

Introduction

You’ve heard the expression, “That’s a big if!”. If is such a tiny word—just two letters—yet so much hangs on it. It’s a logical term often used in conditional statements. “If it rains, then the ground will be wet.” The outcome—a wet ground—is dependent on whether the condition is met—it rains.

Think of all the possibilities and consequences connoted by the word if. Let your imagination go with the following “if” scenarios: if I had not taken that job; if she had left just ten minutes earlier; if that person had never hurt me; if I had said “no”; if I had said “yes”; if we had never met; if I had *fill-in-the-blank*.

Think of how easily two simple letters can completely change a person’s entire life. We frequently think we are the victims of bad luck or chance or the decisions of other peoples’ choices and actions. Think of how many “thens” there are in your life because of someone else’s ifs. Maybe you feel like you’re a pawn in all this, in all the if-thens of life, just a chess piece being moved around according to other people’s will—or even according to God’s will. We can get stuck on a whole host of “if I hadn’t done that then” and “if she would have done this then” and “if they were to...then”. My prayer this morning is that you will see the beauty and glory of God’s sovereign rule in our lives today—even when the “if” is our choice to disobey. We’re in Judges 15.

Jdgs 15:9 Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah and made a raid on Lehi. ¹⁰ And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” They said, “We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he did to us.” ¹¹ 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 have I done to them.” ¹² And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hands of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves.” ¹³ They said to him, “No; we will only bind you and give you into their hands. We will surely not kill you.” So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock.

¹⁴ When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. ¹⁵ And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men. ¹⁶ And Samson said, “With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men.”

¹⁷ As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand. And that place was called Ramath-lehi.

¹⁸ And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the LORD and said, “You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” ¹⁹ And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day. ²⁰ And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Judges 15:9–20

Recap

Last week we saw Samson’s act of vengeance against the Philistines for murdering his wife and father-in-law. He had returned to Timnah to claim her after storming off in anger from the wedding reception. He returned to consummate his marriage but discovered his father-in-law had already married her off to his best man. In response to this offense Samson burned the Philistines’ grain crops and several of their olive orchards. This was an act of cruelty for it affected many people who had nothing to do with his father-in-law’s behavior.

The economic fallout of this would have lasted years as the grain was in the process of being harvested for the coming year. Now it’s simply gone. They would have little for the planting the following season and little to eat *this season* and since they were largely an agrarian society, their food supplies and their economy would have dwindled greatly. Samson was right in being angry, but he showed zero restraint in his response, preferring personal vengeance over justice.

The Philistines were angry at this outrage and, like Samson, rather than confront the one directly responsible, they murdered the woman and her father just as they had threatened to do at the wedding feast. In hot anger Samson used his supernatural strength and divine empowerment to attack them with violence and ferocity. When his bloodlust was temporarily satisfied he went and hid in Etam in Judah.

In all this we must remember God is at work. God appeared to Samson’s mother who had been barren and promised her a son who would be consecrated to the Lord his entire life. While she was pregnant and while she was nursing Samson she would be under a Nazirite vow, forbidden to cut her hair, forbidden to consume any alcohol, and forbidden to touch a dead body. This is because Samson would be under a Nazirite vow his entire life. He was to be completely and thoroughly consecrated to the Lord, set apart for the Lord’s service. God directly chose Samson to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

As he grew we see the Lord was with him, stirring him to act. He saw the idolatry of his own people that led to their oppression at the hands of the Philistines. He saw the suffering of being under the thumb of pagans who worshiped false gods. He was blessed by the Lord and stirred up to do something. Then we saw that his first real act as Israel’s deliverer was to lust after a Philistine woman and demand his parents get her for him to be his wife. Then we read this:

Jdgs 14:4 His father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, for he

was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.

Judges 14:4

What we're seeing here is that God is pursuing his purposes whether or not his chosen and consecrated servant is willing to participate. God is seeking an opportunity to throw off the yoke of the Philistines. Samson's miraculous birth was God's action toward deliverance. God could do it all by himself but in his wisdom God chooses to use means. He gave Samson to Israel and consecrated Samson from birth and supernaturally strengthened Samson and gave Samson physical gifts that were simply unparalleled in human history and divinely empowered Samson with his Holy Spirit, all so that Samson would bring about the deliverance God desired.

Instead of being the deliverer of Israel, Samson hid himself. He was petulant and angry and utterly unwilling to truly fight against the Philistines in order to deliver Israel. He was willing to fight for petty revenge, but fight to rescue Israel from its oppression? Nah. Our story picks up some time after Samson's revenge.

An Opportunity

In verse 9 the Philistines invade Judah. Judah borders the tribal territory of Dan. We know the story of Samson takes place very early in Israel's history in the land. Within a generation or two the tribe of Dan will move to the northern end of the land of Israel, north of Naphtali and East Manasseh. Rather than pursue Samson directly, the Philistines invade Judah and make a raid on Lehi.

The raid would no doubt be to steal grain. They were taking from Judah what Samson took from them. Tit for tat. An eye for an eye. Surely they took other things to which they were not entitled. They were Israel's oppressors, after all. There's a reason God is seeking to bring about a conflict between Israel and the Philistines. God is seeking to deliver them.

The men of Judah approach the Philistine army and ask them, essentially, what's up? Why are you attacking us? Notice what they say in verse 9: we have come to tie up Samson so we can do to him what he did to us. Violent retribution. That's what they're after. We're going to do unto others as they have done unto us. We're going to love our neighbors as they love us. Hurt us? We're gonna hurt you. Break our stuff? We're gonna break yours. Mess with us? Oh, *we're gonna mess with you.*

It's interesting they do not go to Samson directly. It's likely they're afraid to. After the beatdown he gave them—single-handedly, I might add—in verse 8, they don't want a direct confrontation with Samson. They attack Judah hoping Samson's own people would subdue him in order to avoid further trouble with the Philistines. They got what they were hoping for.

Three-thousand men from Judah go to Samson at Etam. The first thing they say to him is, "Don't you know the Philistines rule over us?" They don't say, "Man, I hate those Philistines. Let's go get 'em, Samson! With you as our leader we can defeat them!" They don't cry out to the Lord for deliverance. They don't demonstrate anything that looks like faith. With 3,000 men, they're an army! Remember what Gideon did with just 300. They

have ten times as many, and Gideon’s “army” just played some trumpets. God can use these men with Samson’s leadership and eliminate the Philistine threat once and for all.

Remember that all Israel ever had to do was engage in the battle. That’s it. We saw back in chapter 1 when the author lists all the nations Israel did not conquer that if they would just engage in the battle in faith, God would give them victory. When Israel engaged in battle in faith, Israel was victorious. When Israel refused to engage in battle, Israel was not victorious. Remember that Samson is early in Israel’s history in the land. Here we have Judah once again at the forefront. Remember how the book began:

Jdgs 1:1 After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD,
“Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

² The LORD said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.”

Judges 1:1–2

God has been seeking an opportunity to engage the Philistines in battle, that he might give the victory to Israel so that Israel would continue to cleanse the land of its idolatry. The Philistines’ religious furniture—their idols and carved images and altars and temples and such—would be destroyed. The people wouldn’t be slaughtered; that was never the purpose of the conquest. False worship in the land God gave Israel would be destroyed. Now God has a small army, and he loves small armies! He has an incredibly gifted and capable deliverer in Samson. God has brought about the opportunity to deliver Israel. All that’s needed is faith to engage in the battle.

The Philistine

After being confronted about stirring up trouble, Samson responded: “As they did to me, so have I done to them”. What does Samson want? Violent retribution. That’s what he’s after. He’s going to do unto others as they have done unto him. He’s going to love his neighbors as they love him. Hurt me? I’m gonna hurt you. Break my stuff? I’m gonna break yours. Mess with me? Oh, *I’m gonna mess with you.*

You see, Samson is a Philistine. He’s ethnically an Israelite, from the tribe of Dan but he thinks like a Philistine. He conducts himself like a Philistine. He pursues vengeance like a Philistine. He pursues his desires like a Philistine. He dishonors God like a Philistine. This is contrary to the purpose God put Israel in that land and it’s contrary to Samson’s entire purpose in this world—a purpose given by God.

Israel was placed in the land to show the nations what YHWH God of Israel is like. This is why they were given the law of Moses. The law of Moses was not a mere list of rules, but a description of what YHWH God of Israel is like. If they would live in a manner that was like YHWH God of Israel, Israel would fulfill its purpose in the land. Their purpose in the world was a missionary purpose. By living according to God’s character as revealed in the law of Moses they would show the world what God is like. Even the conquest was to show the nations the glory of the God of Israel.

If the people occupying the land insisted on armed resistance, Israel would show them the futility of trusting in carved images, for God would give Israel overwhelming victory.

If the nations would not give up their idolatry, Israel would take it from them and show them, over and over again, that Baal and Ashtoreth and Dagon and Asherah and Molech and Anath and Mot are not gods at all. How would the nations know? When Israel would trust in the Lord and would face the hostile nations in armed combat, YHWH, the God of Israel, would be victorious every single time.

It didn't have to come to this, of course. Anyone could freely turn from idolatry to worship the one, true God. All were free to worship YHWH God of Israel. None of the nations was forced to resist the Lord. If any insisted on armed resistance, they would be met in battle and the God of Israel would demonstrate his power, just as he did with Egypt. And as with Egypt, the mixed multitude—regardless of ethnic origin—were free to join the people of Israel in worshiping the Lord.

This is how it was supposed to happen. Israel was chosen by God to represent him to the world. They would, by trusting in him, show the world what he is like. This is why the law insisted on justice for the poor and the sojourner. This is why the law insisted on ritual purity. This is why the law insisted that Israel live differently from the nations. By being transformed people, they would proclaim the good news of who God is to others who would be compelled to join them in worship.

This is not what happened. Remember that the book of Judges is not in strict chronological order. Samson is one of the earliest judges raised up by God to deliver his people. Why did they need deliverance so early in their time in the land? Remember what we saw back in chapter 2. As soon as the generation that knew Joshua and had witnessed the miracles entering the land, the next generation did not know the Lord and went after other gods. *The very next generation!*

That's how quickly Israel fell from following the Lord. They are now led by Samson, the Philistine, the one who embodies all that it means to be an Israelite. Rather than showing the nations what they would look like if *they* followed the Lord, he—and all Israel—chose to show the nations what they actually look like. Rather than shining the light of the glory of God on them, they were mirrors to the nations. When the nations looked at Israel, rather than see the glory of the Lord, they saw themselves.

Bound

Three-thousand men of Judah go to Samson and demand his surrender. They should have pleaded with him to lead them in battle. Instead, they plead with him to go quietly. Rather than be delivered *by* Samson, they're going *to deliver* Samson into the hands of the Philistines. Samson, for his part, doesn't bat an eye. He has no fear of the Philistines. He's Samson, after all! He doesn't want his fellow Israelites to harm him so he asks for their assurance. They promise him they won't harm him; they will only deliver him to the enemy.

The author says they bound him. They tied his arms together, like handcuffs. Given the plants that grew in the region, these are certainly made of flax. Flax fibers are among the longest and strongest natural fibers of all. Being long fibers, they make for very strong rope. Wet flax—new flax—is at its strongest. The author says they bound Samson with a new rope. They used the strongest rope available. The author also says they used *two* new ropes. Double the strength!

They led him to Lehi, where the Philistine army had set up camp. When the Philistines saw Samson tied up they shouted in victory and ran to “greet” him. They can’t wait to do to him as he had done to them, for he had done to them as they had done to him, on account of what they had done to him for what he had done to them because of what they had done to him.

Verse 14 tells us the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him again and the new ropes tying his hands simply melted like burning flax. Then Samson noticed a fresh donkey jawbone. This is not a weapon. Well, it could be a weapon one-on-one. It would extend a person’s reach less than a foot. Against an army? Nah. It’s a terrible weapon. We’ve already seen, though, that Samson can tear apart a lion with his bare hands. You know, like how you tear apart a *young goat*. It’s what is available, though, so what choice does Samson have?

For one thing, he could have chosen to honor the Lord and his Nazirite vow. When the author points out it’s a “fresh” donkey jawbone, he means the donkey had recently died. It is, therefore, a dead body. Dried bone was not considered to be a corpse. Bones were often used as knife handles, for example, and there was no issue with ritual purity when using one. Meat, after having been butchered from a dead animal, was not considered unclean. As a Nazirite Samson could eat meat but could not butcher an animal. This jawbone is *fresh*. Not only is Samson breaking his Nazirite vow in using it as a weapon, he is doing so even as he is empowered by the Spirit of God.

Again, what choice did he have? He could have chosen to trust the Lord. Faith results in obedience. The Spirit of God rushes on him and the strongest ropes available were nothing to him. I imagine the scene like the one in the Superman movie where Superman allows himself to be “captured” and put into handcuffs. Lois Lane asks him why he let them put him in cuffs and he just said it makes them feel safer. Then he just gets up and snaps the cuffs as if they weren’t there in order to talk to the military officers behind the one-way mirror that he can see through.

Samson has no reason to fear the Philistines. He could have chosen faithfulness, though, and even if not picking up the jawbone would have resulted in his death, he would have died faithfully. There were other choices available to him. He could have fought them with his bare hands. He could have simply taken a sword from the nearest Philistine! Instead, he chose to defile himself and once again break his Nazirite vow and thereby dishonor the Lord *even as the Lord is using him to deliver Israel*.

Samson struck down a thousand Philistines. This is the point he could have called to the 3,000 men of Judah to engage in the battle and defeat the Philistines! They were still there! This is the point he could have delivered Israel, which was his calling as a judge. He doesn’t call them to engage. He struck down a thousand Philistines and apparently just called it quits. More likely the Philistines fled the battle field. We’ve seen God put entire armies to flight. In fact, that’s what Hebrews says often happened. Men like Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David “put foreign armies to flight”.

God was fighting for Israel! God had been seeking opportunity to deliver Israel and this is it. The Philistine army is together. All that is needed for victory is faith. If Samson will engage in the battle, if he will rise up in faith, God will defeat the entire Philistine army, delivering his people from their oppression. Samson is not fighting for the Lord, however. We know this because of what happened after the battle.

He defeated 1,000 soldiers and apparently piled up their bodies. In the course of battle

as he's striking down the enemy, he's not defiling himself by touching dead bodies. It is when he goes back to those who died and drags their bodies into piles in order to show off his handiwork that he further defiles himself.

Ritual uncleanness is not the same as being dirty. It's a status. When he struck down someone he was doing what the Lord called him to do. When he killed the lion, for example, he was in the act of killing it. He did not make himself unclean until he scraped honey out of the dead lion's carcass. So here he does not make himself unclean until he piled up the bodies.

Forgetting

In verse 16 Samson, who loves riddles and puns, says, "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men". We miss the pun in English. The word for donkey is the same as the word for heap. D. A. Peters suggests the translation,

With the jawbone of an ass, I made asses out of them. With a jawbone of a donkey, I have slain a thousand men.

D. A. Peters, cited by Mark Boda and Mary Conway, ZECOT

Notice his victory cry had nothing to do with the Lord—the one who performed a miracle that his mother would conceive, the one who called him from the womb to serve him, the one who consecrated him to himself for his entire life. Samson failed utterly to acknowledge the Lord, preferring instead to memorialize himself with a little victory ditty. He even named the place Ramath-lehi: Jawbone Hill. When folk would walk by and see a hill made of human skeletons, they would remember Samson—the *great* Samson.

Consider the song Deborah and Barak sang after God rescued Israel from the king of Hazor.

Jdgs 5:3 "Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.

⁴ "LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. ⁵ The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel.

Judges 5:3–5

In that battle Israel faced 900 chariots made of iron—an overwhelming force—yet these iron chariots were rendered useless when the Lord sent rain and overflowed the Kishon river, causing them to become stuck in mud. God received the glory and the honor for the battle, even as he used people to bring about that rescue. Samson piles up dead bodies as a gruesome monument to his own glory.

He hasn't completely forgotten about the Lord, however. In verse 18 we read Samson was very thirsty. It's hot sweaty work killing a thousand men with a bloody jawbone and then dragging a thousand bodies into a big ol' pile and then writing a witty little song for others to sing. Samson finally calls upon the Lord!

He says YHWH God of Israel has granted salvation! Wow! Well, he did so, of course, by the hand of his servant. What salvation? The Philistines are still around and still oppressing Israel. He means the Lord has granted Samson personal revenge. The Philistines lost a thousand men but they are not defeated. Apparently Samson was too thirsty to pursue them. Even Gideon had the motivation to chase Zebah and Zalmunna over 100 miles, and we saw that he, too, pursued them for personal vengeance.

When we read Samson's words to the Lord it sounds like he's giving God the glory for the victory, but his words are an accusation. The ESV renders it as a question but it's a question that's more of a statement. He says, essentially, "Oh, you've given me the victory but you're also leaving me to die of thirst so that I end up in the unclean hands of the Philistines."

Oh? *Now* he's worried about ritual cleanliness? He wasn't when he tried to marry a Philistine woman? He wasn't when he spent a week at a drinking party? He wasn't when he touched a rotting carcass? He wasn't when he grabbed a fresh donkey jawbone? He wasn't when he piled up *one-thousand dead bodies*? After all that defilement, all those times he spat upon his consecrated life and violated his Nazirite vow, as God has continued to empower him and continued to assert his calling of Samson, what makes Samson think the Lord will, after all this, just leave him there to die of thirst?

If I were the Lord, I would scream in his face, "Who do you think you"—but I'm not the Lord. God performs another miracle and causes fresh water to come out of the ground for Samson. The effect is immediate. Samson's *spirit* is refreshed. His *spirit*. After a big victory and the emotional high that it brings there is often an emotional low. Samson's spirit had sunk as low as his behavior, yet God gave him cool, clear water to drink so that Samson's *spirit* was revived.

The author points out the spring was still there when he was writing this. He adds that Samson judged Israel twenty years—but notice when: in the days of the Philistines. There is no declaration of victory. There is no claim the land had peace those twenty-years. There is no indication of deliverance for the people of Israel. The land does not have rest. Instead, during the time the Philistines oppressed and harassed and ruled over Israel, Samson judged Israel.

Application

In the story of Samson I am struck by the extraordinary kindness of God. We see his kindness in granting a miracle to Samson's mother, for though she was barren, she conceived and had a son. We see his kindness in calling Samson to a life of service to the Lord and to the people of Israel. We see his kindness in empowering Samson to do the right thing. We see his kindness in showing mercy to Samson, and showing it repeatedly. We see his kindness in giving water to a whiner.

Remember that Samson is, in a real sense, *Israel*. He is presented as the ideal Israelite. He is everything Israel is: chosen, consecrated, called. He is *everything* Israel is: rebellious, self-centered, disobedient. There is one way, however, in which Samson was different. He is never said to have bowed down to idols. Gideon, despite his beginning, made a golden ephod and caused all Israel to worship it. Abimelech was an idolater through and through. Jephthah tried to worship YHWH God of Israel as if he were Molech when he offered his

own daughter as a burnt offering. Samson does not bow to the Baals and to the Ashtoroth. Samson only bows to himself.

Samson is also Israel in another way: Samson experienced God's incredible mercy and patience. Through this entire book, a book that many would describe as depressing for the repeating cycle of unfaithfulness to the Lord, we never get to the positive conditional statement's outcome: what if Israel were faithful to do all that God commanded them to do? We never get there! We were told in the opening of the book that we, the readers, would not get there.

Many of the judges would have successful careers. Many would deliver Israel from their oppressors but back in chapter 2 the author tells us as soon as the judge died, Israel "turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them" (Jdgs 2:19). Yet the Lord remained faithful. Even in his anger when he raised up another oppressor he was being faithful. The oppressors were intended to cause Israel to return to the Lord.

What is remarkable to me is God continued to seek opportunity. We saw in chapter 14 that when Samson insisted on his parents arranging for him to marry the Philistine woman that God was active in this. Even in Samson's sin, God was seeking opportunity to bring about the deliverance of his people. God was working behind the scenes, so to speak, to bring about the conflict that would result in Samson gathering an army—as he was called to do!—and defeat the Philistines. He would then destroy their altars and their carved images. Israel would cleanse the land of its idolatry. Even in Samson's sin God was at work to bring about God's purposes to bless his people!

This is because God is always seeking opportunity to bless. It is, as we've been seeing, his default "mode". God desires to bless but sin interrupts the blessing. Sin interrupts the immediate experience of that blessing for while Israel remained under the oppression of the Philistines for Samson's entire 20-year career as a judge, God was still seeking to bless his people. The blessings were, at most, *delayed*, for God is working out his purposes.

So often you and I live with an if-then mentality. We tend to think faith is transactional. If we give to God what he desires, then he will give us what we desire. Often what God is giving us isn't what we *think* we want, but what God gives us is always what we need and what we truly desire, for how often does God change *us* rather than our *circumstances*? We want our circumstances changed but when God changes us we recognize his goodness in this.

Church, God is ever seeking opportunity to deliver us. He is eager to bring true blessing into our life, and that blessing is found most fully in making us like Christ. God has brought about the opportunity.

Phil 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

Notice there is no "if" here. God began the work and because God is the one who began your work of faith, God will bring it to completion. This means that as you walk through life stumbling along imperfectly and even making lots of messes along the way, God is ever at work bringing about his purposes. Church, the reason faith cannot be transactional is because it is rooted entirely in who Jesus is and in what Jesus has done. Faith is not an if-then proposition. Faith is "because Jesus has" proposition.

Because Jesus has done everything necessary for life and salvation, our response is one of faith, and faith results in obedience. The obedience doesn't secure anything for us. Our faithful obedience is simply the right response to what Jesus has already done, is doing, and will continue to do as he moves us along toward his intended purpose.

Because of what Jesus has done we desire to be ever more faithful. Because of what Jesus has done we desire to glorify God. Because of what Jesus has done we desire to live for him. Because of what Jesus has done we gladly repent of our sin and press on toward the goal, that we may honor him. Because of what Jesus has done we can leave behind guilt and shame and regret and embrace the mercy and forgiveness that is ours in Christ. Let us not live in the *if* but in the *because*.