

Judges

Lesson 29

Chapter 15

As we open the pages of Judges chapter 15, the story of the details of Samson's traumatic marriage fiasco gets worse. Samson had paid the debt to the thirty men who answered his riddle before the deadline, and he had gone home to his parents to cool off. Then, he decided to return to Timnah to be with his wife. The arrival will rekindle the trauma once again.

(viii) The Sidestep (15:1-2)

In verse 1 of chapter 15, it was time for the wheat harvest. We do not know the year. We do not know Samson's age. We know that Samson was married. We know that on the fourteenth day of Samson's marriage that his riddle was answered, and, on that day, he discovered his wife had been influenced. We know that he had gone to Ashkelon to settle the debt he owed. We know he paid his debt and then went to his parent's home in Zorah for a while. We know from verses 1 and 2 that he decided to return to his wife. But upon reaching his father-in-law's home where he expected his wife to be, a surprise was revealed. In his shock of seeing Samson at his doorstep asking for his wife, the father-in-law did the sidestep as we might call it. Chapter 15, verse 1. *"But after a while, in the time of wheat harvest, 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."*² 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."* (15:1-2)

Dealing with the first part of the passage, we hear the writer tell us that it was *"in the time of the wheat harvest."* That meant that it was June. Back in those days, the wheat was planted just before winter, allowed to grow through winter, and was harvested in June. It is called *winter wheat*.

Moving on in the passage, surely the father was startled when Samson arrived at the door. Was Samson's wife in the house? We do not know. She may have been, and that was why *"her father did not let him enter,"* as the passage says. Instead, the father does the sidestep when he offers the younger daughter. Three things are apparent. The father was wrong in giving his daughter away. The father was afraid of Samson. The father was willing to try to make the wrong right.

(ix) The Reaction (15:3-5)

The father's words brought the reaction of Samson. Verse 3. *"Samson then said to them, 'This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm.'"*⁴ *Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail and put one torch in the middle between two tails.*⁵ *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."* (15:3-5)

Where did Samson get three hundred foxes? We spoke about this in chapter 14 when Samson was attacked by the lion in the vineyard. According to the Song of Solomon 2:15, Solomon wrote, *"Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom."* The foxes were known to dig their dens in the ground of the vineyards. Jackals were there too. What is the difference between a fox and a jackal? First, they are both members of the Canidae family of mammals of dog-like carnivores. Both are often referred to as dogs. Second, both hunt as individual animals, not in packs like wolves. Third, the dens will have at least two entrances, consist of tunnels that spur off into little rooms. The rooms in the tunnels are used to store food and a place to give birth to the young and raise them safely until they can fend for themselves. Rarely do

adult foxes, and jackals sleep in their dens. They will do so when it is extremely hot or cold, but most nights they will be out in the fields. With that knowledge, Samson had a task to accomplish when he caught three hundred foxes. As for the fields being set on fire, the wheat was cut when the stalks were dry. Whether or not the wheat was yet harvested did not matter; in June, the fields would all burn quickly.

(x) The Investigation (15:6a)

After Samson burned the fields, the Philistine investigation began. Verse 6a. *“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.’”* (15:6a)

The writer was not clear in this passage. We do not know who told the Philistines that it was Samson who burned the fields. Therefore, the “they” of this passage is forever unknown.

(xi) The Penalty (15:6b)

Nevertheless, with the discovery that Samson burned the fields, the Philistines acted with the penalty. Verse 6b. *“So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.”* (15:6b).

The very thing that Samson’s wife was threatened with would that happen to her and her family if she did not extract the answer of the riddle from Samson came upon her in the end. She was burned. Her family was burned.

(xii) The Justification (15:7-8)

Samson was horrified by the deaths of the family, and he sought justification by taking revenge. Verse 7. *“Samson said to them, ‘Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that, I will quit.’”*⁸ *He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.”* (15:7-8)

When the text says, *“He struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter,”* it means that he killed everyone who killed his wife and her family. He killed them ruthlessly.

Let us take a moment to examine Samson’s life. He was a Jew. He was forbidden by the LORD from marrying a foreign woman, but he did. He was a Nazirite. He was forbidden by the LORD for having anything to do with grapes or wine, but he did.

Further, he was forbidden from touching anything dead, but he did. But the writer does not tell us that he made any attempt to seek forgiveness from the LORD with an offering. What did he do? He *“went down and lived in the cleft of the rock of Etam.”* Where was Etam? Etam was down in the tribal area of Judah. A *cleft* is nothing but a hole in the rock, not deep enough to be considered a cave, yet, deep enough to be out of the weather on three sides and above.

(xiii) The Accusation (15:9-13)

It did not take long for Samson’s whereabouts to become known. The Philistines went into Judah’s land to camped near the cleft in the rock at Etam at a place called Lehi. Then Judah and the Philistines talked. We see the accusation. Verse 9. *“Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi.”*¹⁰ *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.’”*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 I have done to them.’”*¹² *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.’”*¹³ *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.”* (15:9-13)

We do not know where Etam stood. We do not know where Lehi stood. All we know is that they were in the tribal area of Judah. Look at this. Can you imagine 3000 cousins of Samson coming

to this cleft in the rock to *bind him and give him to the Philistines*? And Samson played along with his cousins and let them bind him.

(xiv) The Assault (15:14-16)

Oh! But Samson must have had a plan. Once in the right place. Once at the right time, the assault would occur. Verse 14. *“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.”*¹⁵ He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it.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.”* (15:14-16)

A thousand Philistines were dead. They were killed by Samson and the jawbone of a donkey. Thus, more dead were added to the tally that this Nazirite had touched.

(xv) The Doubt (15:17-18)

Even after a great victory, as Samson had over the Philistines, tired from the battle, even Samson had a doubt. Notice what he said to the LORD. Verse 19. *“When he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place Ramath-lehi.”*¹⁸ Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, *“You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”* (15:17-18)

Had Samson died and his body fallen into the hands of the Philistines, they would have beheaded him and hung his body on a wall for the birds and animals as a symbol of shame and disgrace. The head would have been put on a pole as an exhibit. But that was not Samson’s situation. It was just his question spawned by his thirst.

(xvi) The Recovery (15:19-20)

Samson asked for water, and God answered to help with Samson’s recovery from thirst. Verse 19. *“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.”*²⁰ So he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.” (15:19-20)

God answered Samson with a miracle. God split a rock and caused water to come forth to soothe Samson’s thirst. Samson named that place *En-hakkore*. It means *spring or fount of the caller*. It is intended to mean the place where Samson called, and God answered with a spring or fount of water.

The passage ends with the number of years that Samson judged in the days of the Philistines. Notice that Samson had not conquered the Philistines as all the other judges in this book. Rather, he judged during the rule of the Philistines over the nation of Israel. We do not know when this twenty-year period began. We do not know where the twenty-year period started in the storyline. However, we do know where his judging will end. We can derive one thing from verse 20. The writer told us the length of Samson’s time as a judge after verse 20 and before chapter 16, verse 1, was multiple years and not soon after time of the story in verse 20.

With the turn of the verse, we come to chapter 16. The writer will now circle around to tell us more about Samson.

Chapter 16

(b) A Philistine Harlot in Gaza

Once again, we must mention that we have lost all sense of timing as to where we are in the storyline of the forty years of the Philistine oppression and any indication of Samson’s age. What we

do know is that he was a married man, but his wife was given to the best man at his wedding for a wife while Samson was calming down at his parent's house in Zorah. We also know that his wife was murdered along with her parent's family. In addition, we know that Samson had some sort of preference for Philistine women over Israelite women. That point brings us to a sorted adventure that Samson took over in the Philistine area and a visit to a Philistine Harlot in Gaza. Chapter 16, verse 1. *"Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her. ² When it was told to the Gazites, saying, 'Samson has come here,' they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. And they kept silent all night, saying, 'Let us wait until the morning light, then we will kill him.' ³ Now Samson lay until midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts and pulled them up along with the bars; then he put them on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain which is opposite Hebron."* (16:1-3)

We do not know why Samson entered into a sexual relationship with a Philistine prostitute in the city of Gaza, but he did. It was a breaking of the Law of the LORD to have an intimate relationship with a non-Jewish woman. In addition, it was a sin to have a relationship with a prostitute because the action involved in the relationship made them husband and wife in God's eyes even though the prostitute was being paid for the relationship.

In the story, the word of Samson's whereabouts was leaked to the neighborhood. Such is the case in social environments like areas of prostitution. Everyone knows everyone's business. Surely Samson was a hot topic of business among the Philistines. No doubt, even though it is not said in the Scripture, a bounty of some sort was on his head. The Philistines expected him to stay all night with a prostitute, but Samson stayed only until midnight. For some unknown reason, Samson decided to leave at midnight, and the men were not ready to kill him. They were going to kill him with the morning light. Why Samson's plan was decided upon, we do not know.

The story of the prostitute was probably not the reason the writer put this short story in the book. The story of what Samson did at midnight was most likely why this tale was interesting to the writer. In the last part of verse three, the writer tells us of Samson's might, power, and vigor when he writes, *"and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts and pulled them up along with the bars; then he put them on his shoulders and carried them up to the top of the mountain which is opposite Hebron."*

Why did Samson remove the gate? Do you remember our description of the gates and the guards at Jericho? How there was an outer gate and an inner gate? That the inner gate was closed and locked at sunset before the outer gate? But, by ten o'clock, the outer gate was also locked? Gaza did not have an outer and inner gate. It only had one gate which faced east. Be that as it may, the gate was surely locked at sunset, and a guard stood on the wall to watch for those coming to the city late. Upon arising at midnight, Samson must have found the gate locked. Without the key, he simply plucked the two posts out of the ground on which the two bi-fold doors were attached and locked together in the middle, along with the crossbar that held the bifold doors closed. He rested the whole unit on his back at shoulder height and walked away from the city with it. But where did he take it?

Gaza sits on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Its elevation starts at sea level, and its highest point is forty-six feet above sea level. The mountain, which is opposite Hebron, is thirty-seven miles from the entry into Gaza, and the top of the mountain is three thousand and fifty feet above sea level. Let us put this in perspective. Suppose Samson was standing on Stuart Beach in Galveston, Texas. Suppose it was there that he plucked this gate out of the ground and secured it on his shoulders. He then walked up the Gulf freeway for thirty-eight miles and dropped the gate assembly in the middle of downtown Houston. Let that give you an idea of the distance. However, Samson did not have a nice concrete flat roadway to walk on. In fact, there was no public road that went directly from Gaza to Hebron in those days. The roads that were in place would have taken Samson

on a fifty-two-mile trip instead. Nevertheless, Samson, being Samson, probably walked due east, first over a low mountain rise, down into a valley, over a second mountain rise that was a little higher than the first, into a second small valley, and then the major climb up the Mountains of Hebron to deposit the gate assembly on the top of the mount in front of the city of Hebron. The elevation of the mount is three thousand and fifty feet high from sea level in Gaza. Samson carried the assembly at least thirty-eight miles, but he also carried it uphill, almost two-thirds of a mile high. And, the writer did not tell us that the Holy Spirit came upon him mightily with some supernatural strength. This deed Samson naturally did on his own. Surely it was for this purpose that the writer included this deed of Samson in the text. It was to prove the raw strength and vitality that Samson was blessed with naturally.

Samson was not through with women. The writer now tells us about the Philistine woman who lived in the valley of Sorek, back in the Timnah area. She was the woman we all remember being with Samson. Her name was Delilah.