



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 15:1-20

To understand how the conflict between Samson and the Philistines was heightened.

The Art of De-escalation

One of the most profoundly important skills a person can learn is how to de-escalate a tense situation. The probability that someone will become angry or upset with you is an inevitable figure. It's not a matter of if, but when. When this happens, you will have one of two choices: 1. Fight fire with fire, or 2. De-escalate the situation and try to make peace, and if possible reconcile. Whenever I find myself in a situation that is hostile, I am reminded of Proverbs 15:1: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Engaging with people who are agitated or angry in a gentle and calm manner does wonders, and using harsh words to even those who are not hostile can make them become hostile in no small amount of time.

In Judges 15, we continue with Samson's narrative and we find him in a position where, due to his own erratic behavior, circumstances have changed and not in his favor. This sets in motion a cycle of tit-for-tat fighting between him and the Philistines. There are no gentle answers given. There is no de-escalation. A lot of anger is stirred up. Samson's story is a great reminder of how badly things can turn out when wisdom is thrown out the window.

Reaping the Consequences

Chapter 15 begins following the events of chapter 14, and the fallout of Samson's choices come into full-swing. At the end of chapter 14, Samson killed 30 men in Ashkelon and gave their clothes to the Philistines after losing a challenge. Afterwards, "in hot anger, he went back to his father's house" (Jg. 14:19). Chapter 15

begins with Samson returning to his wife with a young goat as an apparent gift to try to make up for his outburst. Below is a breakdown of what unfolds upon his arrival.

GIVEN AWAY

When Samson arrives, he is met by his wife's father who prevents him from coming inside. The father very reasonably assumed that Samson, following the chaos that ended the wedding celebration and his subsequent departure, no longer wished to be married. Although it is a foreign concept to us in modern-day western culture that it would be a good thing for a father to give away his daughter to be married to another man that she had never really interacted with, it was in fact a way of caring for her in this era. It's unclear whether or not Samson is actually upset by the loss of the woman he desired to marry, or if he is simply angered by the audacity of the father's decision. Either way, this leads Samson to retaliate, though he believes he is justified in his plans: "And Samson said to them, 'This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm'" (Jg. 15:3).

RETALIATION

Samson's plan is strange but effective. He "caught 300 foxes," and "turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails" (Jg. 15:4). It's unclear why he chose to bind foxes in pairs, but presumably it was to prevent them from running off in whatever direction they chose and potentially missing the target grain and olive orchards. Either way, Samson accomplishes the destruction he intended.

AN IRONIC END

A sad and certainly ironic arc to the story occurs in verse 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." Clearly the Philistines saw the same problem that Samson saw; the father unlawfully (whether intentional or not) gave his daughter to another man though she was technically married to Samson. The irony comes in that they are all killed. Why is this ironic? The only reason Samson's wife revealed the answer to the riddle to the Philistines was because they threatened to burn her "father's house with fire" (Jg. 14:15). In fear, she gave in and betrayed her husband. Now, her very fears have become a reality, except she and her father were also included in the mix.

MORE RETALIATION

Again, it is unclear if Samson is upset by the loss of his wife, or by the fact that someone dare attack him or those that belong to him. Either way, verse 7 indicates that Samson beats the men pretty badly and then goes to stay "in the cleft of the rock of Etam" (Jg. 15:7-8). The Philistines, enraged by this beating, come to Judah demanding that Samson be handed over (Jg. 15:9-10). The Judahites find Samson in the cleft of the rock and berate him for attacking those who "rule over us" (Jg. 15:11). Samson agrees to let them bind him and safely deliver him to the Philistines. It's a sort of Trojan horse plan, except Samson is the horse. Immediately when he is in the custody of the Philistines, "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him," and he broke the ropes that bound him and "found a fresh jawbone of a donkey," and "with it, struck 1,000 men" (Jg. 15:14-15). The fact that the jawbone is described as fresh is intentional; it is still considered a part of a corpse and thus qualifies as another violation of the Nazirite vow. This is, yet again, another example of Samson doing whatever he feels like doing regardless of the consequences. Samson was provided water supernaturally, and the chapter closes by informing us that Samson "judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years" (Jg. 15:20).

What About Now?

One takeaway is that often times God's sovereign plans work in concert with men's intentions, even if they are wicked intentions. Samson seems personally offended and pridefully retaliates several times in this story, and

yet in his disobedience God accomplishes His sovereign will. This truly demonstrates what sovereignty looks like. God’s plans are not only not thwarted by man’s disobedience, but sometimes the acts of disobedience are used to accomplish it! Take heart then in knowing that, even in your worst moments, God is still at work. Another takeaway is the futility of retaliation. This whole chapter is filled with back and forth one-upmanship that only results in death and more death. Retaliation feeds the present urge to see justice done, but rarely works in favor of peace in the long run.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 15:1-2. Where did Samson go, and what happened when he arrived? What did his father-in-law offer him?

2. Read Judges 15:3-5. How did Samson take this news? How did he retaliate? What was his course of action?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 15:6. How did the Philistines respond to Samson’s actions? What was ironic about this?

2. Read Judges 15:7-8. How did Samson respond to the death of his wife? Where did he go afterwards?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 15:9-10. How did the Philistines respond? Where did they go, and what did they demand?

2. Read Judges 15:11-13. How many men went to see Samson, and what did they say to him? What did Samson agree to, and under what conditions?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 15:14-17. When Samson arrived in the Philistine camp, what happened? What was significant about the “the fresh jawbone?”

2. Read Judges 15:18-20. What did Samson do after defeating the Philistines? For how long did Samson judge Israel?
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Week 13 Discussion: Gentle Answers

Proverbs 15:1 reads, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” In chapter 15 of Judges, this proverb was desperately needed and nowhere to be found. Instead of de-escalating a hostile situation, the actions of both Samson and the Philistines only perpetuated the violence and hostility. Talk as a group about how important it is to live this proverb out in your own life.

1. Icebreaker: Is it easy for you to give a gentle answer in a hostile situation?
2. Read Romans 12:18. How much easier is it to live peaceably with all when you give gentle answers to hostile circumstances or people?
3. How difficult is it to live peaceably with all when you give harsh answers?
4. When has retaliation worked out well for you? Or has it ever?
5. Has retaliation ever brought more hostility in your life? Share with the group your experience.
6. How can you give practical guidance to other Christians towards gentleness and peaceable living?

Takeaways:

1. Samson and the Philistines engage in a back and forth retaliatory manner that only heightens the hostility.
2. Samson overcomes the Philistines according to God’s plan even in spite of some of his disobedient decisions.

PRAYER REQUESTS: