



THE POWER OF FLESH AND SPIRIT

Catalog No. 922
Judges 15:1-20
Fourteenth Message
John Hanneman
January 24, 1993

I once read a newspaper story about a man in Enumclaw, Washington, who became so enraged over his wife's filing for divorce that he bulldozed his three-bedroom, \$85,000 home. What he did was perfectly legal because he had taken the time to pick up a demolition permit! The neighbors called the police and their arrival halted the debacle momentarily, but then the man produced his demolition permit which he had obtained for \$11.50. He was within his rights, so he leveled the place.

Our hero, Samson, whose life and exploits we are studying in this current series from the book of Judges, had a couple of things in common with this demolisher of his dwelling house — unrequited love and uncontrollable rage. Samson, however, would not have needed a bulldozer to destroy his home.

Jealousy, greed and anger are powerful, destructive forces. How can we get control over them and render them powerless so that we can enjoy peace within and healthy relationships without? Our text today from Judges will help us greatly.

Samson was born to Manoah and his wife to accomplish the task of delivering Israel from the Philistines. He was to be a Nazirite from the womb, and his ministry would be to save Israel from an enemy who had ruled over them for forty years. But Samson did not get off to an auspicious beginning. To begin with, he fell in love with a Philistine woman, a no-no for an Israelite. Then, as he described it, utilizing an agricultural metaphor, his companions "plowed with his heifer," with the result that he lost a bet he had made with them. He returned home in a rage, and his wife was given to his companion.

In chapter 15, where we pick up the story today, Samson gets his revenge.

I. The Power of the Flesh (15:1-8)

But after a while, in the time of the wheat harvest, it came about that Samson visited his wife with a young goat, and said, "I will go into my wife in her room." But her father did not let him enter. And her father said, "I really thought that you hated her intensely; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please let her be yours instead." Samson then said to them, "This time I shall be blameless in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm." And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned the foxes tail to tail, and put one torch in the middle between two tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he released the foxes into the standing grain of the Philistines, thus burning up both the shocks and the standing grain, along with the vineyards and groves. Then the Philistines said, "Who did this?" And they said, "Samson,

the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he took his wife and gave her to his companion." So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire. And Samson said to them, "Since you act like this, I will surely take revenge on you, but after that I will quit." And he struck them ruthlessly with a great slaughter; and he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock at Etam. (15:1-8, NASB)

After Samson had taken time to cool down, he was ready to forgive and forget. While his anger subsided, it may well be that lust began to control him again. So he went back to Timnah, carrying a young goat as a gift for his wife, just in time to learn that she had been given to another man. Her father offered Samson a younger, more beautiful daughter, but he was not interested. He wanted his own "heifer."

Although Samson maintained that he would be blameless this time, it is obvious that he wanted revenge. Certainly, this was the occasion that the Lord was seeking (14:4). But Samson should never have been in this situation. In reality, it was his own sin that was driving him to seek revenge. Taking matters into his own hands, he captured 300 foxes and sent them into the fields in pairs, with torches attached to their tails. These animals might well have been jackals, since jackals run in packs and thus would be easier to capture. Samson's unique plan resulted in the destruction of the wheat, the vineyards and the groves. The Philistines did not have to guess at who was responsible. Samson's reputation had gone before him.

The consequences were tragic. Human life, not wheat and grape vines, became the prey as the Philistines raised the ante. They now carried out what they had threatened to do earlier if Samson's wife would not tell them the answer to his riddle: "they burned her and her father with fire." She had caved in under the earlier threat, yet this was exactly the fate that befell her and her father. Satan is a hard taskmaster.

Samson retaliated once more, "striking them ruthlessly with a great slaughter." The consequences of his sin continued. Following his revenge he promised to quit but, as we will see, this was not the end of matters. The text then says that "he went down and lived in the cleft of the rock." He was now alone, out of touch with God and out of touch with his people.

Samson was a man who was ruled by his passions. In our last study we saw that lust was his master; today we see that he was ruled by anger and revenge. Although we know that God was using all of these circumstances to accomplish his plan, Samson in his early years walked in the flesh, sowed to the flesh, and reaped from the flesh.

Revenge, anger, jealousy and greed are powerful emotions. They can control us and consume us, leaving in their

wake a trail of destruction and severed relationships. When I was about 11 or 12 years old, a boy I knew wanted to fight me. I had no idea why, and even as we “put up our dukes” I wasn’t taking him seriously. Then he suddenly hit me in the face and bloodied my nose. I might not have been ready to fight up to this point, but the sight of my own blood enraged me. He saw the fire in my eyes and he took off running. I chased him for three hours, but I never caught him. Revenge was never far from my mind, however. During the winter, I came upon him and I pounded him with snowballs and shoved his face in the freezing snow. The desire for revenge was strong, and I had gained mine. This was what Samson was feeling.

What causes anger? The following verses from the book of James leave no doubt: “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

Anger, according to James, arises as a consequence of our inability to satisfy our selfish desires. We have desires that are God-given, but we are a fallen humanity and the flesh perverts these desires, making them self-centered demands. We think that if we can satisfy our desires that we will be fulfilled, but when we do not get what we want, we respond with anger and hatred. We become even more self-centered because we see something or someone blocking our ability to gain happiness and rest. We are obsessed because we are not satisfied. We are not satisfied because we are self-centered rather than God-centered.

This is what is illustrated in the life of Samson. He saw a woman in Timnah (lust was conceived) and he wanted her. He became enraged when others “plowed with his heifer,” and he lost his bet for 30 changes of clothes. He couldn’t satisfy his desires for lust and companionship, and he couldn’t satisfy his selfish ambition. He wanted and could not have, so anger took over and he threw a temper tantrum.

We become angry and engage in temper tantrums over the silliest things, don’t we? A couple of years ago, the remote control to our television disappeared. We searched the house, but it never turned up. Finally, we bought a replacement, but after a few months that, too, disappeared. We searched the house again, but it was nowhere to be found. In December, a friend gave me another one and I put it in my wife’s stocking for Christmas. Last Saturday night, I couldn’t lay my hands on it. It was gone, just like the others. My wife and I were almost obsessed. How could this be? How could we lose three channel tuners? We turned the house upside down, but we couldn’t find it. I told my wife to get my daughter, who was visiting a friend. Nobody was going anywhere until we found this latest channel tuner, I fumed. (My father-in-law, who was over for dinner, became anxious when he heard this.) We sat around the family room and quizzed the children about who was the last person to use it. Then my wife squeezed her smallish hand way down underneath a couch cushion and found not one or two, but all three channel tuners! The mystery had been solved.

When we want and can’t have, we become angry — an-

gry at our spouse when he or she doesn’t give us what we want; angry at our children when they interrupt us; angry when we lose some silly game. And what will be the result when we walk in the flesh and fall captive to anger? The book of Galatians tells us: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8). If we sow to the flesh, then we will reap the fruit of the flesh, which is immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing. James adds a word of caution here: “Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20).

We become obsessed with what we can’t have, and we employ anger and engage in strife to get it. But, ironically, the very means we employ work against what we are trying to achieve — and the harder we try, the more elusive our goal becomes. Again, this is graphically illustrated by Samson’s behavior. Even though God was using him to deliver Israel, Samson was reaping corruption. He was losing the very things he wanted most — his wife, his community, his purpose — with the result that he ended up in the cleft of a rock, all by himself.

I see this principle at work at times when I attempt projects around the house — especially plumbing. I take out the tools for a 15 minute job, but things don’t work out, so I become angry. Three trips to the hardware store don’t improve matters. Then in my anger I do something that makes matters worse. Now when my children see me reach for the tools, they plead, “Hire a plumber!”

Anger will not help us accomplish anything. If we become angry, we will end up in a worse pickle than when we started.

What, then, can we do about anger, hatred, strife, and jealousy? Is there a solution? Let us see if we can learn from the life of Samson. At this point in the story our hero at last begins to change his behavior. God begins to replace self; faith begins to replace discontent; love begins to replace hate; Spirit begins to replace flesh.

II. The Power of the Spirit (15:9-20)

Then the Philistines went up and camped in Judah, and spread out in Lehi. And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” And they said, “We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us.” 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 I have done to them.” And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you so that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not kill me.” So they said to him, “No, but we will bind you fast and give you into their hands; yet surely we will not kill you.” Then they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines shouted as

they met him. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily so that the ropes that were on his arms were as flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds dropped from his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, so he reached out and took it and killed a thousand men with it. Then Samson said,

**“With the jawbone of a donkey,
Heaps upon heaps,
With the jawbone of a donkey
I have killed a thousand men.”**

And it came about that when he had finished speaking, that he threw the jawbone from his hand; and he named that place Ramath-lehi. Then he became very thirsty, and he called to the LORD and said, “Thou hast given this great deliverance by the hand of Thy servant, and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” But God split the hollow place that is in Lehi so that water came out of it. When he drank, his strength returned and he revived. Therefore, he named it En-hakkore, which is in Lehi to this day. So he judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines. (15:9-20)

Now it's the Philistines turn for revenge. They came up and camped in Judah, but Israel was no threat, so they encountered no resistance. The extent of the nation's compromise was so pronounced that, far from coming to Samson's aid, they sent 3,000 men to deliver him over to the Philistines. They had become thoroughly accommodated to the spiritual status quo. Slavery was more preferable than freedom; compromise was more preferable than commitment.

But Samson began to catch a vision of God and how the Lord wanted to use him. He began to actively participate with God rather than just going along with him. Notice his responses. When the Israelites came to deliver him over, he was gentle with them, a far cry from what they were expecting. “Swear to me that you will not kill me,” was all he asked. Then, when he encountered the Philistines, he remained calm in the face of their shouts, waiting for the Spirit to act. He had learned his lesson from the time the lion had leaped out at him (chapter 14). He grabbed the first thing he could lay hold of — the jawbone of an ass — and with this unlikely weapon killed 1,000 Philistines.

Following his victory, he prayed because he was thirsty and he feared he would die. Not only did he depend on God for victory, he prayed for refreshment and renewal. He asked for water, and God split the hollow place in Lehi so that water came out of it. The result was that Samson “judged Israel twenty years in the days of the Philistines.” He had a renewed sense of purpose and calling.

Samson had been sowing to the flesh and reaping corruption. But now he was sowing to the Spirit and he began to reap eternal life. What caused this change? The key to our text, and to understanding the turnaround, is the Spirit of God. For the third time in the story of Samson the text says that the Spirit “rushed upon Samson.” The first occurrence of this phenomenon was when the lion leaped out at him; the second, when he went down to Ashkelon and killed 30 men for their garments. The third time, however, was the charm. Samson at last was becoming a willing participant in God's program.

The flesh and its manifestations, anger, revenge and

jealousy, are powerful, but the power of God is greater. The Spirit of God is the solution to gaining control over these things of the flesh. As Christians, we are “sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance.” No longer does the Spirit come and go, as in the OT, to accomplish specific tasks. He now permanently resides within us. We are not a flesh, but a Spirit people, and it is through the work of the Spirit that we live redeemed lives.

How does this work? The apostle Paul tells us in these words from Galatians, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please...If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16-17, 25).

Practically speaking, this means that we must give our lives over continually to the control of the Spirit. This is a daily walk. We must acknowledge God and become aware of his provision. We must look “not at what is seen, but at what is unseen.” We must make choices to sow to the Spirit rather than the flesh — and we must make these choices over and over again throughout the day.

Personally speaking, I know that no matter what mood I am in, I can make a choice to walk in the Spirit. I can be angry with my wife or my children, or with circumstances, but I can put off that anger instantly and begin to walk in the Spirit. If I do not do this, I am making a conscious choice to remain in my anger. Our text illustrates that even when we have sown to the flesh, and we are in the midst of sin, we can choose to stop walking according to the flesh and begin to walk in the Spirit.

Samson's revenge had led him down an ugly trail, but at last he began to walk with God.

And what is the result of walking in the Spirit? It is that we will experience the fruit of the Spirit. When we sow to the flesh we reap corruption, but when we sow to the Spirit we reap eternal life — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We experience a transcendent, an eternal life. When Samson sowed to the flesh he experienced strife, anger, hatred, and revenge, but when he sowed to the Spirit he reaped a relationship with God, a renewed spirit, a place in the community, a purpose in life.

Several years ago, my favorite football team lost a game one Saturday, and that put me in a bad mood. We had plans to spend the evening with my wife's family, and as we drove to their house I began to sow to the Spirit rather than the flesh; I let go of my bad mood. That evening, someone asked what was going on in church next day, and I said I was teaching a Bible study in the book of James. They asked me if I would teach them what I would be sharing in the morning, and I had an opportunity to open up the Scriptures and teach people who did not know God. As a result of sowing to the Spirit I began to reap eternal life.

All this is well and good, you say, but isn't there something more? I agree. When I reached this point in my study, I, too, felt there had to be something more in the text. I needed further motivation to act righteously. It occurred to me that there is a deeper issue here. Samson became angry because he wanted that which he could not

have. The more elusive his goal became, the harder he tried, and the greater the resultant corruption. But something significant occurred at the end of chapter 15. After the victory, Samson was thirsty, and he told God that unless he provided for him, he would die. (I am not sure he understood the full significance of his statement at this point in his life, but he certainly did by the end of it.) The point is this: Samson could not fulfill his own thirst — for lust, for greed, or for water. Despite his best efforts he could not satisfy his appetites. This was why he told God that unless he satisfied his thirst, he would die. At this point he looked to God to fill him rather than trying to satisfy himself. He had learned that God was the only one who could satisfy his inner thirst.

We become angry because we want and we want because we are thirsty. We try to satisfy our thirst, but when we fail we become obsessed and angry. We want and we cannot have. The choice we face is giving up trying to get what we want, giving up that which cannot quench our thirst, to gain that which can. Unless God can quench our thirst and satisfy our need at a deep level, then we are in trouble. Certainly, the water that Samson desired is a reminder that the Spirit of God that can flow through our life, quenching our thirst and making us full. Jesus claimed that he could give living water. He said to the woman at the well: “Everyone who drinks of this water [the water at the well] shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). The Spirit of God not only gives us victory over the power of sin and the power of the flesh, he also quenches our deep thirst. And if our thirst is quenched, we will not want so desperately. And if we do not want, we won’t resort to anger to obtain. The antidote to anger at this deep level is a quenched thirst.

This truth motivates us to walk by the Spirit because the Spirit quenches our thirst. But it also confronts us with a difficult choice when we decide to do so. The deep choice

we must make is to stop trying to quench our thirst and to look instead to God, to drink of his Spirit, a “well of water springing up to eternal life.” The result is that we will be full, we will be satisfied. We may not get what we think we want, but we will have everything we desire.

Are you ready to make these choices in your life and start drinking of his Spirit? Are you willing to give up what you want? Are you willing to accept that your spouse will never be what you want him or her to be? Are you willing to give up the endless pursuit of pleasure? Are you willing to stop being a workaholic and cease trying to find fulfillment in your career? Are you willing to give up your dream of owning a big house and a three-car garage? Are you willing to let your children be what they want to be rather than what you would like them to be? Are you willing to lose a game? Are you willing to yield on the freeway? These are not easy choices. But here is our motivation for making these choices and walking in the Spirit: only God can quench our thirst. If he does not provide, we will die.

It feels good to turn 40. In our 20’s, we try to fulfill our dreams. But in our 30’s, we must deal with the disappointment of unfulfilled dreams, so we try to live our dreams through our children. When we turn 40, however, it doesn’t seem to matter anymore. All I want now is to drink of Jesus and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit. Some of the things that I once thought were so important are just not going to turn out, but that does not mean that God will not quench my thirst and make me full. The ultimate form of anger is to never give up on what you cannot have — to grow bitter, to reject God and to remain all by yourself in the cleft of the rock.

The flesh is powerful, but its fruit is death. Choosing to give up what we desire and to walk by the Spirit is a hard process. But the Spirit is powerful also. He leads us in victory and quenches our thirsty souls. May we begin today to look to the One who can grant us what we really desire, rather than using anger to gain that which will not satisfy.

© 1993 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino