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July 4th: Judges 15 & 1 Corinthians 4:1-17

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Samson avenges himself on the Philistines. Paul challenges the Corinthians' over-realized eschatology.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Judges chapter 15. After some days, at the time of wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife with a young goat. And he said, I will go in to my wife in the chamber.

But her father would not allow him to go in. And her father said, I really thought that you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful than she? Please take her instead.

And Samson said to them, This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines, when I do them harm. So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails.

And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go in to the standing grain of the Philistines, and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the

olive orchards. Then the Philistines said, Who has done this? And they said, Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.

And Samson said to them, If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit. And he struck them hip and thigh with a great blow, and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam. Then the Philistines came up and encamped in Judah, and made a raid on Lehi.

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. Then three thousand 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. And they said to him, We have come down to bind you, that we may give you into the hand of the Philistines.

And Samson said to them, Swear to me that you will not attack me yourselves. 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.

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. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck a thousand men.

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. As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone out of his hand, and that place was called Ramath-Lehi. 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? 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-Hakari. It is at Lehi to this day.

And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years. By the beginning of Judges chapter 15, Samson's marriage has failed, but he doesn't yet realize what has happened. He is seemingly unaware of the fact that his wife has been given to his best man.

So he goes down to try and visit his wife with a young goat to reconnect with her. This might remind us of Judah's failed attempt to send the goat to Tamar, or the woman he thought was the prostitute, in Genesis chapter 38. When Samson realizes that his wife

has been given to another man, he is furious with the Philistines.

He has been denied his bride, and he is going to be avenged. However, as John Barrett observes, Samson does not run amok. Samson brings violence and chaos, but he does so in a very determined and calculated manner.

They have denied him his wife, denied him his seed. His wife was earlier threatened by fire. And thirty men of the Philistines were responsible for this.

Catching three hundred foxes, or jackals, or whatever they were, is no mean feat. It would take a considerable amount of time and effort. If Samson were merely furious and wanting to strike out at the Philistines, this would not be the way that he would choose.

This is a very calculated and considered action, one that requires a great deal of premeditation and planning and organization. If he just wanted to commit arson, for instance, there would be far easier ways to do it. That he chooses this bizarre way to do so suggests that there is some importance or meaning or symbolic purpose to it.

What might that purpose be? We can try and work it out. There are three hundred foxes with torches. Earlier we've had the story of Gideon, with three hundred people associated with dogs with torches.

Maybe there's some connection there. But there is another connection nearer to hand. It was thirty Philistine men who got the information about Samson's riddle from his wife.

They were the men who started this whole thing. The result of their action was that he was prevented from marrying, and having seed, he was prevented from having his harvest. How did they obtain the information? They obtained the information, according to Samson, by ploughing with his heifer.

They extracted the information from his wife. In Exodus chapter 22 verse 1, the punishment for stealing oxen is five oxen for an ox, or five heifers for a heifer. While there are three hundred foxes, the foxes are divided into pairs.

So there are one hundred and fifty pairs of foxes. They are ploughing the fields with fire. One hundred and fifty pairs of foxes is five times thirty foxes.

By this point it should be apparent that there is a logic to Samson's action, that there is some sort of eye for eye judgement here. The amount of thought and deliberation and planning that Samson must have put into this action might suggest that many popular portrayals of his character are mistaken. Far from just being a hothead who loses his temper, Samson is someone who can engage in a great deal of forethought and planning.

And there is, at the very least, some sense of justice behind Samson's action. There is a

measure to it. There is an attempt on Samson's part, at the very least, to give some sort of proportionate judgement or vengeance.

Some sort of fitting or appropriate response to the wrong that has been committed against him. When the Philistines discover what has happened and who was responsible for it, they burn the Timnite woman and her father with fire. Samson once again claims that he will be avenged upon them.

And he attacks and kills a great many. Then he hides in the cleft of the rock at Etam. All of this has stirred up the Philistines and this is not something that is popular among the Israelites.

The Israelites do not want the Philistines to be stirred up. They want to be at peace with them, to live under their yoke without being oppressed too much. And when the Philistines go up to attack Judah, the Judahites end up sending 3,000 men to capture Samson in order to deliver him into the hands of the Philistines.

Samson is a troublemaker and the Judahites do not want a troublemaker around. He's just going to make things difficult for them and cause the Philistines to attack them when really they just want to live at peace. Samson, however, escapes from the bonds that the Judahites have placed upon him.

In verse 14 we read, This parallels with his encounter with the lion in the previous chapter in verses 5-6. And although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. Samson fortuitously finds a jawbone of an ass, a fresh jawbone, and uses it to attack the Philistines.

With it he strikes 1,000 men. This might remind us of Deuteronomy 32 verse 30. How could one chase 1,000 and two put 10,000 to flight, unless their rock had sold them and the Lord had given them up? After this great victory, Samson sings a sort of victory song, one that plays upon the word for donkey, which is the same word for heap.

At the place called Lehi, or jawbone, Samson fights with a jawbone. And with the jawbone of an ass, he creates heaps of defeated enemies, ass being the same word as that used for heaps. While at the beginning of this episode the Philistines are comparable to a lion, by the end of it they're more comparable to a pile of dead donkeys.

Samson has successfully made asses out of them. This whole series of events started off with Samson going down to Timna and seeing the daughter of the Philistines. One thing has led to another, and it has escalated to the point that he has killed well over 1,000 Philistines.

Fittingly, a story beginning with riddles and taunts ends with a victory taunt over the Philistines. Samson then names the place after the jawbone, and now he's thirsty and calls out for the Lord to deliver him. The Lord responds to Samson's prayer and brings

water out from the rock.

This is something that has happened before, in Exodus chapter 17 and Numbers chapter 20. The story of Samson might remind us of Israel's story once again. A question to consider.

In Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32 we're told that Samson was a man of faith. There is much debate among commentators concerning the character of Samson. Some see him as a man just driven by anger and lust, and others try and paint a very flattering portrait of him, trying to give some more spiritual rationale for most of his actions.

How ought we best to do justice to the complexities of such a character? 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 1 to 17 Why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Already you have all you want, already you have become rich, without us you have become kings, and would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you. For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands.

When reviled, we bless, when persecuted, we endure, when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children, for though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul continues the argument of the preceding chapter. For the Corinthians, who have been elevating ministers and missionaries above their proper station, it is important to establish some sense of proper proportion. Paul, Apollos, Cephas and others are simply servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

They must be faithful and ultimately are answerable to the judgment of the Lord alone. The court of human opinion is not the court about which Paul is most concerned. In chapter 2 verse 15 he made a similar point.

The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. Because they aren't acting for the court of human opinion, the whole game of status-seeking that the Corinthians are so concerned about is abandoned. Rather, the apostles must seek the approval of the Lord, who is their master, the one to whom they are ultimately

answerable.

The judgment and the praise of the Lord must be patiently awaited, and until it comes the ministers of Christ must be trustworthy, recognising that they must give an account of their service to God. They don't indulge in boasting and the pursuit of status, because this is to seek approval from the wrong source. It is also characteristic of the flesh, which is pompous, prideful and puffed up, is overly concerned with the praise of a human audience, and unmindful of God.

Paul has to this point spoken as if he were merely writing about how other people viewed him, Apollos and Cephas and a few others. Yet it becomes apparent that Paul was speaking to broader and deeper problems in the Church, by using himself and Apollos as examples. The real parties causing the problem are modestly veiled by the fact that Paul uses himself and Apollos as the case studies, so that the Corinthians might learn the proper principles by examining their cases.

The principle here is that they should not go beyond what is written. In this case I think that Paul means by this strange statement the message of the Gospel. Going beyond that message would involve adding to the truth of the cross in ways that the Corinthians had clearly been doing, with notions of super-spirituality, status-seeking and human wisdom, and recognising the scriptural testimony to the truth of the cross as God's wisdom, their competitive struggle for honour and status would be abandoned.

The cross is the most basic and foundational truth and they must never leave it behind. Once the Corinthians have grasped the basics that Paul has been teaching, they should recognise that there is nothing in them, considered in themselves, that sets them apart from or above others. As Paul wrote back in chapter 1 verse 30, The next section of this passage drips with irony.

The Corinthians seemingly had extreme notions of conversion. Notions of conversion characterised by what some have called over-realised eschatology. They were acting as if they already enjoyed the fullness of the kingdom and the full measure of the spirit, failing to appreciate just how far short they fell, and how far off these things were in their full enjoyment.

This sort of super-spirituality had little place for the cross. It was about power, about elevated spiritual status and radical freedom. And Paul will have a lot to say to challenge such a spirituality over the course of this letter.

Here, he tackles it by presenting an ironic portrayal of such a spirituality. He holds it up for some ridicule and contrasts it with the reality that he and the other apostles face on the ground. The Corinthians think of themselves as kings, as those who are rich, as people who reign, and who have the fullness of what they want.

They are already acting as if they were living in the age to come. They have seemingly entered into this consummation of the kingdom in the absence of Paul and his companions. The Corinthians seem to imagine themselves as if in some great triumphal procession, leading the way at the front.

And yet, in that great triumphal procession, where are Paul and the apostles to be found? They are not the kings leading at the front, they are more like the gladiators at the very rear. They are condemned to struggle to the death in the arena, and their sufferings are like a grand spectacle before the whole cosmos. Isn't it strange that the Corinthians see themselves as wise, strong and honoured, when the apostles' experience is the exact opposite? In the starkest of contrasts, Paul describes the positions of the apostles, and how completely alien to the supposed experience of the Corinthian super-spiritual Christians it is.

Far from experiencing constant victory, from reigning like kings, from enjoying extreme riches, superior wisdom and radical liberty, the experience of the apostles is one of suffering, daily hardship, lack, hunger and thirst, persecution, rejection, ridicule and dishonour. However, in this difficult situation they respond according to the mind of Christ. They respond to cursing with blessing, to persecution with endurance, to slander with kindness.

Just as Christ was cut off by the world at the cross, His faithful followers are regarded as if they were the scum of the earth, refused to be thrown out. The point of all of this is not to shame the Corinthians. However, of all the people that ministered to the Corinthians, few could claim to stand in the position of a father.

Paul, however, can speak to them like a father. He became their father as one who first delivered the gospel to them. They are seen as his dear children.

He has a peculiar interest in and concern for their spiritual well-being, greater than any of those who are simply like their guardians. As a father figure, he has an especial responsibility to give an example and training to them. And for this reason he is sending Timothy to them, whom he describes as his loved son.

Timothy is the appointed son who represents and acts on behalf of his father. He is also a model son. He is the image of his father.

He will remind them of Paul's way of life by his own behaviour. Timothy will provide them with a good model to emulate and a pattern for their own growth. A question to consider.

What are some of the forms that the era of the Corinthians discussed in this chapter can take in the contemporary church?