

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

Flaming Foxes

November 23rd, 2025

Judges 14:1-15:20

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 14. Thank you, Ali, for reading for us.

Samson may just be the strangest character in all the Bible. He looks like he belongs in a Netflix special. He is a womanizer. He is a man of vengeance. He possesses other-worldly strength. He has a great head of hair! He's like James Bond, John Wick, the Hulk and Harry Styles all rolled into one!

And, in one sense, that makes my job this morning very simple! Is it even possible to lose the attention of the room while telling the story of a man ripping a jawbone off of a donkey and then killing 1,000 soldiers with it? I suppose we'll find out, but I'm optimistic.

However, this story also presents a real challenge. As one commentator warns:

Samson is such a rollicking, entertaining, break-the-mould fellow that we may become preoccupied with him. We must not allow our focus on the savior God raises up to eclipse the God who saves.¹

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 157.

That's exactly right. This story isn't ultimately about Samson. The author of Judges didn't write this down in order to *entertain* us. He wrote it down in order to *teach* us so as to *change* us. So, with that being said, let's make our way through this story and – at the end – we'll try to discern just what exactly we're meant to see in all of this. This is a long story, so let's consider it in three scenes. In scene one, we find:

Scene One: A Forbidden Love

The story begins – as so many great stories do – with a flash of romance. We read:

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." (Judges 14:1-2 ESV)

Almost as if straight from a hallmark moview, Samson tells his parents to bring the pretty Philistine woman to him. Like a construction worker selecting his deli meat at the butcher, Samson knows what he want, and love is in the air.

But, in light of what we read last week in chapter 13, there is something strange about this love. Do you remember what the Angel of the Lord said about Samson – the miracle baby? He declared:

for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and **he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.**" (Judges 13:5 ESV)

The one who was meant to DELIVER his people from the Philistines has gone and fallen in LOVE with them! Evidently neither Samson, nor the Philistines, took the angel's prophecy very seriously. He was content to marry one of their daughters, and they were content to give her away. Samson's parents seem to be the only ones who took the angel's words to heart. They protest in verse 3:

"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?" (Judges 14:3b ESV)

‘Samson, just LOOK at all the women that you have to choose from! God has given you permission to seek the hand of ANY of these women in marriage! Why, then, are you taking that which He has forbidden?’ But, like Adam and Eve before him who saw that the forbidden fruit was pleasing to their eyes, Samson responds:

“Get her for me, **for she is right in my eyes.**” (Judges 14:3c ESV)

If you were asked to define sin in one sentence, this wouldn’t be a bad option. Brothers and sisters, the moment that you give yourself permission to disregard God’s word because something *seems right in your eyes* you have taken the first step down a dangerous road.

Having made up his mind Samson makes his way back to Timnah to negotiate a price for her betrothal. On his way down, Samson has a surprise encounter. We read in verses 5-6:

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. (Judges 14:5-6a ESV)

In a scene where you might expect the judgement of God to fall upon this rebel, we’re told that God instead empowers Samson with the Holy Spirit such that Samson tears a young lion to pieces! For those of you who have torn apart a young goat, apparently it was something like that.

Now, you might think that this miraculous deliverance would have caused Samson to turn back to the Lord. He has just been saved from certain death! Certainly, this will be a wakeup call! But – as has been the case with the Israelites over and over again – the freshly delivered Samson continues his march into the arms of his Philistine lover.

To make matters worse, on the way back, Samson returned to the Lion carcass where he found a honeycomb. If you remember from last week, one of the three major elements of Samson’s Nazirite vow was that he was to stay away from dead things. This prohibition would certainly include foraging honey from a lion’s chest cavity!

But Samson wasn't particularly concerned about his Nazirite vows, and his conscience was unfazed by his blatant disobedience. In fact, he decided to have a little more fun with it. And this brings us to the second scene in our passage:

Scene Two: An Infuriating Riddle

As Samson feasted with the 30 Philistine men who were to be his wedding party, he made them a bet. To frame it in modern terms, he promised that he would buy all 30 of them brand new expensive suits if they could solve his riddle. We find it in verse 14:

“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. (Judges 14:14b ESV)

Samson was tickled pink! Here he is, about to marry the Philistine girl of his dreams! He's eating and drinking and having a great time with his new Philistine friends! And he's about to win for himself a fresh new wardrobe!

But the bridal party decided to adopt a new strategy to crack the riddle. They take his fiancée aside and tell her that – if she doesn't pull out the answer from her would-be-husband – then they will burn her and her father alive! Sufficiently motivated, she managed to extract the answer.

Samson became enraged! 'These men are RULE breakers! They PLOWED with my HEIFER!' I HATE rule breakers!' In a fit of rage, Samson marches off to the distant town of Ashkelon where he kills 30 Philistine men and steals their garments. He pays off his debt and then, in a huff, he leaves his bride at the altar.

When his rage has subsided, Samson makes his way back to Timnah to collect his wife where he discovers that she has been given in marriage to his best man! This really IS like a movie! This heartbreak leads to what might be the most convoluted act of revenge that the world has ever seen. We read in verse 4 of chapter 15:

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. (Judges 15:4 ESV)

We're not told how long this took, but I imagine it takes quite some time to catch 300 foxes. This wasn't a spurious, heat-of-the-moment act of revenge. How many fox traps did Samson set out? Where did he keep them until he had 300? How many times did they bite his hand while he fastened a torch to their tails?

Whatever went into this act of revenge, the message was received loud and clear. The men of Timnah responded with their own fire – a fire that consumed Samson's would-be-wife. When he heard about their retaliation, he set out to settle the feud once and for all. We read in verses 7-8:

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. (Judges 15:7-8 ESV)

This story began with Samson living at peace with the oppressing Philistines. But those days of peace have come to an end. And that lead us to the third and final scene in this story:

Scene Three: A Jaw-Dropping Victory

While Samson may have felt that the matter had been settled, the Philistines were far from done. They launched a counterattack against the unsuspecting city of Lehi in the region of Judah. When the shell-shocked Israelites asked what had provoked this attack, the Philistines explained that they had come for the champion – Samson. What comes next is the most embarrassing, yellow-bellied scene in the Samson story. Look with me again at verses 11-13:

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. (Judges 15:11-13 ESV)

We talked about this at length last Sunday, so I will be quick here, but what a sad sight this is! Israel finally assembles an army, only to send it out against one of their own?! 3,000 soldiers from Judah are sent to do the Philistine's dirty work. And so, the cowards bind up their fellow countryman and hand him over to the enemy.

But the saddest scene in the story quickly gives way to the most memorable. We read in verses 14-17:

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. (Judges 15:14-17a ESV)

As I picture this scene in my mind – because I'm such a nerd – I can hear Gimli shouting ‘Nineteen! Twenty! Twenty-one!’ while urukai fall in heaps beside him at the battle of Helm's Deep. I'd like to think that the 3,000 soldiers from Judah found their courage and chose to join Samson in his fight against the Philistines, but the author doesn't tell us. It's possible that they just stood back and watched with trembling awe.

The stage is now set for the conclusion to Samson's story in chapter 16 and – perhaps even more pointedly – for David's eventual showdown with the Philistine giant, Goliath. But – again – that is a story for another day.

With flaming foxes and donkey's jawbones fresh in our mind, I want to ask one concluding question:

What Does This Story Teach Us About Deliverance?

This is – after all – a story of deliverance. The Angel of the Lord announced back in chapter 13 that this man would be the one to begin to save his people from the Israelites. But what a strange salvation this is... I believe there are two significant lessons for us to learn in this passage. First:

1. **God will sometimes orchestrate temporary chaos to bring about lasting peace**

Framed differently, this story illustrates very clearly that God simply won't allow His people to sleepwalk into hell. Like a smoke detector that startles you out of your cozy bed because the house is on fire, God WILL grab your attention when you are drifting into sin.

If you were with us last Sunday, then you remember that this period of oppression by the Philistines marks the first time in the book that Israel does NOT cry out for deliverance. They sin. And they suffer. But they NEVER cry out for rescue in the Samson story.

They've made peace with their sin. They've made peace with their misery. That's why Samson is marrying Philistine girls and partying with Philistine men. That's why Judah's army is doing the Philistine's dirty work. There's no FIGHT left in God's people! There's no HOPE left in them!

We were reminded last week that even the most hopeless people are not outside of God's reach. But how does He do it? How does He deliver sleepy, apathetic, hopeless people?

We learn in this story that, sometimes, he orchestrates some chaos in order to WAKE THEM UP.

We see this in verse 4 of chapter 14. This verse is really the *interpretive key* for this story. Look there again with me. This is right after Samson demanded a Philistine bride, to the horror of his parents! They didn't understand. Did this mean that Samson *wouldn't* bring deliverance? Had God's plan been ruined? In verse 4, the curtain of God's providence is pulled back for us and we read:

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. (Judges 14:4 ESV)

Before God could rescue His people from the Philistines, they needed to recognize that THEY NEEDED RESCUE! They were living in a false peace. They had grown comfortable living under the thumb of the Philistines. They didn't realize that they were cuddling with a rattlesnake.

So, God sent Samson to orchestrate CHAOS.

That's what Israel needed in this season.

Here's a painful lesson: Sometimes that's what WE need too.

Sometimes, in order to wake us up out of our apathy God sends a storm to shake us to the foundation! Sometimes, to melt a heart of ice, God sets it directly next to the fire. Because He is the God who FIGHTS for His people. And – as we have seen many times in this book – sometimes He fights FOR His people by temporarily fighting AGAINST them. This theme runs through the Bible from start to finish! As one commentator notes:

The Maker of heaven and earth refused to walk away from Eden, shrugging his shoulders and muttering 'You win some and you lose some.' No, he is the stubborn God who will set all creation ablaze with holy war in order to have a seed and a people for himself.²

And that leads into the final lesson that we learn in this passage:

2. God draws straight lines with crooked sticks

One of the most obvious questions in this passage is, 'Why on earth does God choose to use Samson?! This man is a trainwreck! How can a holy God use such a SINFUL instrument for His purposes?' I think that's an important question to wrestle through.

The first thing that we need to say is that God is not the author of Samson's sin. He didn't *compel* Samson to lust after Philistine women. SAMSON did that. Samson chose to sin.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 180.

Nevertheless – even though God is not the AUTHOR of Samson’s sin – God *uses* Samson’s sin as an instrument to set His people free.

If you struggle to wrap your mind around that, I think we find a great illustration in this story. In the same way that Samson tied a torch to the foxes and released them to do what foxes do, God put the fire of His Spirit on Samson and released him to do what Samsons do. Samson is like God’s flaming fox! As one commentator explains:

Yahweh can and will use the sinfulness or stupidity of his servants as the camouflage for bringing his secret will to pass.³

God will use ANY and EVERY tool in order to redeem and refine His people. To say that more pointedly – it may just be that the terrible thing that is bringing *disruption* to your life has been sent by your Heavenly Father on an important errand. It may be that the discomfort that you desperately want to be free from is the sandpaper that God is using to polish and perfect you.

Look back over your life. Isn’t it littered with painful seasons that wound up shaping you for the better? Isn’t it the case that the wind that blew against you caused your roots to grow deeper?

God is more committed to your ETERNAL JOY than He is to your temporary comfort.

And sometimes, in order to redeem and refine you, He will use an instrument that you could never imagine would ever be used for your good.

Sometimes He uses economic downturns. Other times He uses sinful spouses. Sometimes He uses natural disasters. Other times He uses supernatural opposition. Your Father in heaven will use WHATEVER HE NEEDS TO USE to rescue His people. And nowhere is that more clearly displayed than when God used three iron nails an old, rugged cross to save His people from their sin. God draws straight lines with crooked sticks.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 169.

And so, I want to leave with you to reflect on a question: Is it possible that God is orchestrating temporary chaos in your life to bring about lasting peace? Has He set your fields on fire? Is He pursuing you this morning? If that's you, then hear God's invitation to you from Hosea 6:1.

Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. (Hosea 6:1 ESV)

Let's pray together.