Christ, true freedom is not freedom to sin but freedom to live for Christ.⁶

<pause>

So first, the woman; and second...

II. The lion (14:5-9)

Look at verses 5-7.

[⁵ Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. ⁶ Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. ⁷ Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes.]

Remember, Samson is a Nazirite from the womb, which meant that there were three restrictions he was meant to keep:

- first, no drinking wine or eating any grapes at all (Num. 6:3-4),
- second, no cutting his hair (Num. 6:5),
- and third, no going near a corpse (Num. 6:6-7).

⁶ See also Romans 3:8: "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just." Someone who thinks that their continual sin is justified because God will somehow accomplish good from it seems to forget that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and so they are only increasing their own condemnation.

Samson's Nazirite vow will be important throughout his narrative, so keep it in mind—no grapes, no razor, and no death.

In verse 5, as he's going through a vineyard—which is full of *grapes* (which should already signal some alarms)—a young lion suddenly jumps out and threatens Samson's life.

And in verse 6, the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him to endow him with supernatural strength to tear the lion to pieces.

Note that this is the *first* time he displays extraordinary strength, which we'll continue to see throughout his narrative.

<pause>

We need to be careful here *not* to read NT realities about the Spirit of the LORD back into the OT.

In the OT, the Spirit of the LORD does not *indwell* all his people like he does in the NT covenant community.

Everyone is still saved by grace through faith in the LORD in the OT, just like we are in the NT. But in the OT, the Spirit of the LORD only comes upon *certain* people to equip and empower them for a specific task or role—like Bezalel as a craftsman for the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1), or Moses as a prophet, or Saul as a king.

And in the case of Samson, the Spirit of the LORD empowered him with supernatural strength to do what nobody else could do. But it is not permanent, for the Spirit can leave people in the OT, which we'll see later on with Samson (Judg. 16:20) and Saul (1 Sam. 16:14; cf. Ps. 51:11).

If you've ever played the game Super Mario Brothers, think of the Spirit of the LORD coming upon people in the OT like when Mario gets a star and can basically run over everyone; he's able to do what nobody else can do. But it's only temporary. It's not a permanent indwelling.

That's why Moses said that he *wished* that *all* of God's people had the Spirit of the LORD (Num. 11:19).

That's why Ezekiel prophesied that in the new covenant, God would indeed put his Spirit in *all* his people (Ezek. 36:27).

And on the other side of Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon all his people at Pentecost, if we are in Christ, then we experience the *fulfillment* of that.

We now have the Holy Spirit permanently *indwelling* us as God's people—but that is distinctively a NT reality that we shouldn't read back into the OT.

<pause>

Look now at verses 8-9.

[⁸ After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. ⁹ He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.]

After an unspecified amount of time—but long enough for the lion's carcass to dry out and for a swarm of bees to form honey inside—Samson goes down to Timnah again.

And as he sees the honey, he *takes* and *eats* it, and then he *gives* some to his parents as well (cf. Gen. 3:6).

And like in verse 6, again, Samson doesn't tell his parents where he got the honey from, probably because he knew it was a violation of his Nazirite vow to be in contact with the dead.

<pause>

The point of Samson's Nazirite vow was for him to be holy and distinct; he was to symbolize and remind *all* of Israel what they were to be—"a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6)... that just as the LORD is holy, they are also to be holy (Lev. 11:44).

But throughout the narrative, Samson will *constantly* break his vow without much thought, violating every one of the restrictions he was supposed to keep.

Samson's Nazirite vow meant little to him, and likewise, Israel's covenant with the LORD meant little to them—and so, they became indistinguishable from the Philistines.

And so, the LORD used Samson's sinful choices to accomplish his redemptive purpose of causing *conflict* and *contrast* between the Israelites and the Philistines.

The LORD always marks out his people from the world.

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When we are baptized or take the Lord's Supper, all of us who are in Christ make or renew our covenant vows to the Lord and one another.

In joining a church, we enter into a membership covenant with fellow members of the church, which is really just a summary of all the "one another" commands that we see in the NT.

Like Samson's Nazirite vow and the Israel's covenant with the LORD, these vows are meant to distinguish us as God's people; they're meant to mark us off from the rest of the world and identify us as God's people.

So if you consider yourself a Christian, ask yourself: How seriously do I take these covenant vows that I make in baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership? How do these vows I've made affect the everyday decisions that I make? How does my life look distinct from the lives of those around me who don't know Christ (cf. John 15:18-19)?

<pause>

So first, the woman; second, the lion; and third...

III. The riddle (14:10-20)

Look at verses 10-14.

[¹⁰ His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. ¹¹ As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. ¹² And Samson said to them, "Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes, ¹³ but if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes." And they said to him, "Put your riddle, that we may hear it." ¹⁴ And he said to them,

"Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet."

And in three days they could not solve the riddle.]

Samson's father goes down to Timnah, probably to finalize the wedding contract with the parents of the Philistine woman.

Meanwhile, Samson throws a seven-day wedding feast with 30 Philistines who come, where he probably drank wine, again violating his Nazirite vow of not eating or drinking any grapes.

And at this wedding feast, Samson poses a riddle and a wager.

If the 30 Philistine guests can answer his riddle correctly within the seven days, then Samson will give them the equivalent of what we might understand to be 30 sets of underwear and 30 suits.⁷

But if they cannot answer correctly within the seven days, then *they* must give *him* 30 sets of underwear and 30 suits (so to speak).

They agree and Samson tells them the riddle.

Look at verse 14: “Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.”⁸

We, as the readers, know the answer, but for anyone who wasn’t with Samson when he killed the lion and scooped out honey from its carcass, this was basically an impossible riddle.

And that’s what the 30 Philistines were realizing when they couldn’t figure it out after three days. So they start to panic.

Look at verses 15-18.

[¹⁵ On the fourth day they said to Samson’s wife, “Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father’s house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?” ¹⁶ And Samson’s wife wept over him and said, “You only hate me; you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is.” And he said to her, “Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you?” ¹⁷ She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted, and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to her people. ¹⁸ And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down,

“What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?”

And he said to them,

“If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have found out my riddle.”]

In verse 15, the 30 Philistines threaten to burn Samson’s wife and her father’s house unless she entices Samson to reveal the answer to the riddle.

So in verses 16-17, in a desperate attempt to save her life, she uses her tears and words to try to manipulate Samson.

She essentially says, “You don’t love me because you won’t tell me the answer to the riddle.”

Or to put it differently, “If you *really* loved me, you would tell me the answer.”

Samson eventually cracks and tells his wife the answer, and she then tells the Philistines.

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In verse 18, the Philistines come back to Samson with the right answer.

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 174.

⁸ These are two parallel statements, where you need to figure out what “the eater” and “the strong” are referring to, and what “something to eat” and “something sweet” are referring to.

Samson then says, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."

A "heifer" is a young female cow, and the idea is that you don't use someone *else's* cow to plow your *own* fields; you're supposed to plow your *own* fields with your *own* cow.

In other words, he's saying, "You cheated. My wife should have been off limits for you."

So what does Samson do in response?

Look at verse 19-20.

[¹⁹ And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. ²⁰ And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.]

Samson goes to Ashkelon, a major Philistine city that was about 23 miles away, and he killed 30 Philistines there, stripped them of their clothes, and then paid his debts to the 30 Philistines in Timnah.

<pause>

We should note that the Spirit of the LORD coming upon Samson doesn't mean that God approves of what Samson did.

The Spirit gave him extraordinary strength, but it was *Samson's* decision in terms of what he *did* with his strength.

We who have the Spirit of the LORD *indwelling* us should be the first to recognize that, even so, not everything we do is always right.

<pause>

So after Samson pays his debts, he's still furious with his wife for betraying his trust, so he goes back to his father's house in "hot anger."

And in verse 20, we find out that Samson's wife is given to his best man, which sets up the next scene.

<pause>

So first, the woman; second the lion; third, the riddle; and fourth...

IV. The revenge (15:1-17)

Look at chapter 15, verses 1-5.

[^{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. 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." ³ And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm." 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.]

In verses 1-2, Samson eventually cools off and returns to Timnah with a young goat, which we might understand as giving a bouquet of flowers.⁹

Normally, the husband and wife would have consummated their marriage on the last day of the wedding feast.

But given how Samson left in “hot anger” earlier, their marriage probably wasn’t consummated yet and his father-in-law probably didn’t think Samson was coming back.

And so, in order to protect and provide for his daughter, he gave her away to Samson’s best man instead.

But now, as Samson is standing in front of him, his father-in-law realizes that he made a big mistake, and he tries to make amends for it by offering his younger daughter instead.

But Samson refuses; the marriage contract has already been broken. Presumably, his best man has already consummated their marriage by sleeping with the bride.

In verses 3-5, Samson blames the *Philistines* for the loss of his wife, so he catches 300 foxes, pairs them up, ties their tails together with a torch in between, and then he sets them loose to destroy all of the Philistines’ crops.

Look then at verses 6-8.

[⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.]

In verse 6, the Philistines find out that Samson is responsible, and so they burn his wife and his father-in-law with fire.

And in response, in verses 7-8, Samson makes a vow that he’ll take vengeance, but he says he’ll stop after that. He slaughters an unspecified number of Philistines, and then he goes into hiding.

<pause>

Notice how Samson says in verse 7 that he’ll quit after taking vengeance this last time, but of course, it’s not the last time.

It’s an endless cycle of revenge that takes place between Samson and the Philistines—and it just keeps escalating. Every act of revenge doesn’t make the situation any better—only worse.

Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever said to God or to yourself, “This is the *last* time I’ll do this”—and then you end up doing it again after that?

That might be regarding revenge or sin in general.

“This is the *last* time I’ll do this sin” is a terrible lie.

If you give sin an inch, it will take a mile.

Sin will gladly give you a piece a fruit and then take paradise from you.

Don’t negotiate with sin, but be killing sin or sin will be killing you.

⁹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 177.

<pause>

So what happens after Samson's so-called "last" act of revenge?

Look at verses 9-13.

[⁹ Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. ¹⁰ 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." ¹² 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.]

In verses 9-10, the Philistines come and attack the people of Judah, saying that they've come to bind Samson, "to do to him as he did to us." It's no surprise; the Philistines want revenge.

And in verse 11, three thousand men of Judah go down to Samson. And they rebuke him: "Do you not know that the *Philistines* are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done *to us*?"

These words should make us scratch our heads a bit.

These aren't the words that you'd expect to come out of the mouths of *Israelites* who have the *LORD* as their ruler (Judg. 8:23).

They've forgotten who they are so much that it's now *unthinkable* and even *offensive* to them that Samson would want to fight against their *oppressors*.¹⁰

<pause>

And notice Samson's response: "As they did to me, so have I done to them."

These are pretty much the *same* words that the Philistines spoke in verse 10—"to do to him as he did to us."

Samson doesn't defeat the Philistines to *deliver* God's people, but like the Philistines, he does what he does out of *revenge*. Samson looks no different than the Philistines at this moment.

<pause>

And in verse 12-13, the men of Judah, who in chapter 1 were once the mighty God-appointed leaders who led all of Israel in conquest into the Promised Land (1:1-20), now all look like complacent cowards.

Rather than fight *alongside* their judge-deliverer, which is what happened in all the previous accounts, this is the first time where the people of Israel *hand over* their judge-deliverer to the enemy.

Notice that Samson is the only judge throughout the book who doesn't have an army to lead, but he himself is a one-man army. He literally stands alone.

Again, this shows the level of disintegration of the people of Israel.

They don't want to be saved. They'd rather maintain the status quo.

So they bind him and bring him out from the rock.

¹⁰ They're speaking as if they're *Philistines* rather than *Israelites*, as if their *enemy* is their *friend* and as if their *deliverer* is their *enemy*.

<pause>

For the Israelites living under Philistine oppression for forty years, they had grown complacent and gotten all mixed up.

For us, as we live in this sinful world that is constantly trying to conform us into its own likeness, we're all prone to grow complacent with how things are and to get our values and priorities all mixed up.

- We begin to think that sin is normal and obeying God's Word is strange.
- We begin to think that our enemies are other brothers and sisters in the church rather than the sinful desires of our flesh, the temptations of this world, and the lies of the evil one.
- We begin to think that what is easy, comfortable, and convenient is most desirable instead of understanding that following Jesus means denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following him (Matt. 16:24; cf. 7:13-14).

This would be a good discussion to have with others later today: What in God's Word seems strange or even undesirable to you? Who do you view or treat as your enemies? What are you unwilling to do simply because it's not convenient?

<pause>

Look now at verses 14-17.

[¹⁴ 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."

¹⁷ As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi.]

In verses 14-15, when Samson comes bound to the Philistines, they come to him shouting in victory.

But it's premature, because the Spirit of the LORD comes upon Samson once again (14:6, 19), he easily snaps through the ropes, he picks up a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and he kills 1,000 of the Philistines.

Notice that this was a "fresh jawbone," meaning it was from a fresh *carcass*, which means that he broke his Nazirite vow once again by coming into contact with the dead.

And in verses 16-17, he taunts the Philistine *corpses* (again, he's in contact with the dead), boasting about what he's done.

<pause>

So first, the woman; second, the lion; third, the riddle; fourth, the revenge; and fifth...

V. The thirst (15:18-20)

Look at verses 18-20.

[¹⁸ 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. ²⁰ And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.]

In verse 18, after the battle, Samson's very thirsty, and he thinks he's going to die, so he calls upon the LORD.

This is the first time in the entire narrative that he does that, but it's more of an accusatory complaint than it is a humble request.

He first acknowledges that it's not by his own strength that he was able to defeat 1,000 Philistines, but then comes the complaint—"and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"¹¹

He sounds just like the Israelites in the wilderness after the LORD just delivered them from the mighty Egyptian army—"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exod. 17:3).

And yet, in verse 19, God graciously responds to Samson's complaint by miraculously splitting open a hollowed stone,¹² where water came out to quench his thirst.

<pause>

This is the only bright spot of Samson in these two chapters. This is where he calls upon the LORD for help, acknowledges the LORD's help, and commemorates the LORD's help.

Even though Samson was the source of so much wreckage through his sinful choices, at the end, he's *finally* crying out to the LORD.

This seems to be a glimmer of hope—a sigh of relief.

But unfortunately, this is *not* the end. Samson still has one more chapter to go, which we'll look at next week.

Samson won't call out to the LORD again until he's about to die at the end of chapter 16. From this point on, he'll just continue to rely on himself, assuming that he'll always be able to do things that nobody else can do.

And verse 20 hints of things being unfinished as well. It's still "in the days of the *Philistines*."

So there's still more to come.

Conclusion

As we close, perhaps we're still wondering, "How could God use someone like Samson—with all his sinful choices—to accomplish his redemptive purposes?"

Perhaps part of us feels a bit unsettled about that.

But all throughout the book of Judges, God has been showing us that he is not limited in how he saves. He can use massive armies, he can use 300 men, he can use one. He can use godly people, and he can even use someone as scandalous as Samson.

God is perfectly able to draw straight lines with crooked sticks.

¹¹ He's concerned that God would leave him to die, and the Philistines would come and perhaps mutilate his body (as they would later with Saul; cf. 1 Sam. 31:8-10).

¹² Arthur E. Cundall (*Judges*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008] writes: "*hollow place* is literally 'mortar', a word generally used for a hollowed stone or deep wooden bowl in which, for example, olives were crushed to produce the oil. Here it clearly indicates a circular depression from which the spring issued."

And rather than that being a stumbling block to us, that should profoundly humble us and make us rejoice... because at the end of the day, we're all crooked sticks.

We've all sinned against the God who created us and we rightfully deserve his judgment, but God has graciously come in the person of Jesus Christ to be our substitute—to live the perfect life we could not live, to die to take the punishment of sin we deserved, and to resurrect three days later to confirm everything he said and did.

So now, whoever repents of their sin and believes in Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Savior can be freely forgiven of all their sins.

That's the good news of Jesus Christ.

And *that* news is entirely about the *God* who saves.

When we think of our salvation, our focus is not on the *sinful* people who crucified Jesus or the *sinful* people he saves, but on the *sinless* Savior who died in our place.

Samson is not the hero of this story, but he's meant to point to the true hero—Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior.

- Samson was an impulsive, temperamental, angry, vindictive man, but Jesus was gentle and lowly, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
- Samson disregarded his father's will to do what was right in his own eyes, but on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said to his Father, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).
- Samson constantly broke his Nazirite vow and conformed himself to the Philistines, but Jesus kept his covenant with his people even unto death and now conforms us into his likeness, distinct from the rest of the world.

So fix your eyes on Jesus and stand in awe of the God who is sovereign and good even over sin. Take comfort in trusting that God sovereignly accomplishes his redemptive purposes even through sinful choices.

Let's pray.