

THE MEANING OF SAMSON

Adapted from a series of college chapel talks by the Rev. Ormond Odhner

Readings: Judges 13:1-8

Today we will look at the wonderful tale of Samson and his one-man crusade against Israel's enemy, the Philistines—sea-rovers from the islands of the Aegean Sea who began to push east into Palestine some time around 1100 B.C.

Samson was a Nazirite, the sign of which was that he was never to cut his hair. (This was also the case with John the Baptist.) Indeed, Samson's strength was in his hair. When his hair was long, he was strong. When his hair was cut off, he was easily captured. When his hair grew back he grew strong again. But why? What is the significance, the spiritual meaning, of hair?

Hair, very obviously, is part of the living human body. But hair has very little life in it in its use as the outmost covering of the body. It is on those facts that the spiritual significance of hair is based. It is alive, but not very alive, and it is an outmost covering. Hair, therefore, is said to represent such literal truths as are found in the stories of the Word—in the plain, simple teachings of revelation. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that hair represents *ultimate truth*. This does not mean the highest truth, but rather the external truth that can contain all other, higher kinds of truth, and that is therefore very powerful.

Why was Samson strong when he had long hair, but weak when his hair was cut? To illustrate this, consider the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). In its inmost (celestial) sense, this means that we are not to hate the Lord. In its internal (spiritual) sense it means that we may not destroy another person's faith or religion. And in its literal, ultimate sense it means we may not kill another human being, injure him, hate him, or destroy his reputation.

Now let us suppose that we decide to obey this commandment only as to its two levels of internal meaning. We will not hate the Lord. We will not destroy another person's religion. But hate our neighbor? Why, of course, hate him. We will revel in hating him. We will injure him when possible, and would gladly kill him, if we could get away with it. And as for destroying his reputation—what could be more delightful?

It is clear that in such a case the fifth commandment has no real strength with us at all. The internal may indeed be the most important thing. The external may be only its covering, comparatively lifeless as far as religion goes (for an utterly irreligious person may also abstain from murder and slander.) But unless we obey the teachings of the Word in their ultimate form, in their literal meaning, nothing in the Word has any real power in us at all.

Hair signifies such ultimate, literal truth. So it was that Samson, who represents the power of the Word, was strong when his hair was long, and powerless when his hair was cut off.

SAMSON'S INSTABILITY: Judges 14:10-20

Samson is a very strange and inconsistent character. He was a man of terrific strength. He killed a lion with his bare hands. He walked off with a weaver's beam braided into his hair. He tore the gates off a city's walls and carried them away into the hills. But he was obdurate, stubborn, at times

completely foolish, and was always getting himself into trouble. Against the will of his parents and the laws of his religion, he married a woman of the Philistines. Indeed, he constantly got into trouble with women, and even when he plainly saw that the woman Delilah was out to have him killed, he could not resist her physical charms and came back to her again and again.

A mighty hero—and a very foolish man. But it should be carefully noted that Samson was heroic when “the spirit of the Lord came upon him.” He was foolish when he acted on his own, without Divine instruction. This distinction is most important to understanding the spiritual or internal sense of the story. For Samson, we are told, represents the Word in its letter—the Word as we have it in the Old and New Testaments. It is here that there is strength and power against evil. That is why Samson was strong. But Samson did what was right only when under Divine guidance; he did what was wrong when he acted on his own. And the stories of the letter of the Word give us spiritual strength when we are led to a proper understanding of them *by the Lord*. They can get us into serious trouble when we try to interpret them on our own, without the guidance of the spiritual sense. Such Divine guidance has been given to us in the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church.

THE PHILISTINES: Judges 15: 9-20

Religion is not merely what you *say* you believe. Religion is the way you *live* according to your belief. Yet one of our most common temptations is to believe that the whole of religion consists in knowing and understanding the tenets of faith. We are tempted to make religion consist solely of doctrine, separating it from life.

Each of the nations who fought the Israelites as they tried to settle in their promised land represents a particular evil. The Philistines, the Heavenly Doctrine says, represent this evil of which we have just spoken—making religion to consist merely in doctrine and knowledge, while ignoring the application to life.

It was Samson, strong and mighty Samson, who, on a one-man crusade, began to lead Israel to deliverance from the Philistines. Samson, we have already seen, represents the literal sense of the Word, the plain meaning of the literal teachings of the Old and New Testaments. And it is the literal sense of the Word which alone can deliver us when, tempted by spiritual Philistines, we would make religion consist of mere knowledge and doctrine. In the letter of the Word we will find the strength of Samson, if only we will turn to it, again and again, in such temptations.

In intellectual conceit we may be tempted to despise the plain and simple letter of the Word as a lowly weapon for the battles of life. But it contains the strength of Samson, who could take the fresh jawbone of a donkey and with it slay a thousand Philistines—“heaps upon heaps” (Judges 15:16).

SAMSON’S STRENGTH: Judges 16: 1-5

To us today, Samson’s strength seems almost impossible. We accept it only because revelation tells us that we must. And yet, the Heavenly Doctrine gives some indication of how such things could be, and, to some extent, so does common experience. There seem to be authentic cases in which people under great emotional stress have performed almost superhuman feats of strength. The most common example of this is that someone will carry something precious out of a burning building, and then, once it is safely outside, he or she is completely unable to lift it. These tales illustrate the general truth that under emotional stress people can sometimes do things that they are incapable of under ordinary circumstances.

Where does such strength come from? Not from the body itself—that remains unchanged. No, it is rather something from the mind that enters into the body and gives it unusual strength. It is this idea that the Heavenly Doctrine speaks of to explain how Samson’s strength literally lay in his hair. First, something special came into Samson’s mind from the Lord, and then his mind affected his body.

SAMSON AND DELILAH: Judges 16:6-31

Samson, mightiest of the heroes of Israel, fell because of the nagging of the woman he loved, but could not trust. Shorn of his hair, he was powerless before the Philistines. They took him captive, gouged out his eyes, and set him to work grinding wheat in their prison. Only one more act remained for him—to die the death wherein he would kill more Philistines than he had killed in the whole of his life.

Samson had fallen in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, but there is no indication at all that she loved him in return. Quite to the contrary, she at once agreed to the plot of the Philistine lords, in which, for a sum of about four thousand dollars—almost a fortune in that day—she would discover the secret of his strength and reveal it to his enemies.

So Delilah started to plead with Samson for his secret. He toyed with her, telling her to bind him with seven new bowstrings. She did and then called to the Philistines lying in ambush in her house. Samson snapped the cords as though they had been wax. He must have known Delilah was out to betray him. Nothing could have been more obvious. But still he came back to her. She nagged, and again he lied—about unused ropes. Again the Philistines ambushed him, and again he freed himself. And came back for more. But now he began to weaken. He did not reveal the whole secret yet, but close to it, telling her to bind his *hair* with a weaver’s beam. Once again he walked away free—and came back for more. She nagged again. And, vexed to death, he at last told her his secret: “If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man” (Judges 16:17). He sat at her feet; she stroked his head; he fell asleep at her knees. Then the deed was done, and he was captured, for when he rose to escape, the Lord had departed from him.

As foolish as it may sound, many a person has purposely let himself be tempted, just up to a certain point, so that he may feel pride and glory in resisting evil. Nothing could be more lethally dangerous. No person can ever resist evil from himself. His power to do so comes from the Lord alone, and it comes only when he keeps himself in a state of order. It is hardly orderly to put oneself into temptation. The Lord tells us to ask Him not to lead us into temptation in His prayer. Why should we lead ourselves there? The outcome is inevitable, and if anyone has ever escaped it, it was not because of his own power or his own intelligence.

The Word tells us that Samson “did not know that the Lord had departed from him” (Judges 16:20). Actually, the Lord never departs from anyone. He is infinite, eternal, unending love. But for the Lord’s love to do a person any good, there must be something in that person to receive it. What? A person must have knowledge, a living knowledge, of the plain teachings of the Lord’s Word. If you cast these away from yourself, then nothing in heaven or earth can save you from hell. To all intents and purposes, the Lord will have departed from you. The hair of Samson’s head represents this living knowledge. So when Samson’s hair had been shaved, the Lord’s power was no longer with him, and the Philistines took him, blinded him, and threw him into prison.

Samson went on to die in one last feat of strength as he pulled down the great pillars of a Philistine temple filled with people. With a prayer to the Lord, Samson was granted the strength to do this, demonstrating that the source of his power was really not his hair but the “Spirit of the Lord.”