

Judges 15

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[0 : 00] Let's do turn back to Judges chapter 15.! Or Heath Ledger.

Or those of that growing list is an air of talented musicians and singers who are dead by the age of 27. Kimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse. Or perhaps we think of those sportsmen and women who begin so well but have their careers cut short through injury and never win that title everyone is expecting them to win.

Well, Samson's life seems to have wasted potential emblazoned in large letters all over it. Right from before his birth it was clear he was the man God's people desperately needed.

If you remember Israel, they're in the promised land but they've turned their back on the Lord.

They've forgotten all the privileges that were theirs. They are enslaved now to the Philistines.

And worst of all, they just don't seem to care. But actually what we see in these opening chapters of Saulcraft Samson's life is that the Lord cares. We saw last Sunday night, didn't we?

[1 : 29] The Lord comes, the angel of the Lord comes to one family and promises that they will bear a son. And that son will be a saviour. He will begin to rescue Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

And more than that we saw, didn't we, that he's going to be a Nazarite. By how he lives he is going to show Israel what it means to follow the Lord. He was to show Israel what true holiness looks like. In a time of the judges, when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes, he was to be a light, showing what it meant to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

To be that standard that everyone else should measure up to. To be a Nazarite from birth. Not simply taking a vow later on in life, but from the womb. From conception, Samson was going to be that Nazarite.

People should be able to look at Samson as he was around in Canaan. And they'd be able to see him coming because of his long hair. And they would think, well here's Samson, this is what it means to be set apart for the Lord.

[2 : 32] This is what we've been rescued for. Samson was to provide rescue, but also a pattern for life. Samson was to provide salvation, but also the path of holiness.

He was just what Israel needed at this time. And yet as we saw it in chapter 14, it's very disappointing, isn't it? Samson should point to what Israel were meant to be.

But in practice, Samson is just what Israel was. Samson actually is being a mirror of the whole nation. Samson as an individual is really showing us what the whole of God's people were like at the time of Judges.

Forgetting about their privileges. Forgetting about who they're meant to be. Doing what is right in their own eyes. The Lord uses him to draw the philistines into confrontation, but he's not very impressive.

What drives Samson? Well, we saw this morning. It's not a passion. It's not a holy passion for the glory of the Lord. No, you can see in verse 3 of chapter 14, he is simply concerned about what is right in his own eyes.

[3 : 43] Like actually the rest of the nation were. He does what he wants, even if that means breaking food laws, breaking marriage laws. So instead of these chapters being one glorious story of rescue, there are actually two plot lines side by side in these chapters of Samson.

In these chapters we see the first plot line, which is the story of Samson himself. Samson picturing for us the dire state of God's people at the time.

But alongside that plot line, we've also got, still wonderfully, a story of the mercy and salvation of the Lord. So even though Samson is a failure, the Lord has still not given up on his people.

Samson's sin only makes the mercy of the Lord shine brighter. Samson is an embodiment of all that Israel were. That is great news.

That is great news for God's people. That is great news for the world. Because really if Samson is an embodiment of what Israel were like at the time of the Judges, it's really what the whole of humanity were like.

[4 : 54] Turning our back on the God who made us. Forgetting what we are made in the image of God. Is there any hope? Well, there's no hope in and of ourselves. But there's hope in the mercy of the Lord.

So because of what the Lord is doing, we can look to this story of Samson and learn about the ways the Lord acts and the salvation he brings. Now we see both these things as we move into chapter 15.

Now we need to remember that this chapter follows straight on from what we saw this morning. All the events of these two chapters kind of belong together really. They're like a kind of dominoes. If you remember that kind of game of dominoes, you kind of line them up and one falls down and it leads to the others falling down. Every kind of incident in chapter 14 and 15 moves on and produces the kind of consequences which lead on to the next scene.

One thing leads to another in these two chapters. And we need to remember verse 4 of chapter 14 that we focused on this morning. For all of Samson's sin, the Lord has a purpose in all of this.

[5 : 57] The Lord is seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. He's done that, hasn't he, through Samson's desire to marry a Philistine wife. He's done that through the way Samson has provoked the Philistines with that riddle at his wedding.

We saw that the Philistines cheated. They got the answer to the riddle. And we left chapter 14 with Samson slaughtering 30 Philistines in anger to get the pairs of clothes he needed to pay his winnings.

And then the story continues in chapter 15. But what do we learn from the story that I read in chapter 15 a few moments ago? Well I think there are four very brief things I want us to see tonight. Firstly we see in verses 1 to 8 that the saviour, Samson, is avenged. The saviour is avenged. So as we come into chapter 15, what's going on?

Well time has passed. But Samson still thinks he's married. Despite all that happened in that great scene at the end of chapter 14, that terrible scene at the end of chapter 14, Samson still thinks, well I'm still married.

[7 : 05] So he returns to the scene of the crime, doesn't he? And he returns to enjoy his wife. And her father, not surprisingly really, thinks Samson has rejected her.

And at the end of that party, he's given her to one of the companions who were at the party. And Samson is absolutely livid about that, isn't he?

Verse 3. Samson says to them, this time I'll be innocent in regard to the Philistines. Well I do them harm. Basically saying, I'm going to really cause them trouble.

And then what does Samson do? Well, verse 4 and 5, he rounds up 300 foxes, ties them together in pairs, puts a blazing torch of fire between them, and lets them loose in the Philistine harvest fields. We're told, isn't it? We're told, aren't we, in verse 1, that it is the time of the wheat harvest. Really, it is a phenomenal act of terrorism that Samson does.

[8 : 07] Destroying the Philistine harvest with these foxes and with this fire. Now obviously violence begets more violence, and that's what we see in these verses.

The Philistines, understandably, are absolutely angry, kind of livid at what has gone on. And strangely, we might think, they take it out, well, they take it out on the people who are there, Samson's long since gone, so they take it out on the family of Samson's bride, in a cruel and a vicious way.

And then as violence begets more violence, Samson in turn is angry about that, and acts against them. Striking them, verse 8, hip and thigh, a kind of Hebrew figure of speech, kind of meaning vicious and complete violence.

Really, you see what's going on. They are horrible, violent verses, where really Samson is getting the upper hand over the Philistines and causing the Philistines pain and agony and economic issues and problems.

And we might be uncomfortable with all of these verses. Kind of in a sense, right, if you're uncomfortable with these verses. Earlier this week, when the royal baby was being born, if you went

to the Guardian website, in the top right-hand corner of the website was just one word.

[9 : 32] It was the word Republican with a question mark. And if you clicked on that word, all the royal baby news went away from the Guardian website. And perhaps as we read through this passage, we wish we had an electronic Bible with the words 21st century in the corner that we can perhaps click on to take away all the violence and all the cruelty to foxes there are in this chapter.

But you see, we can't. Now, we need to remember a lot of things when we come to these kind of chapters which are just full of incredible cruelty. We need to remember that just because these kind of incidences are in God's word, it doesn't mean they are approved of.

Kind of recording what happened isn't necessarily saying this is a godly and a right thing to do. But the other thing we need to do is, in a sense, leave our squeamishness at the door and start seeing things from the point of view of the Lord and of his people.

What is going on in these first eight verses as Samson destroys Philistines and destroys their life, really, as he destroys the harvest?

Well, actually, we need to remember verse 4 of chapter 14, the Lord is behind this. The Lord is seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. I think we've got to say the Philistines are being judged.

[10 : 54] And that is a good thing. See, the Philistines ruled over Israel. They ruled over God's people at this point. And the Lord wants an opportunity against them.

Now, we need to think about what this means. The Philistines governed Israel. They were in charge. And because of that, they believed their gods were in charge of Israel's gods.

Their god, as we will see when we get into chapter 16, is a god they worshipped, a god called Dagon. And at this point, because they are in charge over Israel, they think actually Dagon has the victory over the Lord.

This imaginary god has the victory over the creator of the heaven and earth. And actually, God's people didn't care at this point. They've given God's glory to another. And as we see that and perhaps feel that, what is the Lord doing through Samson in these first eight verses, which are perhaps uncomfortable as we first read them, the Lord is showing he won't share his glory. He is judging the Philistines. He is taking back his honour. There's an incredible irony in these verses, as horrible as they are. At the end of chapter 14, Samson's Philistine wife wants to know the riddle because she doesn't want her family to be burnt.

[12 : 15] And now, what happens in chapter 15? Well, her family are torched at the hands of the Philistines. Now, I'm not saying that's a good thing or that's a right thing, but it shows up how wicked the Philistines are.

It shows the kind of horrible irony, really, of judgment. Now, again, I realise that this explanation of what is going on in these verses may not comfort us massively tonight.

Just imagine that we're in a land where Christians are being impressed and burnt. Imagine we are in one of those countries around the world where pastors are being killed. Where people who follow other gods are hounding out Christians because they believe they are right and Christianity is wrong.

Actually, the fact the Lord won't ultimately stand by while this is happening is actually a source of great comfort. The Lord ultimately won't give his honour to another.

There is coming a day when wrongs will be righted, when his great saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be avenged.

[13 : 32] That's why I began the service by reading Psalm 2. It couldn't be clearer than those words in Psalm 2 that are kind of that laughter of the Lord when people stand against his saviour, his anointed one.

Now that is, and in a sense, what you get, you know, behind all the kind of wickedness and the sin of these first few verses of chapter 15, you get that promise that that is going to happen and that will happen.

When the Lord Jesus Christ returns, it may not happen in this life. But the Lord won't stand idly by when his glory is given to another.

Now it's important, I say, what that doesn't mean for us. That does not mean that we do what Samson does now. In fact, actually, the application of this truth is that now as Christians, we actually can love and should, as Jesus commands, love our enemies and love those who persecute us and pray for those who persecute believers.

why? Well, actually, because it's they who are in the greatest danger. Anyone who stands against the law is in great danger.

[14 : 53] And because Christ will deal with what is happening, we don't have to deal with that. So, in a sense, if our brothers and sisters who are physically opposed around the world can and should love their enemies and pray for them because the Lord will deal with it, then how much more should we?

Perhaps when was the last time you prayed for blessing? On those who, you know, in this country, stand against Christianity. When was the last time you prayed for blessing, perhaps, on those hardline atheists in public life who speak up against Christianity, who seek to get past laws against Christianity?

For MPs who argue against Christian values? When was the last time we did that? Because I think doing that is real love for those people and it is believing the truth, the kind of the solemn and serious truth of what the Lord is going to come and do in the future.

So the Saviour's avenged, that's what we see in the first eight verses. Secondly, as we move on to verse 9 to 17, we also see that the Saviour is alone. So just imagine that you're in this situation, imagine you're an Israelite and you're ruled by a foreigner, you're being oppressed by the Philistines, and suddenly you've got a guy like Samson on your side.

He's provoking the Philistines, he's killing 30 of them without breaking a sweat, he's performing amazing acts of terrorism with his bare hands, well with the help of a few foxes at least.

[16 : 30] What would be your reaction? Well actually, it's interesting, isn't it? And it's very sad in this story that their reaction is not sheer joy. Verse 9, 10 and 11, they are terrified.

The Philistines come in, don't they, to see them, to get hold of Samson, and then 3,000 of them come and have a word, a quiet word, with Samson.

It's cowardice, isn't it? They don't try and bargain with the Philistines, they don't hide Samson, no, they go and get Samson to hand him over to the Philistines. Just listen to how pathetic verse 11 says, listen to what they say, do you not know that the Philistines have ruled us over us?

What then is this that you have done to us? Samson will say, don't you know that this is just the way it is? The Philistine rules. Dagon, well he's a greater God than our Lord.

We don't rule ourselves. Why rock the boat, Samson? We've simply got no choice but to hand you over to them. It's pathetic, isn't it?

[17 : 42] It's one of Israel's lowest points. Why is it so pathetic? Because they've forgotten who they are. They've forgotten their Lord. It's not just cowardice, it is sheer lack of faith.

Actually, when you read through Judges and Joshua, the Philistines shouldn't even be in the land at this stage. When Israel were given the land, they were told to get rid of all the other people who were there and they were given the assurance that they would win those battles because the Lord would fight for them and use them as a way of judging on these nations that were opposed to the Lord.

Do you see what they've done? They've laid down their arms and they are enjoying life together with them. Samson, the saviour, is alone.

The Philistines are to be attacked. He is the only one who's going to do it. It's a pathetic life. I guess it's a little bit like an addict. I don't know if you've ever known someone you love, be addicted to something, something which you know is harming them, perhaps drink or drugs or something like that.

One of the hardest things is getting them perhaps to realise they've got a problem and to help them to see that actually there is life without those things which are causing them such great harm.

[19 : 02] And that's the kind of situation it's where they're in. They just think life with their enemies is just life as it is. It is normal life. They don't see it's a problem. It's a picture of the pity, isn't it, in lots of ways.

And yet it is a very relevant picture once we think about it. It's relevant to you tonight if perhaps you're not a Christian, perhaps coming along you're interested, you like listening, you like spending time with Christians, but actually deep down you just don't think all this stuff about Jesus and this stuff about Christianity is for you.

Perhaps you think that Jesus, well, he's a great saviour but he's for other people. I wonder whether you've ever actually faced up to your need for him.

Have you ever faced up to your sin, your rebellion against God that you can't actually deal with yourself? Perhaps you're rebellion to God which perhaps you just live with. Perhaps you hear Christians talk about sin and the way that shows itself in life and you just think, well, that's just human nature, isn't it? That's just the way we're meant to be. There's no way that that can be dealt with.

[20 : 10] That's just not a problem. Actually, the Bible teaches, no, that is not the way your life is meant to be. And Jesus Christ has come to deal with that sin and to take it.

It's also a warning, I think, to all of us tonight who are Christians. How often do we put up with things in our life which just should not be there? Sin perhaps which we live with because we just think, well, actually, really, that's just how we are and perhaps we play out scenarios in our minds and we think back to kind of how we were growing up and all of those things and how much contributed to the kind of people we are now and the sins that we struggle with.

How often, like Israel, do we forget that we have the Holy Spirit? That we are called by God to be holy? That God commands and promises that we can and should put sin to death?

Perhaps how often do we get lethargic as a church forgetting that God is at work so that we can do great things for him? It's a terrible scene, isn't it? Is Israel at one of its lowest points?

But actually, as we think about the Saviour being alone here, it's also incredibly encouraging because although, sadly, the Saviour is alone, the Saviour is still there.

[21 : 32] He is there, alone, ready to act. What does Samson do when he allows himself to be handed over to the philistines by Israel? He is going to act on their behalf even though they don't want him to act.

That's what we see in verses 14 to 16. The Spirit comes upon him, doesn't he, verse 14, as he reaches the philistines. He gets free from the ropes, he grabs a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and he slays a thousand men.

He's acting as a Saviour there for Israel against the philistines, but he's acting alone as a Saviour, as one against the many. And again, isn't that just a wonderful pointer?

Samson stands against Jesus really is in contrast, but here, Samson is a pointer towards the great Saviour who is to come, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was alone.

We didn't want to be saved, we didn't want to be rescued. Yet he stood alone, handed over by his own people to suffer and die and conquer for us.

[22 : 38] The Lord Jesus Christ, our great Saviour, who is victorious by his Spirit, alone, acting as one for the many. So the Saviour is avenged, he's alone.

Thirdly, we also see the Saviour is sustained, that's what we see in verses 18 to 20. The chapter ends with Samson in danger again, don't we? He's crying out with thirst, verse 18.

I think, it's difficult to know quite what, to think about what Samson says, he calls out in verse 18. Perhaps we need to take him in his word here, he's lacking, or for the very least he feels he's lacking that vital need we all have, that need for water.

I guess many of us have felt that kind of thirst over the last few weeks and this heat. It's interesting, isn't it, that it's here that Samson acknowledges his need for the Lord. He perhaps thinks his strength comes from within, even though it doesn't, but he knows that actually when it comes to those vital things of life, water, he knows that needs to come from outside.

And the wonderful thing is the Lord sustains, he sustains his saviour. He won't let his saviour be killed. He won't let his saviour be killed before his time, whether it's by a lion or by thirst.

[23 : 54] So verse 19, he splits open a hollow place and water comes out from it. And I think it's no accident that this incident is next to a verse which tells us of all the years of Samson's rule.

Look at verse 20, he charged Israel in the days of the Philistines for 20 years. And I think what's being implied here is that the Lord provided for and sustained Saint Samson, not just here, but for all of those 20 years of his rule.

This long-term provision is just as important as that short-term provision of water. The fact that the Lord provided for Samson in this hour of his desperate need for water was a sign that he continued to provide.

And that's why that hollow place is named as a reminder of God's faithfulness. You see, the Lord's sustaining, don't we, for his Saviour here.

You see, when the Lord calls someone to a role, he equips them and he sustains them for it. We see that in the life of Christ, don't we? Providing for him every step of the way.

[25 : 02] And it's a comfort for his church now. God sustains, he provides for us now. Like Samson, he doesn't call us hypocrites when we cry out to him even though we fail him.

So often, though he hears, he responds, he gives us what we need to do what he calls us to do. We see the Lord sustaining his Saviour.

So his Saviour's avenged, he's alone, he's sustained, but finally, as we draw to a close, we need to remember that for all that the Lord is doing through Samson, the true Saviour is still to come.

The true Saviour is still to come. I think that's pretty obvious, really, as you read through Judges 15. Samson's fighting against the Lord's enemies, but we just can't ignore his failures, can we? There's his personal anger which just kind of comes through this chapter.

The Lord, yes, is provoking the Philistines and showing he's victorious over them and their gods, that again, it's noticeable how little Samson himself cares for the honour of the Lord's name.

[26 : 08] Why does he destroy those crops at the start of the chapter? Well, actually, it's not because of a passion for the glory of the Lord, it's simply because he can't sleep with someone he wants to sleep with.

Why does he strike down the Philistines in verse 7? Well, it's because he simply wants personal revenge. That's really his sole motivation throughout this chapter. It's very personal, isn't it?

Pride, short fuse comes together in Samson. Let me also see how he views what's going on in this chapter. We have the benefit of what the narrator tells us about the work of the Spirit in Samson's life, but I think it's clear that Samson doesn't really recognise that.

So look at verse 16. Perhaps he's overcome by his riddle in verse 14 being able to make that up and in chapter 14 being able to make that up on our spot.

So this time of great victory he becomes a poet again, doesn't he? What does he say? Verse 16. With the jawbone of a donkey heaps upon heaps with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men.

[27 : 15] Notice what he says. I have struck down the Philistines just with this donkey's jawbone. Look at how great I am. Perhaps verse 17 is pointed to the fact he does even more than that.

Perhaps he deliberately sets up this great memorial throwing away the jawbone. Running through this chapter just like in chapter 14 he sets us disregard for his own calling and his own holiness and his vows as the Nazarites.

We find him at the start of the chapter back with the Philistines wanting to have sex with one of them. We find him touching dead animals we find him enjoying and feeding violence.

For all that the Lord is doing through Samson the Lord is also saying loud and clear he is not your ultimate saviour. Now actually I think as you look at Samson don't you think Samson is the kind of saviour as human beings we would have if it was up to us to produce one?

Yet a saviour who is an impressive kind of Superman figure a saviour who does some rescuing but actually a saviour who also simply adds to evil does violence which begets more violence which never actually can ever put an end to it.

[28 : 36] Just look at the world we're in today isn't that the kind of world situation we're in today as politicians and as we all try and solve situations by having wars or actions that are going to end problems and struggles what's that do when it just produces more violence and produces more difficulty if it was left to us what kind of saviour would we have but we'd have a saviour who lifted us up and gloried in ourselves as human beings rather than having a saviour who rejoices in God we perhaps produce a saviour who didn't actually care about God's rules but did life our own way ultimately what do we see in Samson well actually I think Samson makes us more grateful for the saviour we do have there is a massive contrast between Samson and the Lord Jesus Christ yes he rescues us when we didn't want him to he is the scraped saviour who stands as one against the many but he is the one who does it who promises an end to all evil when he returns again there will be that stop as he says be still and know that I am God and the whole earth will tremble before him our saviour who glorifies his father's name and obeys him perfectly as we think about this chapter let's thank God we have a saviour we didn't create but actually we have a great saviour who we really need let's pray thank you

Thank you.