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What Would You Do with Power? Judges 15:1-20

Greg Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

All of us want power. It's not that we all want to rule the world, but we could all use more time in the week to do things, more money in our bank account, more influence with those close to us. But why do we want power and what would we do with it?

When I first began teaching, I got a new power, grades, the power to give an A or an F. And a lot of my students were desperate for an A, especially the students who wanted to go to medical school or law school. And I wanted to give them those A's but not because they were great students. I wanted to give A's, because it's easy to give an A. You put a big star on their paper, write "good job!" and you're done. To give a bad grade you actually have to work, finding mistakes, making corrections, writing comments. When I got the power to grade, the first thing I wanted to use it for was myself, to make my job, my life easier.

That's how we often are with power. If we get a raise or find ourselves with an unexpected day off, we use it for ourselves or for our families. We use power and we want power for ourselves, to do what we want to do.

Now Samson, as we heard in the first scripture, was a man with great power. God had chosen him to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, and so long as he fulfilled his vows as a Nazarite, that is as someone specially dedicated to God, Samson had the power to win any fight. In the book of Judges, he's presented like a comic book hero, using his super strength to defeat all of his enemies with ease and with his power dependent on the long hair required by his Nazarite vows. Judges 13 and 14 recount his miraculous origin story and then his decision to marry a Philistine woman against his parents wishes. After an argument at the wedding over a riddle, Samson fights and kills numerous Philistines, which leads to more conflict between him and his Philistine in-laws in the next chapter. Let's listen to Judges chapter 15.

But it came to pass within a while after, in the time of wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said, I will go in to my wife into the chamber. But her father would not suffer him to go in. And her father said, I verily thought that thou hadst

utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion: is not her younger sister fairer than she? take her, I pray thee, instead of her.

And Samson said concerning them, Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure. And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives.

Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire. And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease. And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam.

Then the Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi. And the men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us? And they answered, To bind Samson are we come up, to do to him as he hath done to us. Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us? what is this that thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them.

And they said unto him, We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines. And Samson said unto them, Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon me yourselves. And they spake unto him, saying, No; but we will bind thee fast, and deliver thee into their hand: but surely we will not kill thee. And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock.

And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands. And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith. And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.

And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking, that he cast away the jawbone out of his hand, and called that place Ramathlehi. And he was sore athirst, and called on the Lord, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?

But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof Enhakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day. And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

This scripture is a story of revenge. After having his wife taken away, Samson burns the Philistines' crops in retribution. Then the Philistines want revenge and burn Samson's in-laws to death. Then Samson wants revenge and slaughters the Philistines who killed his family. Then the Philistines want revenge and demand the Israelites hand Samson over to them. But when Samson is delivered to them all tied up, he breaks free from the ropes and grabs a donkey's jawbone and fights them.

This is a dark story. The immediate lesson we learn from it is that there is a vicious cycle caused by revenge. When everyone feels entitled to exact justice from whomever seems to have wronged them and with whatever punishment seems right to them, revenge quickly spirals out of control; violence and suffering multiply with each extra attempt to set things right.

But beyond that, the part of this story that stands out to us as Christians is that God helped Samson get revenge, that the Spirit of the Lord came to Samson to fight and kill the Philistines. In the New Testament we hear Jesus tell us to turn the other cheek when wronged and see Jesus refuse to fight back against those who would put him to death. How can we reconcile these two sides of God?

First we should note that Samson only seeks revenge in proportion to what he has suffered. As Samson explains to the Israelites about his fights with the Philistines, "As they did unto me, so have I done unto them." This is a sort of knock-off version of the golden rule, to treat others the same way they treat you and no worse. This is the principle we see in the Law of Moses, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, that you should get revenge in proportion to what you suffered and no more. Under this rule, revenge won't

spiral out of control and this is the rule Samson follows. The Philistines on the other hand always escalate, always seek nothing less than death as punishment. So Samson deserves some credit here.

Second, when the Holy Spirit helped Samson, God's plan was greater than Samson's. While Samson just wanted revenge against the Philistines and justice for himself, God intended to free Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. The reason God had given Samson his strength in the first place was to deliver Israel from the Philistines and here, God used Samson's own selfish desire for revenge to do that.

The Philistines were violent and evil, as you may have noticed from the scripture when they burned Samson's in-laws. So God needed to protect His people from them, but Israel was flawed too. Since God's chosen people weren't perfect or even totally innocent in their fights with the Philistines, God had to work through the flawed people available to Him. Even though Samson is impulsive, angry, and violent, God works through him. And for all his flaws, Samson has faith. Samson has confidence in the gifts God has given him, so much confidence, that he lets the Israelites deliver him bound to his enemies because Samson knows that with God's strength he has nothing to fear.

In contrast to Samson, when God was here in Jesus, when God had a perfect person to work through, God had no need to take violent, immediate revenge. But when God chooses to work through flawed human beings, the outcome will reflect those flaws.

And this is the lesson of Samson that God helps us and works through us, despite our brokenness and selfishness, so long as we have faith. If we ask God for help, even for selfish reasons, God answers and God uses us to do His will. Samson just wanted revenge, but through him God worked to free the Israelites from the Philistines. If we ask God for a better job, for a better life, God will not simply bless us and help us, but use us in his greater plan to redeem and save the entire world. Though Samson makes mistake after mistake, so long as he is faithful, God strengthens him and works in the world through him.

But later, in Judges, in chapter 16, Samson marries another Philistine, Delilah, and three times she asks him, where his power comes from and how he could be bound, and three times Samson lies. Three times Samson refuses to acknowledge that his power comes from God and his vows to God. And when he does admit his power comes from

the vow to God marked by his long, uncut hair, Delilah betrays him; she shaves his head in his sleep leaving Samson powerless.

Then the Philistines seize Samson, tie him up, put out his eyes and blind him. They tie him to the pillars of their temple and mock him. But Samson does not give up on God; he is not afraid to come back to God. Though Samson refused to acknowledge God earlier, he repents and prays one last time. And he is still the same violent, impulsive, but faithful person, he prays “O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.”

And God hears him and strengthens him, not because Samson was a good person or because God loves human revenge, but because Samson had faith and God had a plan. As his strength returns, Samson pulls down the pillars of the temple so that the entire building collapses, killing both Samson and the Philistines. Once again God was fulfilling his plan to free Israelites from the oppression of the Philistines through Samson despite his flaws.

Wherever we are in life, whatever flaws we have, however many times we have turned away from God, God still wants to help us, and if we reach out in faith, God will help us, not just for our sake or to make our lives better, but to make the world better. In the Bible we see that God’s plan does not depend on perfect people; God works through whoever has faith in Him. In the stories of Rahab, David, Matthew, and Paul, we see this same thing.

But more than the lives of these other broken followers of God, Samson’s life should remind us of the life of Jesus.

Samson’s life foreshadows the life of Jesus. The births of both Samson and Jesus were foretold by angels to unsuspecting mothers. Both were born to free God’s people. The Holy Spirit guided both of them. Jesus spoke in parables and Samson in riddles. Both of them were betrayed and handed over to their enemies. Both of them were mocked and beaten. And each of them, at their deaths stretched out their arms and called on God.

Samson asked for strength and revenge. He put his hands out on the pillars of the temple, and pulled them down; he destroyed it and everyone in it. So that the book of

Judges tells us “the dead which [Samson] slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”

And Jesus stretched out his hands on the cross and called on God saying “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” He asked for forgiveness, and the veil of the temple was torn and the wall of partition between us was torn down and Jesus reconciled the nations to each other and each of us who believes was reconciled to Him. And though Jesus saved and healed many people in His life, Jesus saved even more in His death.

Jesus did much more than Samson ever did. Jesus had a different approach than Samson. Jesus didn't just ask God for help getting what He wanted. Instead Jesus offered to help God with whatever God had planned. As Jesus says in John “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” Not His will, but God's will.

As Christians we should strive to do the same. Rather than having God help us, with our small plans and goals, we should help God. While it's good and right to go to God for help with everything like Samson did, it's better to go to God to help Him with His plan. It's better to offer up whatever power we have to Him rather than to ask God for more power.

After all, Samson was given great power by God, but his life was no better for it. His super strength increased his problems, increased the consequences of his anger, increased the scale of the violence around him. Samson was always seeking revenge, seeking what he wanted, and God helped him, but his life turned out brutal and short. When we ask God for help with what we want, we put ourselves in a similar danger, that as we are blessed with more money, more time, more influence we would only use it in the same flawed way we use our power now.

Don't just ask God for help; offer to help God. Offer up whatever you have in your power to God's plan. Offer it and God will gladly accept it like He did the widow's mite in Luke. You'll do much more that way. We learn this when we're kids. If you ask your parents to grab a snack off a high shelf or to open a container of juice. They'll help you. You'll get the little help you want. But if you offer to help your parents you can be a part of something much greater, you can make a whole meal. From a young age I loved the

pillsbury biscuits that come in a tube, and so every year at my grandparent's for Thanksgiving, I would be responsible for them. I would pop the tube and place the premade biscuits on the tray. And by helping, I was a part of doing something greater than I could ever do on my own.

Most of us, perhaps all of us, will never be blessed with power like Samson. There are almost 8 billion people in the world and each of us is just one, small, broken piece of that. What we do, the money and the time that we have or even wish to have, will probably not amount to much in the end. But God's power and God's plan will amount to everything. So while we should ask God for help, while we should call out in faith like Samson, more than that we should pray like Jesus not my will, but God's will. Don't just ask for help; offer to help. Don't just ask; offer.

Let's pray.

Discussion Questions:

1. What have you done with power? What were some times in your life when you have been in a position of authority, what did you do with it?
2. How do you respond to the violent stories of the Old Testament? The story of Samson is grisly and off putting; how do you approach parts of the Bible like this?
3. Looking back on your life and what God has done in it. Can you think of any times when God answered your prayer not just to help you, but to fulfill some larger plan?
4. What are some things you find yourself asking God for these days? Why do you want those things?
5. If you were to get those things, how might God use them for His kingdom? What larger plan might your prayers be a part of?
6. What are some things you can offer up to God already? What gifts has God given you to use for His Kingdom?