

Homiletics Analysis: Judges 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Judges 15 continues and escalates the Samson narrative that began in chapters 13–14. Following his father-in-law's misguided reassignment of Samson's wife to another man, Samson retaliates against the Philistines by burning their grain fields using foxes tied tail-to-tail with torches. The Philistines respond by burning Samson's wife and father-in-law to death — the very outcome Samson had originally sought to prevent (14:15). Samson then strikes the Philistines with a great slaughter and withdraws to the rock of Etam. When the men of Judah discover Samson is hiding in their territory, they are more afraid of Philistine reprisal than motivated by any impulse toward deliverance, and they come to bind Samson and hand him over. Samson submits — on condition he not be killed by them — and is delivered bound to the Philistines. When the Philistines close in with shouting, the Spirit of the LORD rushes upon Samson, his bonds fall away, and he kills a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey. The chapter closes with Samson's thirst after the slaughter, his desperate cry to God, and the LORD's miraculous provision of water from the hollow of the jawbone — followed by Samson's twenty-year judgeship over Israel.

This Text — Intent

God intends this chapter to produce two simultaneous and uncomfortable recognitions in the reader: first, that Israel's deliverance from the Philistines is genuinely accomplished here — God keeps His word and raises up a deliverer — and second, that this deliverer is spectacularly flawed, and that the people he delivers are not reaching for freedom but managing subjugation. The chapter does not invite admiration of Samson nor condemnation of him — it invites the reader to feel the weight of what it means when God works through deeply broken instruments among deeply passive people, and to recognize that this points not toward human heroism but toward Israel's desperate need for a deliverer who is actually righteous. God intends this dissonance to press the reader toward hope for something — someone — better.

Subject Sentence: God delivers His people through a deeply flawed judge amid a deeply passive Israel.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that He keeps His covenant purpose of deliverance even when His instruments are broken and His people are complicit in their own bondage

— and in doing so, He exposes the bankruptcy of every merely human deliverer and sharpens the reader’s longing for the one who will deliver rightly.

Interpretive Evaluation

On Samson as Hero or Anti-Hero

The most pervasive interpretive problem in Judges 15 is the tendency to treat Samson as a straightforward hero of faith. This reading is superficially supported by Hebrews 11:32, which includes Samson in the faith hall of fame, and has generated generations of “be like Samson — God can use you despite your failures” sermons. This reading must be qualified significantly. Hebrews 11 does not endorse the character of those listed — it commends the faith by which they acted in specific moments, not their overall moral record. Samson in Judges 15 is acting out of personal vendetta (v. 3, 7, 11), not covenant faithfulness. His stated motivation is retaliation (“as they did to me, so have I done to them”), not the deliverance of Israel. The text does not praise Samson — it records what God accomplished despite Samson, and alongside Samson’s self-serving motivation. A Reformed reading acknowledges the Hebrews 11 reference without importing hero-worship back into the narrative; Samson’s faith is real but fragmentary, and the text is doing something more complex than celebrating him.

On the Spirit of the LORD

A Pentecostal/Charismatic reading tends to focus on the Spirit’s empowerment in verse 14 as a paradigm for Spirit-filled ministry — that the Spirit rushes upon the surrendered believer and produces miraculous power. This must be carefully qualified. In Judges, the Spirit’s coming upon the judges is not primarily about personal spiritual empowerment or the believer’s surrender — it is a sovereign divine intervention tied to God’s covenant purposes with Israel. The Spirit comes upon Samson here not because Samson is spiritually prepared or surrendered (he is manifestly not — he is being handed over to his enemies as a prisoner after a cycle of personal vendettas) but because God has committed to use this instrument at this moment for His own purposes. The lesson of the Spirit’s work here is not “the surrendered believer is empowered” but “God sovereignly accomplishes His purposes even through instruments that have not surrendered their lives to Him.”

On Judah’s Passivity

Some expositors treat the men of Judah’s willingness to bind Samson and hand him to the Philistines as a minor narrative detail — a logistical bridge between episodes. The Reformed reading sees this as theologically central to the chapter’s claim. Judah’s response — “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?” (v. 11) — is the theological low point of the passage. This is not merely political pragmatism; it is the posture of people who have accepted their bondage so completely that a deliverer among

them is a threat rather than a gift. This pattern — God’s people managing their oppression, neutralizing deliverance — is the indictment the book of Judges is building across its entire arc. An expositor who misses Judah’s role in chapter 15 has missed the passage’s most pressing application for the people of God.

On the Water Miracle (vv. 18–19)

The water miracle at the end of the chapter is sometimes read as a sentimental footnote — God comforts His exhausted servant. This undersells it significantly. Samson’s prayer here (vv. 18–19) is the only direct, extended speech to God in the chapter and possibly the most theologically honest moment in the Samson narrative to this point. Samson acknowledges that God gave the victory (“you have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant”). It is brief, partially self-referential (“shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”), but it is a genuine cry of dependence. God’s response — splitting open a hollow place and bringing out water — is a small echo of Moses and the water from the rock (Exodus 17), subtly casting Samson within the line of God’s covenant provision for His servants, however unlikely a candidate he is. The Reformed reading holds both realities: Samson’s prayer is theologically impoverished compared to what it should be, and God answers it anyway, because God’s covenant faithfulness is not proportional to the quality of His servants’ prayers.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 17:1–7** — Water from the rock in the wilderness: God provides for His servant (and His people) after a great deliverance, not because they deserved it but because He is faithful to sustain those He calls. The structural parallel to Judges 15:18–19 is striking and places Samson, however improbably, in the line of covenant servants whom God sustains.
- **Hebrews 11:32–34** — Samson is named in the faith hall of fame: the text commends not his character but the faith that, however partially and fitfully, moved him. This controls how far the interpreter may go in pure condemnation — the text will not allow it — while not requiring hero-worship.
- **Romans 8:28** — God works all things together for good for those called according to His purpose: the Samson narrative is a sustained demonstration that God’s sovereign purpose is not hostage to the quality of His instruments. This is not a comfort to license; it is a demonstration of God’s power and faithfulness.
- **1 Samuel 8:4–7** — Israel demanding a king: the same theological failure pattern as Judah in Judges 15 — God’s people preferring human management of their condition over God’s appointed means of deliverance. The Judges-to-Samuel arc is the extended narrative of a people who cannot locate the right deliverer.

- **John 6:15 / Luke 4:18–21** — The contrast between Jesus as deliverer and every merely human judge or king: where Samson delivers Israel for twenty years (15:20) while acting from personal vengeance, Jesus announces the year of the Lord’s favor — deliverance accomplished through perfect righteousness, not broken instrumentality. The failure of Samson points forward to the necessity of the one who delivers rightly.

Aim: To show that God’s covenant faithfulness is not defeated by broken instruments or passive people — and that this faithfulness, rather than producing complacency, should produce deep longing for the perfect deliverer to whom all of Judges points.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15:1	Samson returns to his wife during wheat harvest with a goat as gift; her father refuses him entry, having given her to Samson’s companion	The father’s action (14:20) triggers the entire chapter’s escalation; Samson’s anger is partially justified, but his response will far exceed the provocation
15:2	Father-in-law explains: “I really thought you utterly hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister more beautiful? Please take her instead”	The offer of the younger sister compounds the offense; the father treats Samson’s wife as a commodity and attempts to manage the situation transactionally
15:3	Samson declares: “This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm”	Samson frames his retaliation in quasi-legal terms; he is positioning himself as the wronged party acting with justification — the text does not endorse this self-assessment
15:4–5	Samson catches 300 foxes, ties them in pairs by their tails with torches, and sets them loose in the Philistines’ standing grain, vineyards, and olive orchards	The scale and creativity of the act is striking; it is economic warfare targeting the harvest — the wheat harvest timing (v. 1) is not incidental

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15:6	Philistines ask who did this; learn it was Samson because his father-in-law gave his wife to another man; Philistines burn the wife and her father	The Philistines' response fulfills the very threat Samson's wife had feared (14:15) and produces exactly the outcome Samson had (at that point) sought to prevent
15:7	Samson vows: "If this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit"	The cycle of retaliation deepens; Samson is operating entirely within a personal vendetta framework — his motivation remains personal, not covenantal
15:8	Samson strikes the Philistines with a great slaughter ("hip and thigh"); withdraws to the cleft of the rock of Etam	"Hip and thigh" is an idiom for total, decisive slaughter; the retreat to Etam suggests Samson intends to pause, not continue — he is not pressing a campaign
15:9–10	Philistines encamp in Judah at Lehi; men of Judah ask why they have come up; Philistines say: "To bind Samson and do to him as he has done to us"	The Philistines camp in Judah — a military incursion into Israelite territory — and Judah's first question is not outrage but inquiry: what do you want so we can give it to you?
15:11	Three thousand men of Judah come to Samson at Etam; their accusation: "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?"	The theological low point of the passage: Judah's people have internalized their subjugation; a deliverer is a problem, not a gift; they muster three thousand men to arrest their own rescuer
15:12–13	Samson negotiates: swear you will not kill me yourselves; they agree; Samson submits to being bound with two new ropes; they bring him up from the rock	Samson's submission is not passive faithfulness — it is a calculated negotiation; yet the image of the deliverer bound and led away by his own people carries narrative weight the text intends

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15:14	As Samson comes to Lehi, the Philistines shout against him; the Spirit of the LORD rushes upon him; his bonds become as flax burned by fire; his ropes fall off	The Spirit's intervention is entirely God's initiative — not Samson's faith, readiness, or surrender; the timing is when the enemy closes in, not when Samson is at his best
15:15	Samson finds a fresh jawbone of a donkey and kills a thousand men with it	A fresh jawbone retains its firmness — a dry one would be brittle; the choice of weapon is deliberately humble; this is not martial sophistication but raw divine empowerment through an absurd instrument
15:16	Samson's victory song: "With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men"	The song is boastful and self-referential — "I have struck down" — unlike the songs of Moses or Deborah (Exodus 15, Judges 5) which credit God; the contrast is deliberate and unflattering
15:17	Samson throws away the jawbone; the place is called Ramath-lehi ("Hill of the Jawbone")	The naming convention continues the pattern of Judges place-names memorializing acts of deliverance — but the act being memorialized is Samson's boast, not God's praise
15:18	Samson is very thirsty; cries to the LORD: "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?"	The most direct prayer in the Samson narrative; Samson acknowledges God's role in the victory — this is genuine, if limited, theological recognition; the petition is also partly self-preservational
15:19	God splits open a hollow place at Lehi; water comes out; Samson drinks; his	God answers the prayer; the place-name credits the one who called — Samson — not

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15:20	spirit revives; the place is called En-hakkore (“Spring of the One Who Called”) Samson judged Israel in the days of the Philistines for twenty years	the one who provided; yet the miracle is real covenant provision A standard judge-formula closing; twenty years of relative stability follow, though Israel is not fully delivered — the Philistine problem persists into Samuel

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	15:1–3	The Trigger: Offense Compounded and Retaliation Announced
2	15:4–8	The Escalation: Samson’s Vengeance and the Philistines’ Counter-Violence
3	15:9–13	The Betrayal: Judah Chooses Bondage Over Deliverance
4	15:14–17	The Deliverance: The Spirit Acts, a Thousand Fall, Samson Boasts
5	15:18–20	The Dependence: Samson Cries, God Provides, the Judgeship Begins

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God delivers His people through a deeply flawed judge amid a deeply passive Israel.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that He keeps His covenant purpose of deliverance even when His instruments are broken and His people are complicit in their own bondage — and in doing so, He exposes the bankruptcy of every merely human deliverer and sharpens the reader’s longing for the one who will deliver rightly.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine where you have accepted bondage as normal. (*Affections/Worship*) The men of Judah said, “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?” — three thousand men who had so completely accommodated their oppression that they treated a deliverer as a threat. Before applying any lesson from Samson, the congregation must sit with Judah. Where have you stopped expecting deliverance? Where has the weight of a sin pattern, a relational wound, a spiritual defeat pressed you into a posture of management rather than hope? The Philistines of your life rule over you only as long as you have decided they do. Christ has come and has delivered — and the first movement of faith is to refuse to treat your bondage as permanent.

2. Stop requiring God’s instruments to be worthy before you receive what God is doing through them. (*Mind/Belief*) Samson is a mess and God delivers Israel through him anyway. This is not a comfortable truth, but it is a protecting one. If you have decided that a sermon, a rebuke, a word of encouragement, or a moment of God’s provision is invalid because the person or circumstance delivering it is imperfect, you are making the same category error as a congregation that would reject this story because Samson was acting from vengeance. God is not hostage to the quality of His instruments. Receive what God is doing, while holding the instrument with appropriate discernment.

3. Let Samson’s boast convict you of where you credit yourself for what God has done. (*Affections/Worship*) “With the jawbone of a donkey have I struck down a thousand men.” The pronoun is the tell. Samson experienced real divine empowerment and immediately narrated it as personal achievement. This is not uniquely Samson’s problem — it is the instinctive movement of the human heart away from worship toward self-congratulation whenever God works through us. Where have you taken credit for something God accomplished? Where has your testimony of what God did become, on closer examination, a testimony of what you did with God’s help? Samson’s song should make you uncomfortable enough to rewrite your own.

4. Cry to God from exactly where you are, not from where you think you should be. (*Will/Behavior*) Samson’s prayer in verse 18 is not a model prayer — it is partly self-referential, partly alarmed, and theologically thin. God answers it anyway. This does not license thin prayer; it licenses actual prayer. The barrier most people face is not theological ignorance about prayer — it is the conviction that their spiritual state, emotional state, or moral record disqualifies them from bringing their actual need to God. Samson brought his thirst to God after a cycle of vengeance-driven violence and God gave him water. You are not disqualified. Come with what you actually need, from where you actually are, in whatever words you actually have. God answers the one who calls.

5. Recognize that every human deliverer — including the best ones — exposes the need for Christ. (*Mind/Belief*) Samson judges Israel for twenty years (v. 20), but at the end of twenty years the Philistines are still there. Every human deliverer in Judges delivers

partially and temporarily. This is not a failure of the narrative — it is the narrative's point. God is building, through every broken judge and every incomplete deliverance, an argument that the people of God need a deliverer who does not deliver for vengeance, who does not sell out his own people, who does not need rescuing from thirst after the battle, and who does not leave the enemy still ruling after twenty years. Jesus is not Samson's upgrade — He is Samson's answer. Read Judges 15 to feel what it costs when you settle for less.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Judges 15 teaches that God's covenant faithfulness is sovereign over the quality of His instruments and the responsiveness of His people. God had promised to raise up a deliverer for Israel (13:5), and that promise is kept in chapter 15 — through a man acting from personal vengeance, empowered by a Spirit he has not sought, using a jawbone he found on the ground, amid a people who tried to hand him over. This reveals that the engine of deliverance in the Bible is not human worthiness but divine commitment. The Spirit's intervention in verse 14 is theologically decisive: it is entirely God's initiative, timed to God's purpose, requiring nothing from Samson by way of spiritual preparation. The water miracle of verses 18–19 extends this: God sustains the servant He calls, even when that servant's prayer is partly self-interested. Both acts together teach that God's covenant purpose advances not because of human faithfulness to it, but because of God's own faithfulness to Himself.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Judges 15 is a sustained display of sovereign grace operating through means that refuse to produce human pride — which is precisely the Reformed understanding of how grace always works. The instrument is flawed, the method is absurd (a jawbone, three hundred foxes), the people are passive, and the deliverer's song credits himself. Yet God's purpose advances. This is not an encouragement to sin ("God uses flawed instruments, so my flaws don't matter") but a demonstration that salvation is of the LORD — that the glory of deliverance cannot be secured by human strength, preparation, or character. Judah's three thousand men coming to bind Samson is a dark typological picture of the people of God preferring managed bondage to the disruption of grace. The twenty-year judgeship (15:20) achieves what God intended, but it leaves Israel still under Philistine pressure — pointing the canonical reader forward through Samuel and David to Christ, who delivers finally and fully because He alone is the righteous deliverer that every broken judge prefigures and fails to be.

Main Takeaway

God will keep His covenant purposes — through broken people, with absurd instruments, despite passive or even actively obstructive communities of faith. But the deliverances He accomplishes through Samson are not the ending He is working toward. Every jawbone, every twenty-year judgeship that ends with the enemy still at the border, every deliverer who acts from vengeance rather than righteousness — each one is God pressing His people to cry for something better. Christ is that something better. Judges 15 is not the place to find your hero; it is the place to feel your need.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating Samson as a straightforward model of faith.** The “God can use you despite your failures” sermon is not wrong at the level of a sentence — but it becomes wrong when Samson’s character is rehabilitated to make him admirable. The text does not admire Samson. It records what God accomplished through him and leaves the reader with a clear-eyed picture of what a deliverer looks like who is acting from vengeance rather than righteousness. A sermon that ends with the congregation inspired by Samson has failed to land the passage’s primary weight, which is not “be like Samson” but “God is faithful even when His servants are not.”
- **Ignoring Judah’s role.** The men of Judah occupy verses 11–13 and represent the passage’s most pressing congregational application. Preachers who move quickly through this section to get to the Spirit’s empowerment and the jawbone miracle have skipped the passage’s sharpest diagnostic moment. “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us?” is the line the congregation needs to hear applied to their own lives before they hear anything about Samson’s strength.
- **Reducing the Spirit’s empowerment to a template for personal spiritual experience.** Verse 14 describes a sovereign intervention for covenant purposes, not a model of Spirit-filled ministry available to all believers through surrender or preparation. Preaching verse 14 as “when you surrender to God, His Spirit will empower you supernaturally” imports a Pentecostal framework that the text does not support. Samson has not surrendered; the Spirit comes anyway. The lesson is God’s sovereignty, not Samson’s spiritual readiness.
- **Missing the typological failure dimension of verse 20.** The twenty-year judgeship is commonly preached as a victory note — “Samson brings twenty years of peace.” But the Philistines are still there. This is the recurring structural feature of Judges: partial, temporary, incomplete deliverance that keeps the reader hungry for more. A sermon that closes on the twenty years as triumph has missed the canonical

function of the Judges pattern, which is to produce longing for Christ, not satisfaction with Samson.

- **Allowing Samson's prayer (vv. 18–19) to be the whole point.** The water miracle and Samson's dependence on God are genuinely moving, and it is tempting to land the sermon here — “even Samson learned to cry out to God.” This is not false, but it is incomplete. The prayer is theologically thin, partly self-referential, and the miracle that answers it is primarily a display of God's faithfulness rather than a commendation of Samson's spiritual breakthrough. Preach the miracle as divine covenant provision; do not over-sentimentalize the prayer as a spiritual turning point in Samson's character.
- **Preaching the chapter in isolation from the Judges arc.** Judges 15 makes its fullest claim when understood as one episode in a downward spiral of increasingly broken judges and increasingly passive people. The preacher who treats it as a standalone story of a strongman hero will miss the cumulative theological argument the book is constructing — that no merely human judge can finally deliver Israel, and that God is through every episode building His people's longing for the one who can.