

Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 15 — Samson's Vengeance

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This again leads to a bitter vengeance of the Philistines on those of Timnath who had served him so ill — the very fate befalling them at last, to escape which at first the woman had lent herself to the basest treachery. (Compare Judges 14: 15 with Judges 15: 6.) Now it was that God wrought for His glory. He extricated failing Samson from the direct consequences of his sinful association; but He dealt retributively with treachery by the hands of their own people. For "the righteous Lord loveth righteousness"; and in its measure it is very striking to see the way in which this came out even in the case of the worldly uncircumcised enemy. We can all understand righteousness where the ground is clearly sanctioned of God; but is it not also strengthening to our hearts to find that, even where all was dark and faulty, God knows how to give effect to His principles? He has no doubt secrets of grace above all difficulties and wrongs: of this we cannot doubt for a moment; and indeed we have abundant proofs of it here. The earth is destined to be the theatre where God will display righteousness reigning; but even now, while things are out of course, and His enemy is in power, He holds to His own character, owning and using all He can. After this we see the Philistines the object of the severest chastisement from Samson, who smote "them hip and thigh with a great slaughter, and went down and dwelt at the top of the rock Etam." There he encounters a new trial, which sets before us the state of Israel in the most painful light. Is it not increasingly true that we can go no lower, whether we look at the people of God or the last deliverer in the book of Judges? Is it possible to conceive a conjuncture of its kind more humiliating? Not till they desired a king like the nations. But alas! even when God gave them one in a man after His own heart, we then trace greater abominations under the lines either of those who broke off in self-will or of those who turned the line of promise to nothing but corruption. We are arrived at the end of this sad history. Picture in imagination, if you can, how God could descend more to meet a degraded people; yet was it just then that the outward exploits against the foe were so brilliant. But if God's people have got into subjection to the world, none are so heartless about, if not bitter against, him who breaks fully with the enemy. Samson is now absolutely isolated on the rock Etam. There is not a man that sympathizes with him, not even in Judah; yet Judah, we know, was the royal tribe in the purpose of God from the beginning, as in fact its type followed in

David. This makes their behaviour the more remarkable here. "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?" Judah! is this the tribe for the praise of Jehovah? is this the tribe that men praise? Could, at the beck of the Philistine, there be found at once three thousand men so willing and prompt to betray the champion of Israel? three thousand men of Judah! One could understand three thousand men of the Philistines; but to what a deplorable pass in Israel were things come, when three thousand men of the worthiest tribe were thus obedient to the Philistines, and joined against the strong deliverer to hand him over, bound a prisoner, to the tender mercies of those that hated him and despised them! Is it they who say to Samson, "Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?" Not only were they in slavery, but content to be slaves, yea, traitors. Could a people descend lower in human things? Alas! it is no new thing to faith; Jesus knew it to the bottom. It was His brethren who sought to lay hold on Him as beside Himself, His brethren who did not believe on Him. It was not for their lives, but for the truth He confessed, that His own people would have Him die. "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." There is little moral elevation in Samson, little in any way to command respect or love. "As they did unto me, so have I done unto them." We see a man, not without faith indeed (Heb. 11: 32), though his confidence was largely in the strength with which God had invested him, rather than in Him who would yet prove Himself the sole source of it; a man who was roused by personal affront and desire of vengeance, not by a solemn duty; a man who slowly and weakly wakes up to any sense of his mission, who is ever too ready to sink down again into the lowest indulgence of fallen nature among the enemy. In short Samson appears to me a man with as little, or as low, an appreciation of what it was to fight the battles of the Lord, as God had been pleased to use in any epoch throughout inspired history. "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." What an opinion he had of them! And as naturally as possible too they take it. They have no shame nor resentment on their part at this accusation of treachery. Their moral condition indeed was the very lowest, below nature itself, towards their deliverer. "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 Jehovah 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." Nor was this the only intervention of the Lord, but personal succour follows at His hand. For "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 Jehovah, 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 En-hakkore, which is in Lehi unto this day." We have seen before, from the earlier part of the book, the remarkable manner in which, either personally or in the weapons that were employed, God was acting mysteriously at this period of Israel's history. To those who discern what a witness it is that the people were far gone from Him here the principle reappears in all its strength — the isolation of the man himself, the circumstances that had brought about the rupture with the foe, the mind of Judah, if not treacherous to the Israelite, cowering before the uncircumcised, and now the strangest of weapons for war that Samson uses against them — the jawbone of an ass. Never was there failure of divine power with Samson against the foe; but moreover the pitifulness of Jehovah is marked towards His poor servant (for did He disdain when the thirsty man called on Himself, as he cried to God in his distress?). Bad as were the features we have seen, we have to see even worse still; yet he was heard and answered when he called. We do not find in Samson the generous disinterestedness of grace that could suffer affliction with the people of God, and is willing to be a sacrifice upon that faith. We have nothing like a Moses in Samson. Not without faith, he was a combatant ready to fight the Philistines at any odds. No doubt it was a wonderful display of physical force on the one hand; as on the other those he vanquished were the unrelenting enemies of God's people. Still the overt thing to Samson seems to have been that they were his enemies. This certainly stimulated him though I am far from insinuating no better underneath. But the good was hard to reach or even to discern, the evil abundant and obvious, "And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years." It appears to me that the Spirit of God brings in this little notice of his judging Israel here in order to show that this is the normal close of his history. Nor should we wonder at it. Not that God did not work

mightily afterwards, and even more in his death than in his life. But it need surprise none that the proper history of this judge terminates according to the mind of God here; for what has the Lord to tell in the next chapter? We have seen how grace overruled, broke up an evil association before it was consummated, and gave him righteous ground to take vengeance on the Philistines, followed by his judging Israel for twenty years. "Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot;" yet here, though fallen lower than ever, we find power put forth under these deplorable circumstances. "And they compassed him in, and laid wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him. And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron." The man thus went forth in the confidence of his strength, and to outward appearance did things just to make the enemy feel what he could do, with as little exercise toward God as could well be found in one that feared Him.