

The Book of Judges

Lesson 22 - Chapters 15 and 16

We continue today our story of Samson that appears in the middle chapters of the Book of Judges. We finished chapter 14 last week and today we'll begin chapter 15 and get a little way in chapter 16.

When we left off Samson spotted a Philistine girl that he wanted to marry and so disrespectfully demanded that his parents negotiate a marriage contract for her. Properly so, Samson's parents objected to this because this girl was not a Hebrew, and no Hebrew man (let alone a **Nazarite** Hebrew); should have ever considered marrying a pagan Philistine but his father gave in and did as he wanted.

A 7-day long Philistine-style wedding ceremony ensued that was fashioned around a banquet; 30 Philistine men were invited as "companions" of the groom undoubtedly because no respectable Israelite was going to accompany Samson into Philistine territory in order for him to marry a Philistine girl. At this ceremony it was Samson's duty to entertain the guests and so one popular means of entertainment was to offer up a riddle; but Samson also spiced the game up a bit by attaching a wager and a handsome prize to those who guessed the answer correctly. But the game also came with a hook: if the guests lost the wager they would owe Samson a heap of valuable clothing.

The riddle concerned the lion that Samson had secretly killed on the journey to Timnah, when his parents first met Samson's future bride; and then on the next trip for the actual occasion of the wedding Samson stopped out of curiosity to view his handiwork and found to his delight that some bees had set up a hive and produced honey inside the carcass of the dead lion.

Since he was alone on both occasions with the lion, the riddle he offered (with the lion being the answer) was unsolvable, meaning it was quite unfair and insulting to his guests. The wager that involved expensive clothing made the matter all the more delicate and the guests sensing they had been duped went to Samson's bride and demanded that she use her womanly wiles to get the answer to the riddle from Samson and then divulge it to them (after all these were her fellow countrymen and besides that they threatened her and her father's lives). After several days of crying and whining and complaining to Samson, Samson finally caved in to stop the flow of tears and told her what she sought and immediately she went to the wedding guests with the solution.

Samson of course felt betrayed and only hours before the 7-day wedding ceremony was to conclude he stormed off in a huff, walked some 20 miles to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, and there murdered 30 men for their clothing in order for him to pay off his wager for the riddle.

These 30 Philistine men were killed at random and had no part in the wedding; so from that standpoint they were innocent victims of a serial killer.

Thus Samson was probably never actually married. So we find that the humiliated father of the jilted girl eventually gave her to Samson's best man (a Philistine) since Samson had never returned to finish claiming his bride.

Let's continue the story by reading Judges 15.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 15 all

Some undefined amount of time passed and the wheat harvest season arrived, which means it was around late May or early June, the time of the holy celebration of Shavuot (Pentecost). Samson's anger finally had subsided sufficiently that he decided he would go back to Timnah to see his wife. The word used for wife is in Hebrew *ishsheh*, which can mean woman or wife depending on the context, so it's hard to know what he had in his mind about his relationship with this girl. Was he married to her or not? For sure he must have felt he had some "ownership" claim or he would not have expected to visit this girl in her personal chambers. The girl's father explained the situation to Samson: they had no idea what to make of Samson abruptly leaving the wedding ceremony but since he hadn't come back and so much time had elapsed they could only assume that Samson didn't want her anymore; so the father gave the girl to another man.

The answer to what was actually happening here might be in the young goat that Samson was bringing with him. Why would he be bringing a gift and why would it have been considered important enough to include the gifting of a goat in the account? It is usually taught that the young goat was a present of reconciliation and while possible it is hard to imagine that such a common and rather inexpensive item would have been suitable to apologize for the tremendous insult and boorish behavior that Samson had displayed several months earlier at his own wedding.

Instead there is another and much more likely possibility. There is an ancient Middle Eastern custom (still practiced today by some Middle Eastern cultures) called *sadika*; it was (and still is) followed by men who have no permanent habitation, and thus their wife is allowed to remain with her parents on a more or less indefinite basis. It is also recognized as a marriage of lesser status than a more typical one whereby a husband and wife set up their own household together. This *sadika* is probably an evolution of the concubine relationship whereby a man takes a woman to live in his household but she is not given a marriage certificate or married under a Chuppah (given a wedding ceremony), yet she does have many rights of a wife.

In modern times the husband in this kind of marriage is called a *joz musarrib*, meaning "visiting husband". And in this system it is the husband's duty to bring the wife a gift each time he comes to visit her; it doesn't have to be a real valuable gift but it can't be so small as to be insulting; a goat kid would fit that bill just about right in that era. Thus in our case with Samson he says in verse 1, "I want to go to my *ishsheh* in her room". No man would be allowed to enter a single woman's private chambers, nor could a married woman have a male visitor

other than her father or husband in her own room. Such a thing just wasn't done and could easily bring the death penalty for violators; both for the visitor and the visitee. So Samson obviously thought that he had some kind of marital relationship with this girl (probably of the **sadika** kind), but the father thought otherwise.

Seeing that Samson was surprised and upset, and certainly not wanting to further anger this renowned man of violent and impulsive behaviors, the father offered the girl's younger sister to him. She's even prettier, he says; why not take her as a nice trade? While that may seem uncivilized to us, it was usual in those days for such a transaction and the father was making a sincere attempt to make things as right as he could under the circumstances. Of course Samson wasn't having any of it and another rage overcame him.

Samson determines he's going to take revenge for this perceived offense against him, and it was going to be against the Philistines in general. It's self evident that Samson seemed to lump all Philistines together; if one Philistine insults him then all Philistines are open to blame and are fair game. What a strange man Samson was; he seemed to hang out regularly in Philistine territory and had a hunger for Philistine women yet he had some type of deep-seated burning hatred towards the Philistines as a group, and I think it might even be fair to say that he was rather bigoted towards them. After all, that you could take any race of people and decide that the actions of one equal the actions of them all, then it's hard to not see this as a kind of bigotry. Yes, of course, the Philistines ruled over Israel at this time and so the Philistines were hardly the good guys. But any soldier who has fought on foreign soil will tell you that it is a dilemma to mentally separate the innocent civilians from the military troops who are trying to kill you; yet most soldiers instinctively know that there is a difference and they must conduct themselves in that knowledge.

I also realize that one might legitimately argue that since God was mucking around in the middle of all of this with Samson, that perhaps Samson was responding to a righteous kind of impulse within him to destroy the Philistines. But his other actions indicate that Samson really didn't seem to care too much about what God thought or what God's laws and ordinances entailed. Samson operated primarily in a self centered manner, by doing what was right in his own eyes, and with very little self-control or wisdom anywhere in the mix.

He decides on a rather inventive kind of collective revenge upon the Philistines; he captures 300 **shu'al**, binds their tails together in pairs and ties a lit torch to them. The animals race off in panic and confusion and in the process the flaming torches that they are dragging behind them set the dry and ripened wheat fields on fire. A **shu'al** is not actually a fox (at least as we think of these cute little reddish dog-like animals); rather they are more akin to Jackals. Foxes are solitary animals and it would be near to impossible for one man to trap 300 of them; Jackals on the other hand travel in packs so there is the possibility of capturing several at once. While I don't have a great need to have pets, I like animals; and while I don't subscribe to the PETA sort of "animals are people, too" kind of philosophy, animals should be treated with kindness. God prescribes that man is to be humane even with the creatures used for sacrificing or grown for their meat. What Samson did was downright cruel to these **shu'al**. It's not hard to imagine many of them being severely burned, others being killed, and every last one of them traumatized to the extreme. He used them as a tool of personal vengeance, caring little for

their fate and suffering; this is becoming an all too familiar character trait of this Hebrew strongman.

Now understand: just like any ancient society these fields of grain were the livelihood of the common folks. And while these folks were indeed Philistines, who God ultimately wants removed from the Promised Land, they weren't monsters they were simple farmers. Much of the wheat crops that they depended on were now destroyed. In addition it was common to plant wheat among olive trees so many of the olive groves were also burned down. Interestingly, unlike some of his earlier adventures we don't find any reference to Samson being given divine strength and influence to set these fields on fire. We also don't find any reference to the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) coming upon Samson in this case; so without more to go on it would be reasonable to assume that this was nothing more than Samson obeying his own evil inclinations. Were the results something that Yehoveh would use for His purposes (the result being that the Philistines would be violently upset with the local Israelites in general)? Absolutely. The Lord's primary purpose for Samson was to undo the ungodly peace (and resultant syncretism) between His people and His enemies. Did the Lord approve of wanton cruelty and indiscriminate destruction? Not a chance. Not then and not now.

In verse 6 the Philistine farmers begin to ask one another if they knew who might have done this; some must have witnessed it because without hesitation Samson was fingered as the culprit. But unfortunately these same farmers were informed that this happened because Samson's almost father in law had denied Samson's bride to him and given her to another, and it was this that drove Samson to burn down their crops. The Philistine farmers went as a mob to the man's house and burned it down with him and his daughter inside. When Samson found out about this atrocity he decided that he would reciprocate by killing some more Philistines (kind of familiar cycle, isn't it?).

It is so interesting how humans under stress can react. Because these Philistines farmers had no interest in taking on Samson (whom their army couldn't even deal with), they blamed their misery on someone who they determined upset Samson (and someone they could more conveniently extract some revenge upon, no matter how misplaced). We have a great deal of "blame America" going on in our time because some people who are absolutely petrified of Islam want to shift the blame to our government and our military for acts of terror perpetrated by radical Islam upon us. When 9/11 happened the knee jerk reaction of millions across America was first to blame our government for not preventing the attack, and second to ask what America might have done to offend Islam such that it would cause them to hate us and harm us so.

Regarding Israel we have an almost worldwide consensus that the homicide bombings of public buses, the constant rocket attacks into purely civilian neighborhoods coming from Gaza, and the maniacal desire of a dozen Muslim nations to annihilate Israel is because Israel has done something to offend them. It is Israel's fault that their neighbors constantly attack them and want them dead. And the only reason (other than an underlying anti-Semitism) that this irrational attitude persists throughout the world is because the world fears Islam. If Austria or Argentina or Belgium were coming after Israel it would be a different story because none of these nations frightens anyone. I've said on multiple occasions that history is circular; it

repeats itself over and over in identical patterns because people don't change and the way the Universe operates and God responds never changes. Thus for the world to shift blame to the victim because to deal with the perpetrator is fraught with difficulty and danger is an age-old solution.

Well after Samson went on another random killing spree upon whatever Philistines crossed his path, he left Philistia and went to a cave at a place called 'Eitam Rock. Actually what happened here is that as he said in verse 7, he would stop killing once he had extracted some undefined amount of more blood from the Philistines that seemed to satisfy his personal sense of justice; he would be through with his murdering and so retire to this cave to withdraw from the conflict and be left alone. Good luck. Not only were the Philistines hardly ready to forgive and forget but also the God-ordained purpose of Samson's birth was to create all of this turmoil and disrupt the peace process.

As I said, history is circular. I'm sure the majority of you have put it together that what we see happening between Samson and the Philistines is once again happening between Israel and the modern day Philistines, the Palestinians. Can anyone doubt that the intractable problems of the Middle East and the "Israel Problem" are the Lord's will? I'm about to say something awfully politically incorrect so close your ears if you're sensitive. The Lord does not want peace in the Middle East (at least not yet). And this is because the kind of peace that men are wanting and striving for is manmade, involves compromising God-principles, and it means Israel has to essentially give up on the covenants God made with them. If the Palestinians weren't harassing Israel, someone else would. Before there was such a thing as Palestinians, Jordan was Israeli's archenemy. Before them Egypt, Iran, and Iraq. If the leaders of Israel (and a growing segment of Israelis) weren't so willing to give up much of the Holy Land, half of Jerusalem, the Temple Mount, and so intent on showing respect or at least tolerance for the false god Allah, Yehoveh wouldn't be allowing the never-ending murders row line-up of hostile nations to oppress Israel and keep trouble stirred up so that such misguided efforts as The Roadmap to Peace cannot possibly happen.

We have today (for example) the Israeli police forcibly evicting Jewish settlers from settlements in Judea and Samaria that only a few years earlier were encouraged and financed by the Sharon government. Why? Because the current Israeli government (with unceasing international pressure upon it) thinks that by giving this land to the enemy, the enemy will be appeased and grow to accept Israel. Besides since the Israeli government can't seem to defeat the enemy, then they'll shift the blame for the failed peace process to people they can more easily deal with: their own Israeli citizens, Jews, who still believe in God's promises and covenants.

The same seemingly unsolvable dilemma that is the Middle East today was very much the same way in Samson's day. In fact it is this instability, and constant violence from the enemy, and Israel's disobedient response to it all (instead of repenting of their ways and returning to the Lord) that is the hallmark of the days of the Judges; and it's that same way again in our time and for the same reasons.

Naturally, the Philistines figure they must do something about Samson; despite being

constantly defeated by this one man, they're ready to try again. So in verse 9 some Philistine soldiers went up to Judah and attacked a town called Lechi. 'Eitam Rock, where Samson was living, was also in Judah and nearby. The local Hebrew inhabitants of Judah were puzzled over why the Philistines were attacking them; they had good relations with the Philistines. When the residents of Lechi found out the Philistines were after Samson (and in reality were extracting some pay-back upon the Israelites just as Samson indiscriminately burned the fields of the Philistines) the men of Judah were more than happy to help the enemy capture him if it meant that the Philistines would leave them alone. Of course the Israelites of Judah knew Samson and respected his amazing strength and so they sent a contingent of 3,000 men to try and subdue him.

When they found Samson they were right up front and told him they were going to turn him over to the Philistines. Samson knew these people well and so requested only that they not kill him themselves. The irony of this is that instead of sending an army of 3000 men against their Philistine oppressors, these Judahites went after one of their own in order to appease their oppressor. They asked in regards to Samson's personal war against the Philistines, "what are you doing to US"! Fighting the enemy disrupted their otherwise comfortable lives, as they were more interested in preserving a satanic peace with the Philistines than fighting a Holy War to rid the place of them.

Samson obtained their promise only to bind him and turn him over to the Philistines; they tied him up with new ropes (meaning the strands were still moist and thus at their strongest) and when they got to their village of Lechi with Samson the Philistines were ecstatic. Wow. Samson was captured and they got the Israelites to do it for them!

But for the first time in a long time suddenly the Spirit of God that invests Samson with an even greater strength than usual, comes upon him. He burst the ropes like they were nothing, looked around and found the jawbone of a donkey lying nearby and began swinging it at the heads of the hundreds of Philistine soldiers who had only moments before stood in relief that they wouldn't have to face him. The jawbone was "fresh" in the sense that the sun hadn't dried it out yet and become brittle.

Samson's words as he kills Philistine soldier after Philistine soldier is a poem and a play on two words: donkey (ass) and heap. As is more common in Hebrew than you might think, the same word can often mean two entirely different things (thus at times in the bible we'll get some nonsensical English translations because the translator wasn't aware of the alternate meaning). Both donkey and heap use the word **chamor** as their root. This play on words is best translated as: "With a donkey's jawbone, I heaped heaps. With a donkey's jawbone I killed a thousand men".

So what we have is that after killing a large number of Philistines whose bodies piled up to a heap, he chased down more of them and did the same to them creating another heap of corpses. In fact, the way Hebrew works, it could have been several more than two heaps. Thus we find out how the place where this massacre took place came to be called Ramath-Lechi, which means, "jawbone heights" or "jawbone hill".

The battle concluded leaves Samson exhausted and thirsty; there had been no time to refresh himself and apparently there was no nearby water source. In a rare moment of proper spirituality Samson acknowledges that it was the Lord who won this battle, and who preserved Samson's life in what only seemed to be a one-man fight against staggering odds. He says to God that he is grateful that God has seen fit to accomplish such a great rescue through his servant. Well, I'm afraid that while Samson was quite aware of his calling as a Nazarite for life (thus calling himself God's servant) and as God's tool to begin to liberate Israel from the Philistines, he was probably by far the most unfaithful of all the Judges and paid but lip service to his God-ordained status as a *nazir*.

Samson is now weakened both by dehydration and sheer physical exhaustion from a fight that probably went on for most of a day; he would not be able to withstand another attack if other Philistines decided to join in. As God had done in the days of old, long before Samson, the Lord sprung forth water from a rock to satiate Samson and he was revived.

Let's move on to chapter 16.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 16 all

The final words of the previous chapter are that Samson judged Israel for 20 years. First of all he didn't judge all Israel, but only the area in the former territory of Dan and the northern part of Judah that were under the thumb of the Philistines. The Philistines only presented a problem for a relatively small part of the Land of Canaan and but a few of the 12 Israelite tribes at this time.

This "20-year" reference is also not meant for us to think that 20 years had passed since the donkey jawbone incident and the mention to begin chapter 16 that Samson went down to Gaza and engaged the services of a prostitute. We don't really know how much time had passed, but probably a few years had gone by. Apparently the Philistines had stopped pursuing Samson after he had single handedly killed 1000 of them with nothing more than a donkey's jawbone. What we ought to take notice of is that Samson created havoc with the Philistines for a substantial amount of time, two decades.

In yet another violation of his Nazarite vow, Samson got involved with a Philistine prostitute down in Gaza. Yes, this is the same Gaza we know of today. Samson seemed to really have a thing for Philistine girls, didn't he? There is no record of any interest in Hebrew women. Would he actually venture all the way from his home in Tzora to Gaza simply to use a prostitute? Perhaps. While prostitution went on in Hebrew society it was not well accepted as it was in Philistine culture.

It's amazing that the Philistine army didn't immediately come after Samson but I suspect they were just hoping he'd be a good boy this time around, enjoy himself and go home without decreasing the Philistine population again. But the townspeople of Gaza weren't so pragmatic; when they heard Samson was there they set a trap for him. They were going to wait for him to come out in the morning and then kill him. Thus the stage is set for yet another conflict between Samson (on Israel's behalf) and the Philistines.

The foolish Gazans surrounded the place where Samson was staying, but Samson must have sensed something was up so he arose at midnight. But rather than stealthily stealing out of town (Samson didn't do ANYTHING involving stealth) he went to the city gates, broke the lock and with superhuman strength lifted the city gates off of their pivoting pins and walked off with them. I can't even imagine the gaping mouths that stood looking at the hole in the city's defensive wall and their missing gates as the morning sun peaked over the eastern hills. There is no reason to try to make the city gates escapade any less than what it is. City gates were not small, nor could a single human even contemplate lifting one of them. The gates were made of heavy wood planks and usually put together using large iron spikes, and by that time iron sheeting often covered the outer side so that it could not be easily burned down.

But Samson didn't just take the gates down; he carried them off on his shoulders! He took them to a hilltop and presumably tossed them over. Now depending on your translation it says that he either took the gates to a hill in Hebron or he took them to a hill TOWARDS Hebron. Hebron was 40 miles away; it is also at a 2500-foot elevation, meaning it was uphill all the way. Therefore it makes little sense that he would have taken them that far. Almost certainly he took them on a road that was TOWARDS Hebron, and arrived at some intermediate place on a hill from where he could see Hebron from a pretty fair distance.

Well in verse 4 begins one of the most infamous stories in the Bible, the story of Samson and his love affair (albeit a one-sided love affair) with the stunning temptress Delilah. The story will take some time to deal with, so I think we'll stop here for today and take it up next time we meet.