

SWEET REVENGE? JUDGES 15:1-20

STUDIES IN THE JUDGES #12 (SAMSON #2)

Ted DeGrazia was a successful painter. While many artists historically have not been recognized until after their deaths, Ted's abilities were recognized while he was still living. So he not only enjoyed the fame of being a gifted painter, but he had also amassed quite a fortune as well from the sale of his paintings. Ted's specialties were Indian children and chubby-faced angels - perhaps you can remember seeing some of DeGrazia's works. But there came a serious turning point in Ted's personal and professional life when he was 68. At a time when he should have been icing the cake of a wonderful career, Ted learned something that completely changed his thinking. Someone told Ted of a new I.R.S. ruling. Because of the value of his estate, half of the value of all the paintings left after his decease would go to the government rather than going to his heirs. Ted couldn't believe it was true. But when he checked it out, he found that indeed it was true.

The first thing that Ted did was stop painting. He was not going to paint any canvases for the I.R.S. But then he had all of these wonderful works of art that he had accumulated throughout his lifetime. How could he stand it knowing that the I.R.S. was going to get half of them? So Ted loaded up about 100 of his paintings on a cart and took them up into the Superstition Mountains in California where he piled them up and set them aflame into a huge bonfire. Now the government wouldn't get any of them.

But as time went along, Ted found that there was a great void in his life.

Painting had brought great satisfaction to him. He felt at home standing before a canvas with some oils and a brush in his hand. But whenever he tried to paint, all he could see was some Internal Revenue Agent coming and taking the painting away. Finally, Ted devised a plan. He would paint several pictures. Then he would take them up high into the Superstition Mountains by his home and hide them in a cave. When he got enough paintings in a cave, he would dynamite the mouth of the cave shut. Then no I.R.S. official would ever be able to get his paintings.

Ted DeGrazia died on September 17, 1982. And the I.R.S. didn't get much from his inheritance. But the strange thing is that the heirs that he was trying to protect didn't get much either. And because of Ted's obsession with revenge against that I.R.S. ruling that he felt was so unfair, the time of his life that should have been filled with the joy of achievement and the comforts of investments earned ended up being filled with anger and hatred and bitterness.

The spirit of revenge is one of the most powerful motivators known to man. But vengefulness is a double edged sword. While it is capable of driving a person to dedicated action, it also always hurts the individual that is seeking revenge. The Japanese have a proverb which states this truth very succinctly - If you would revenge yourself, dig 2 graves.

We have a clear illustration of this principle in the life of Samson. For Samson's life seems to have been characterized by vengeful actions. And while Samson consistently seemed to get the better of these vengeful situations, he suffered greatly in the process.

Last week, we began to look at this 6th major judge of Israel. We saw Samson's uniqueness as a judge. While the other judges all were blessed with charismatic leadership abilities so that they could muster armies to deliver the Israelites from the oppression of their enemies, Samson was given such unique strength that he could defeat the Philistines single-handedly. He didn't need an army, he didn't need weapons, he didn't need anything but his God-given strength. Last week, we observed him tearing a lion apart with his bare hands.

But what Samson gained in strength he lacked in personal discipline. So he failed to be able to focus his God-given abilities in the systematic task of delivering the Israelites from the Philistine oppression. Samson has the distinction of being the only judge who ultimately failed in his mission. For while he killed many Philistines, after he died, King Saul inherited the throne under Philistine domination.

This evening, we want to continue the story of his first attempt of deliverance against the Philistines where we left off last week. You will recall that Samson left his home in Zorah to journey the 4 miles to the Philistine outpost of Timnah to begin his deliverance. But his mission became diverted as he saw a beautiful Philistine woman. In his infatuation with her, Samson decided that he wanted to marry her against the wishes of his parents, the authority structure that God had placed over him. Samson allowed his fleshly desires to direct his decision-making process instead of committing himself to do what he knew was right. And the result was disastrous. The wedding had to be called off as Samson stormed away in anger, 30 Philistines were killed for

no reason other than to take the clothing off their backs to pay off Samson's bet, and the woman Samson was to marry was given to one of the friends of the bride to be his wife. Now we pick up the conclusion of this story found in Judges 15 - and you will see that the theme immediately centers around revenge.

READ JUDGES 15:1-20

JDG 15:1 Later on, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson took a young goat and went to visit his wife. He said, "I'm going to my wife's room." But her father would not let him go in.

JDG 15:2 "I was so sure you thoroughly hated her," he said, "that I gave her to your friend. Isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead."

JDG 15:3 Samson said to them, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." ⁴ So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, ⁵ lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves.

JDG 15:6 When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his friend."

So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. ⁷ Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." ⁸ He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam.

JDG 15:9 The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. ¹⁰ The men of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?"

"We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us."

JDG 15:11 Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?"

He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me."

JDG 15:12 They said to him, "We've come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines."

Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves."

JDG 15:13 "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. ¹⁴ As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. ¹⁵ Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men.

JDG 15:16 Then Samson said,

"With a donkey's jawbone

I have made donkeys of them.

With a donkey's jawbone

I have killed a thousand men."

JDG 15:17 When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi.

JDG 15:18 Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the LORD, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" ¹⁹ Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi.

JDG 15:20 Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines.

I would ask 3 questions as we see Samson's example in this matter of taking and receiving revenge. First, How did this vengeful situation between Samson

and the Philistines begin? Second, How did this vengeful situation between Samson and the Philistines escalate? And Third, How did this vengeful situation between Samson and the Philistines end? I think we will find the answers to these questions to be very interesting as we study God's word this evening. For in many ways, Samson's situation here is representative of many, if not most, revengeful situations in life.

1. First, how did this vengeful situation between Samson and the Philistines begin? It all began with a simple misunderstanding, didn't it?

*Samson was upset because his betrothed wife-to-be told the answer to his riddle to the 30 Philistine friends of the bride. So he stormed home in anger to Zorah. He really did want to marry this woman. But he evidently did not communicate his feelings to her or her father personally. His actions lead the family to believe that he was no longer interested in her.

*So her father gave her hand in marriage to one of the 30 Philistine friends who were attending the wedding.

*Finally - it must have been quite a long while for Samson's betrothed was married to another in the interim and the Bible indicates that a planting season had passed for it was the time of the wheat harvest - Samson's anger cooled down. So Samson comes back with a young goat as a peace offering to rekindle the relationship with his betrothed. But he finds that his betrothed had been given to another in marriage. It had been an obvious misunderstanding, a lack of communication - but what a series of catastrophic events this set off.

There are times when revenge is set off by a major injustice. But how

often in our lives are feuds set off by simple misunderstandings, a lack of clear communication. And these often seem to be the most difficult situations to rectify.

History is filled with examples of devastating consequences which were set off by seemingly small, insignificant irritations. And such situations are not limited to any single national location showing this human temptation to revenge to be a universal problem:

- *900 years ago a dispute began between Modena and Bologna over a well bucket, and a war was started that spread destruction all over Europe.

- *A Chinese emperor once went to war over the breaking of a teapot.

- *Sweden and Poland declared war on one another in 1654 and fought bitterly for years because the King of Sweden discovered that in an official dispatch his name was followed by only two etc's. while the king of Poland's name was followed by three etc's.

- *The spilling of a glass of water on the Marguis de Torey led to a war between France and England.

- *A small boy throwing a pebble at the duke of Guise led to the massacre of Vassy and the 30 year war.

- *A major war was waged between South American countries over the outcome of a soccer game.

Yes, very often small, seeming insignificant events can initiate a major series of revengeful consequences. Often a simple lack of clear communication kicks off a feud. And great devastation and heartache occurs with everyone

getting hurt in some way or another.

2. But now let's move on to answer our second question - How did this vengeful situation between Samson and the Philistines escalate?

The answer to this question is quite obvious from the story, isn't it? Each side, in turn, feels wronged. And each side refuses to accept any responsibility for the wrongful situation. So each side in turn retaliates to hurt the other.

*Samson comes to the house of his betrothed and finds that she is married to another. He feels wronged. She was his betrothed, and now she is married to another. He does not accept any responsibility for the misunderstanding. He had started the whole conflict by introducing the riddle. He had stormed off in anger without communicating his intentions to the family. But Samson assumes that they should have read his mind and known what his intentions were. So, since his fiancé had been given to one of the 30 friends of the bride, and since Samson blames them for starting this whole situation by driving a wedge between him and his betrothed by threatening her to find out the answer to the riddle, Samson lashes out against them and their families by destroying their crops at harvest time. Now this is their livelihood. They worked all season for this harvest. And in one rash moment, Samson burns up all their profits.

*We can see how the Philistines would feel wronged. But they exhibit no sympathy for Samson's grief at losing his betrothed. And they accept no responsibility for the misunderstandings of the situation. We must remember that the friends of the bride were invited to the wedding to share in the joy of

the wedding and to help insure that all of the festivities went smoothly. In case of a problem, it was their responsibility in this culture to mediate between the bride's family and the groom's family. These friends of the bride were instrumental in breaking the couple up and one of them ended up marrying the bride. But they feel no sense of responsibility for this. They only see this out-of-control Israelite who is destroying their property. So they retaliate in hurting Samson by killing the ones that they felt were most dear to his heart. They burn up the bride's family's house, killing both her and her father. It is interesting that this is what they had threatened to do if the bride had not revealed Samson's riddle to them. At this time, Samson's betrothed had caved in to the pressure and shown loyalty to her Philistine friends rather than to Samson. In the end, she suffered the same fate that they had originally threatened, and she didn't have Samson as a husband to protect her.

*But now it is Samson's turn again, isn't it? So Samson just goes on a rampage and kills Philistines at random. Verses 7,8a read, "Samson said to them, Since you've acted like this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you. He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them."

*So, the Philistines retaliate back again. They now come up against the Judeans to destroy them. And the whole tribe of Judah is in an uproar and terrorized by the prospect that their families are going to be harmed.

*Finally, Samson ends up killing 1,000 more Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

*So we see each side, in turn, not accepting any responsibility for the

situation, lashing out in revenge against the other, feeling that their response will finally settle the issue, but just adding fuel to the fire of the feud. And what is amazing is the fact that in the heat of their vengefulness, neither side realizes the damage and hurt that they personally are suffering as they are inflicting their wrath on the other side.

I am reminded of a scene from that old skit featuring the feuding Moriarty and Pat. Pat says to his friend, "Do you know that fellow Moriarty whose always coming up and thumping me on the chest and shouting, How are you? in my ear?

"Yes, I know him Pat?" answered the friend.

"Well, he's made me ache more than once - but I finally figured out a way to get even with him. He always hits me right here over this pocket. I'm going to put a stick of dynamite in there so the next time he pokes me, He'll blow off his finger."

We have a saying, "Revenge is Sweet" - but that saying is really deceptive. Oh yes, revenge seems to feel sweet at first. But almost always there is bitterness in the end. Hurt and destruction are escalated. And most often, the one executing revenge ends up as hurt as the one who is on the receiving end. Paul, a man who suffered much injustice at the hands of the cruel Roman soldiers, wrote from prison, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord." Rom. 12:19

3. Finally, How did this vengeful situation between Samson and the

Philistines end?

This feud between Samson and the Philistines ended the way most feuds end - with both sides bitter and hurt, but with the strongest one eventually winning out. Thousands of Philistines lying dead in the fields. Samson living the rest of his life with the guilt of losing his love and causing her death.

*Now I know what some of you are thinking. Wait a minute here. Aren't we forgetting a major consideration? Wasn't it Samson's job to be a judge, to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines? Wasn't it part of his job to confront the Philistines in conflict? Yes, it is true that God called Samson to be a judge, a deliverer. And God blessed Samson with great strength to accomplish this task.

But Samson was never given his supernatural strength to be used for personal vendettas. And that is what happened here in this story. You see, the Philistines never saw themselves as being confronted by the word and power of God himself here - there is no indication of this at all from the story. Rather, the Philistines see themselves in a position of personal animosity against Samson. Samson's motives and methodology were selfish and wrong.

We cannot help but contrast Samson and his deliverance with Moses standing before Pharaoh in the deliverance that brought the Israelites to the promised land in the first place.

*As Moses stood before Pharaoh, his message was "God says, Let my people go." There was no question that the Egyptians were not in a struggle just with Moses, but with the God of Moses. Even the Egyptian wise men

admitted that the final plagues were the "finger of God" and they begged the Pharaoh in fear to let the Israelites go. In the end, the Bible says that Jehovah God humiliated and showed his superiority over the gods of Egypt - and Jehovah God was glorified and shown to be the all-powerful one.

*Here in this case, the Philistines have no idea that they are battling God. There is no indication of this from the text at all. They just want to get this man Samson who has become an irritation to them, a burr under their saddle. And even though this scene ends with a victory for Samson, the Philistines are not going to forget. They are going to continue to plot their revenge until they finally get him, subdue his strength, and humble him to the point of even blinding him.

This story is important for us to study for it characterizes so many vengeful situations. So often, the simple misunderstanding that starts a feud is lost in the heat of revenge. The hurt escalates as each side does its best to damage the other. And no one really wins.

Perhaps you are here this evening and you are involved in a vengeful situation. Perhaps you have been in this situation for years. You know the hurt and the inner bitterness that it has caused. Let me conclude this evening by saying that there is a better way - a way that has been demonstrated by God himself.

After God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the beautiful garden of Eden, the first human beings raised their puny fists in rebellion against God. "We will not obey you as our creator", they said. "We will make our own

decisions and be our own god". There was no question about who was right and wrong in this situation. And God could have retaliated in revenge swiftly and decisively. He was infinitely more powerful. Adam and Eve didn't stand a chance in this feud.

But God chose a different way. Instead of avenging the wrong against him, God chose to forgive. God sent his one and only Son to this earth to die upon the cross for the sins of man. God chose to pay for those sins himself, so that we could be forgiven. Now there will be a time and a place for God's righteous judgment. For those who refuse his gift of forgiveness, God will one day display his holy wrath. But that was not God's first response. God sent his son for our good. He also responded in this way as an example of how we should respond when confronted with situations which could become vengeful feuds.

Let me conclude by reading the Apostle Paul's exhortation to us found in Ephesians 4:30-32.

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. And Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."

There are 2 ways to end a vengeful situation:

1. One is with each side taking its turn at revenge until finally battered and broken, the strongest side wins, with all parties ending up hurt and bitter.
2. The other is by one side, either one, forgiving as God in Christ has

forgiven us. This simply ends the feud. This is the best way. This is God's way.