

Judges 14-15

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[0 : 00] And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Really? Is it true that in all things God works for the good of His people?

Now you may be able to reply with confidence that yes, that is true. It's in the Bible. After all, it must be true.

But even if we believe it's true, it does beg a very difficult question. How can it be true?

If you believe it is true, that's to be commended. But how can it be true? How can God, even God, in all things, good things and bad things, evil and wicked and horrific things, how can He work for the good of those who love Him?

[1 : 31] Even work for the good of His own people when we don't love Him as we ought. I want to find an answer to this question because it is a big question.

The verse that I've read from Paul's letter to the Romans is often quoted, and rightly so. It does serve, and rightly so, as a source of security and comfort to us.

And yet, when we try and get our heads around it and ask the question not, is it true, but how can it be true, that's a very difficult one to answer.

But I want to try and find an answer to this question. I'm not saying it's the answer or an exhaustive answer, but an answer in what appears an unlikely place, and it's the story of Samson and his brutal exploits among the Philistines.

Now, there is a lot of material in the two chapters that we've read, but we'll try and take a bird's eye view, guided and limited by three words that summarize or capture the big themes of the story, and hopefully will help us answer our question.

[2 : 52] The three words that will guide us as we think about these two chapters are the words disappointment, the word disobedience, and the word design.

Disappointment, disobedience, and design. And with each word, as we think of them in turn, we'll find that each is increasingly significant in our quest as we try and answer the question, how can it be that God is able in all things to work for the good of his own people?

Let's begin with the word disappointment, indeed, a big disappointment. Samson, we've been going through the book over some time now, and Samson's, Samson is the twelfth and final judge in the book of Judges.

And as we read the book, we wonder whether matters are coming to a head if we're at the dawn of a glorious climax. Now, that's perhaps somewhat militated against by the fact that we know the whole book, or we are fairly familiar with it, so we maybe already know that the climax isn't what we might have hoped for.

But in the measure that we could imagine ourselves reading the book for the first time, it wouldn't be unreasonable to think, well, we're coming to a climax. And all these judges have come and gone, and some have been pretty good, and some have been pretty awful, and some have been, well, just forgettable.

[4 : 23] But here, things are coming to a climax. Surely, the final judge will set up to the mark in a manner that his predecessors have failed to do.

It's not just the fact that he's the final judge and that we're looking and desperately needing a hero. It's not just that. It's not just a vain hope. The birth narrative that we were thinking about last week augurs well.

The miraculous annunciation of his impending birth. The divine declaration as to Samson's mission. All of these things would generate a sense of hope and expectation that finally we're going to find a judge who is up to the task that he is given.

In addition to that, we've been introduced to, and this is what we were particularly focusing on last week. We've been introduced to his godly parents, Manoah and his wife.

And so everything is set up for a seriously impressive judge, somebody who can do delivering as it's meant to be done. But of course, our man Samson proves to be such a disappointment.

[5 : 46] He is a big disappointment. Think of it from the perspective of his parents. And we'll do that again as we move forward. How must they have felt when they saw their son who had been born in such remarkable circumstances and of whom God had given such great promises concerning the task that he was being given.

And they see their son grow into an impetuous, angry, young man. They must have been devastated to see their son in that way.

How must they have felt when he came, as we've read, and said, Get me that woman. I want to marry her. What anguish must have been theirs as they wondered, well, where did we go wrong? What's happening? What about the promises concerning this young man, our son? The one announced by angels growing into a violent man dominated by lust and anger.

I love happy endings. I feel cheated when I go to the cinema and get a sad or inconclusive ending.

[7 : 05] Now, some of you are maybe more intellectual and can cope with such endings, but I like a happy ending. Just to illustrate that, the last film I saw and I thought was great was Paddington.

I'm not a great film buff, as this will be evident, but it's got a happy ending. And you go home and you think, well, that was good. A nice happy ending gives you a nice warm feeling.

Judges doesn't provide a happy ending. The final judge is a big disappointment. And the reason, of course, is that the book of Judges doesn't have the ending.

That's why there isn't a happy ending, because we don't have the ending in the book of Judges.

Remember what the angel said to Samson's mother when the birth of Samson was announced in chapter 13 and in verse 5.

And he will begin the deliverance of Israel. And the great significance in that aspect of the message, he will begin the deliverance of Israel.

[8 : 17] We're not going to get the ending in the book of Judges. The book of Judges and every judge in the book serves to point forward to another, to an unerring judge and a perfect deliverer.

Samson, who was one big disappointment, points forward to the one who never disappoints, to the promised Messiah, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And so one theme of this account that we're given of Samson is the theme of disappointment. But then, very much connected to that, is the next word that I want us to focus on for a brief moment, and that is the word disobedience.

And if we had to apply an adjective to disobedience, we could speak of epic disobedience. If it was big disappointment, then we have to talk about epic disobedience.

Now, of course, it's true that in a sense, the disappointment is a result of the disobedience. And so the order might be reversed. But my concern is to pause for a moment and consider the nature and heart, not only of Samson's disobedience, but the disobedience of Israel as God's people, who Samson represents.

[9 : 42] And in both cases, in the case of the disobedience of Samson, and in the case of the disobedience of Israel, we'll focus on one example that illustrates their disobedience.

And we can summarize these two examples of disobedience, of Samson and of Israel, in this sentence. Samson married a Philistine, and Israel married Philistia.

Samson married a Philistine, and Israel married Philistia. In that sentence, really, we sum up the disobedience of both Samson and the nation of which he formed a part, and over which he was placed as a judge.

Let's think, first of all, of Samson. Samson marrying this Philistine woman. In the matter of Samson's disobedience in his, we'd have to call it, aborted marriage to his first love, we could reel off a list of all his sins and draw a somber moral lesson.

Don't be like Samson. That's often the way in which the story of Samson is used. And I'm not saying there is no merit in that, but I think to reduce the story of Samson to a moral tale about how not to behave would be to miss the big picture.

[11 : 15] Of course, the list, if we were to draw up such a list, would be a very long one. Lust, arrogance, dishonoring his parents, anger, violence, murder.

It really is quite a gory catalogue. But I'm not sure how much profit there is in dissecting his many sins. Rather, what I think we have to try and do is get to the heart of the matter.

Samson uses a revealing expression in his conversation with his parents, very particularly as he is addressing his father. In chapter 14 and in verse 3, We'll read the whole verse and that will take us at the end of the verse to the very revealing statement.

His father and mother replied, Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?

But Samson said to his father, and then take note particularly what follows, Get her for me. She's the right one for me.

[12:22] Now that phrase or that sentence translated, She's the right one for me, is literally expressed in these words, She is right in my eyes.

That's what Samson said to his father about this woman. She is right in my eyes. When it comes to obedience and disobedience, it's all about the eyes.

Whose eyes matter? The Samson story begins in chapter 13. Let's just remind ourselves, what do we read there in chapter 13 and in verse 1?

Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Samson is Israel writ small.

The Israelites don't care about God's eyes, and Samson only cares about his eyes. What's right in his eyes?

[13:34] And this is really the source of all disobedience from the beginning through to the present.

I'll do as I please. I decide what is right and what is wrong. It's as old as Eden, and it is the moral stance, if we can dignify it with the word stance, that holds sway in 21st century Scotland.

A private morality not subject to the tedious constraints of any objective or God-given moral absolutes. Some of us live our lives on this principle.

She is right in my eyes. It seems okay to me. What's wrong with that? No reference to what God tells us lovingly and graciously concerning what is right and wrong, but that which is right in our eyes.

And to live our lives in that way leads inevitably to disobedience, to epic disobedience. Now, how epic the disobedience is really depends on power.

[14:57] The more power, the more epic the disobedience. Just look at Samson. Why was Samson so epic in his disobedience? Well, because of the power he enjoyed. And so it gave him greater capacity to do evil, to do what was right in his own eyes.

Some of us, we might think, well, I'd like to do that. It's right in my own eyes. But we don't do it because we haven't got the power. Not because of moral constraint.

Not because of some commendable resisting of temptation. We simply don't have the power to do it. But when the power is allied with the principle of doing what is right in our own eyes, then the result is, as we have described for us in the tragic story of Samson.

Now, in saying all this, we're not denying, and in due course, not this morning, we'll acknowledge that Samson did good. He was used of God in a significant way.

We will talk about that this morning. But to recognize that is not in any way to detract from the reality of his disobedience and the profound and serious nature of it.

[16:18] Samson married a Philistine. Why? Because it was right in his eyes. But then moving on to the other example that we have in these two chapters, not only of Samson, the individual, but of Israel, the nation.

And Israel, I've suggested, married Philistia. Now, why do I say that? Well, the one incident I want to note as illustrative of Israel's disobedience is the action taken by the men of Judah when the Philistines come to take Samson captive.

That's recorded for us in chapter 15 and from verse 9 and onwards. We know the story. I won't read all the verses again, but the Philistines want to avenge themselves of the violence that they've suffered at the hands of Samson.

And so they come and they indicate their intention to the other Israelites, those spoken of as the men of Judah. What do the men of Judah do?

Samson's fellow Israelites, what do they do when they're confronted with this intention on the part of the Philistines? Do they protect their God-given judge?

[17 : 31] Do they stand shoulder to shoulder alongside the one Israelite? Despite all his failings, and there were many with the guts to stand up to the Philistines, is that what they do? Of course not.

What they do is they hand him over to the Philistines. Why do they do that? Well, the reason they do that is that Israel has married Philistia, or in any case, is in bed with Philistia.

It's not so much a marriage, but certainly an illicit love affair. The men of Judah don't have a big problem with the Philistines. The rule that the Philistines exercise over them is not violent or oppressive.

When we read the story, it's very clear that that was not the nature of their rule over them. On previous occasions, that was not the case. Pagan nations exercise their authority with oppression and violence.

Not so in Samson's day. We see how Samson's able to go from one village to another, from an Israelite village to a Philistine village, and nobody stops him.

[18 : 39] He's able to see a young girl and determine that he'll marry her. Nobody stands in the way. At this point, they don't know what a violent and brutal man he can be. You see, the rule of the Philistines over Israel was not a violent and oppressive one.

They were their overlords. And the men of Judah say, well, they're not so bad, the Philistines. You know, we're not going to risk the harmony that we enjoy, the relative peace and prosperity that we enjoy to protect this hot head is Samson.

The Philistines, they're all right. Why pick a fight with such benevolent overlords? So much simpler and more prudent to sacrifice one of our own, especially a job like Samson, than stand up and fight against them.

Now, why was this a problem? Why was it a problem that the men of Judah had such an attitude toward the Philistines? Well, it's a problem because the Israelites were doing exactly what Samson was doing.

They were doing what was right in their own eyes. The most oft-repeated and fundamental divine instruction to the Israelites was to maintain their distinctiveness and remain separate from the pagan nations round about them.

[20 : 03] This is what was drummed in time and time again by God to them. And it is precisely this command that they are ignoring and they're doing what was right in their own eyes.

And let's just be very clear to avoid any misunderstanding. This wasn't a racial issue, but a faith issue. The purpose of them remaining separate and distinct was that their faith would not be corrupted, that their worship of God would not be corrupted.

But the men of Judah knew better. Their eyes were way more important and discerning than God's eyes, or so they thought.

When we think of this reality and how it applies to ourselves and to the church, for each generation of God's people, this is the oft-failed challenge to maintain our God-required distinctiveness. We are often way too friendly with the world and its wisdom. We love a peaceful coexistence, better to accommodate than to pick a fight.

[21 : 17] We forget that friendship with the world is enmity with God. But we can't have it both ways. We can't love God and jump into bed with Philistia, which is what Israel was doing.

So epic disobedience on a national scale, but mirrored also in the life of Samson. So this is the scene. What possible good can come out of such chaos?

What good can come from disappointment and disobedience? Disobedience. What would Samson's parents have made of a neighbor, reassuring them that they need not worry, as in all things God works for the good of those who love him?

What would Manoah have made of that word of encouragement had it been offered to him? Disappointment, disobedience, but finally design.

The disobedience and the disappointment and the disobedience provide the backdrop, the stage, and indeed the actors for God's design.

[22 : 31] The key verse, really, of these two chapters that we've read and arguably of the whole verse, certainly a key verse, if not the key verse, is verse 4 of chapter 14.

The verse is in brackets. You wonder how a key verse can be in brackets, but there you go, it's in brackets. But this is fundamental to our understanding of what is happening and to the question that we've posed right at the beginning.

How is it? How can it be that in all things God works for the good of those he loves? What does verse 4 of chapter 14 say? It's in the context, of course, of Samson wanting to marry this Philistine woman that he ought not to have married.

His parents are opposed, quite rightly so. And what are we told? What is the editorial comment that we're given there in verse 4? His parents, Samson's parents, did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines, for at that time they were ruling over Israel.

You see, an invisible hand was moving behind the scenes and through the disobedience working out his purposes in accordance with his grand design.

[23 : 46] We can think of this design from three perspectives, the design stated, the design explained, and the design executed. First of all, the design stated, we don't need to spend any time really with this, it's the verse that we've read.

God's design is stated in verse 4. He was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines. That is God's purpose stated explicitly there in that verse.

But why? How do we explain that that was God's design, that that was God's purpose? Why is God intent on picking a fight with the Philistines?

Well, this must have something to do with what we've noted already even this morning, with what God had said about Samson and his purpose as being the one who would begin the deliverance of Israel.

So this picking a fight with the Philistines must have something to do with delivering God's people from the Philistines, which God has already declared is his purpose.

[24 : 57] How do we explain all this? Well, here's the deal. The Israelites are in grave danger. Indeed, they've never been in greater danger throughout the period of the judges.

And yet, it doesn't appear that way. It appears that there's a great measure of peace and harmony. Yes, they're being ruled by the Philistines, but it's not violent. It's not oppressive, certainly not in the measure that they had endured previously.

the Philistines are okay. And that's the problem. The Israelites are being assimilated and molded into the image of their overlords, and assimilation leads inexorably to extinction.

Just give it a couple of generations, and the Israelites are no more. They didn't see that. They didn't recognize that, but God did.

The calling of the Israelites was not to be friends of the Philistines, but their foes. And even when we use that language, it grates somewhat, doesn't it, when we think of the language of Jesus and His call to love our enemies.

[26 : 15] But when we even think of that language, just going off at a tangent just for a moment, even when we think of that language of Jesus, what we often miss is that call to love, or in that call to love, is what Jesus takes as a given that we have enemies.

The call to love our enemies would make no sense if it wasn't a given that we have enemies. Yes, we are to love them, but we are not to become like them, which is precisely what was happening with the Israelites.

But back to God's design. The danger to Israel was so great and so imminent that God determines to bring the matter to a head in a conflict that will serve to break up the illicit love affair so eloquently illustrated by Samson's Philistine bride.

Of course, it wasn't just about Samson and his bride, it was about the whole nation. And this design of God is grounded in his love and faithfulness.

It is because he loves his people that he determines to save them from assimilation and extinction. It is because God takes his covenant duties seriously that he seeks an occasion to confront the Philistines as is explicitly stated there in verse 4 of chapter 14.

[27 : 41] So that, in a measure, explains God's design. But then finally, in this matter of design, the design, the purpose is executed. How does God seek and find an occasion to confront the Philistines?

We're told that that's what he wants to do, that's what needs to be done. There needs to be this conflict generated between the Israelites and the Philistines. Well, how is that going to happen?

Well, this is the answer, really, or it brings us very close to the answer to the question we posed at the very beginning. It's through the disobedience of Samson. The lust and rage of Samson provoke a confrontation that escalates into open hostility and conflict.

And we've seen the tit for tat, he did this, we're going to do that, I'll get my revenge, we need our revenge. The whole thing escalates, but where does it begin? It begins in Samson's sin, in his lust, in his anger, in his violence.

That's where it begins. And God uses that to provoke the conflict that he himself requires for his gracious purposes of delivering his people from the Philistines.

[28 : 54] This conflict, much to the disappointment, I'm sure, of the men of Judah, puts a break on the pernicious process of assimilation and ultimate extinction.

Now, does this justify Samson's sin? Well, of course it doesn't justify Samson's sin, he's morally responsible for his actions. Does this mean that his parents were wrong to oppose his marriage? After all, it was through this marriage that God was to bring about his purposes. No, of course it wasn't wrong for his parents to oppose his marriage. They did the right thing in seeking, at least, to oppose his marriage.

What it does mean is that God uses the disobedience of Samson to secure his own good and perfect purposes in favor of his own people.

And not only does God use Samson's disobedience, he also equips Samson for his violent clashes with the Philistines. The phrase that repeats itself in these chapters is this phrase that speaks of the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samuel.

[30 : 02] And evidently, the effect of that was the physical strength that he required to perform these exploits. And of course, sometimes when we read that and we say, well, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samuel, then that must mean that what he did was okay.

It was good what he was doing. Given the equipping and strengthening of the Spirit, we might feel obliged to conclude that Samson was morally justified in his actions, but I don't believe we're under any obligation to come to that conclusion.

A much more remarkable conclusion and ultimately much more satisfying conclusion is that God's sovereign power is such that he really can and he really does in all things work for the good of his own people.

God is so faithful to his promises that he not only fulfills them in spite of the disobedience of his people, but even through their disobedience, God uses the sinfulness of his own people to bring about our deliverance.

But are we getting carried away with ourselves on the basis of what, after all, is one historical example? The fact that God used Samson's sin does not require us to conclude that he uses all things.

[31 : 29] What about me? What about my life? What about my failings and my sin? Well, let's fast forward just over a thousand years from Samson to the greatest illustration or example of this principle of this reality, God's capacity and practice of in all things working for the good of his own people.

And where does that take us when we fast forward some eleven hundred years? Well, it takes us to the foot of the cross where we are witnesses of the greatest act of evil in human history, certainly the greatest injustice perpetrated by man, the sinless one dying a sinner's death, the one who came to save and to serve slaughtered.

Can God use this? Can God in this work work for the good of his own people? Well, Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost gives us a very clear and eloquent answer to the question.

Chapter 2 of Acts and in verse 22 we read, Men of Israel, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did among you through him.

As you yourselves know, this man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

[33 : 06] And Peter goes on. You see, Peter is recognizing this reality in the death of Christ. God using the deeds of wicked men to secure his loving purposes of delivering his own people just as we see happening in the account of Samson.

And arguing from the greater to the lesser we can and must conclude that God not only has and can but always does in all things work for the good of his own people.

He did so in and through Samson's folly and through the wicked deeds of wicked men who crucified the Lord of glory and he continues to so weave his perfect and good purposes in our sin-blighted lives and world.

So I would encourage you to behold your God and take comfort that he is indeed your God. Can we and you and me always see God's hand and God's design?

Well by no means. What are we told of Samson's parents in that verse that we're suggesting is so pivotal in understanding what is going on? How does verse 4 begin of chapter 14?

[34 : 32] His parents did not know that this was from the Lord. They didn't know. They didn't realize what was going on. And often we don't know.

Often we can't see. But though we can't see and though sometimes we can't know what we can do in the light of God's word is we can trust.

We can trust that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and even more fundamentally those who are loved by him.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father we come to you and we bow down before you in grateful acknowledgement of your greatness and of your power. We thank you for the manner in which your sovereign power in a way that is so mysterious to us and in many ways beyond our capacity certainly to fully understand so orders all things yes even the most wicked and terrible things for the good of your own people and for the fulfillment of your perfect and gracious purposes.

as we acknowledge we readily recognize that just as with Samson's parents they didn't know they couldn't see it so that is so often true for us also but help us on those many occasions when we can't see it to trust and to believe that what you have declared and what you have demonstrated to be true continues and remains true for us and these things we pray in Jesus name Amen.