

## COLLEGE CHAPEL TALK

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# THE BOOK OF JUDGES

By the Rev. Ormond Odhner

### **The Book of Judges – XI : HAIR**

*Readings:* Judges 13:1-8

Today we will look at the wonderful tale of Samson and his one-man crusade against Israel's newest 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.

Two things read from the story so far should be noted.: Manoah's wife saw and heard an angel, but had no idea at all that it was an angel. Manoah's child was to be a Nazarite, and therefore was never to cut his hair.

Protestant theologians unanimously conclude that the reason Manoah's wife did not know she saw an angel was that the angel had put on a disguise. The same was the case, they say, with Abraham and Gideon. We, of course, know differently. Angels *are* men, and therefore they look like men—not like spooks and ghosts. The men of the Most Ancient Church talked with angels constantly, and only knew it was not men on earth they spoke with if the angels suddenly disappeared, or some such thing.

And now for Samson's being a Nazarite, the sign of which was that he was never to cut his hair. (Such was also the case with John the Baptist.) We all know well the story of how 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? Why is hair so frequently mentioned in the Word, and why are such strange stories told about it? (Some children, for example, once called Elisha the prophet a "baldhead". Elisha cursed them, and immediately forty-two of the children were devoured by bears. ) Why?

Hair, very obviously, is part of the living human body. It is classified as bone, and our bones have to do with the structure and form of our bodies. And hair, though alive, is not very, very much alive; it has very little life in it in its use as the very outermost covering of the body.

It is on those facts that the spiritual significance of hair is based. Alive, but not very much alive. Bone and therefore having to do with structure and form. An outermost covering. Hair, therefore, is said to signify such literal truth as is found in the stories, in the plain, simple teachings of revelation. Hair, the Writings frequently state, signifies ultimate truth.

Why, now, was Samson strong when he had hair, weak when his hair was shorn? To illustrate this, take the fifth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” In its inmost or celestial sense, this means that we may not hate the Lord. In its internal or spiritual sense it means that we may not destroy another’s faith, another’s religion. In its literal, ultimate sense it means we may not kill another human being, injure him, hate him, or destroy his reputation.

Let us pretend, now, that we decide to obey this commandment as to its internal meaning only. We will not go around hating the Lord. We will not destroy another man’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 as clear as day that in such 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, their literal meaning, nothing in the Word has any real power in us at all.

The hair signifies such ultimate, literal truth. Hence it was that Samson, who typified the power of the Word, was strong when his hair was long, powerless when his hair was shorn off.

## **The Book of Judges – XII: SAMSON’S INSTABILITY**

**Readings:** Judges 14:10-20

The wonderful story of Samson paints a picture of a very strange and inconsistent character. He was a man of terrific strength. With his bare hands he killed a lion. 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 Church, he married a woman of the Philistines. Constantly he 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.

So far in the story we have read how, on one of his early visits to the Philistine woman, he had killed the lion, and how, some time later, he had found bees and honey in the lion’s carcass. He kept that a secret. Today we read the story of his marriage feast – a marriage which was never consummated. Interesting marriage customs are revealed here. The bridegroom, even then, had a “best man”. For seven days he put on a marriage feast and at the end of seven days he took the woman home to be his wife. Only Samson never did. She had betrayed his riddle. He had lost his bet. He killed enough Philistines to pay his debt and then went home in anger. His bride was at once married off to the friend who had served as best man.

A mighty hero - and a very foolish man. But it should be carefully noted in the story that Samson was the hero when “the spirit of the Lord came upon him”; foolish, when he acted on his own, without Divine instruction. This is most important to an understanding of the spiritual sense. For

Samson, we are told, represents the Word in its letter -the Word such as we have it in the stories of the Old and New Testaments. It is here that there is strength and power against. evil - that, we have already seen. 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.

What, for example, does the letter teach about the Divinity of Jesus Christ? If you just stuck to the letter and tried to interpret it on your own, you might come up with this answer - millions of people have - that it teaches that Christ is the Son of God, that He said prayers to God the Father, and asked Him to send the Holy Spirit. Three separate Gods - foolishness, trouble. But under the Divine guidance given in the revelation of the spiritual sense, you discover that such passages are written according to the appearance and must be interpreted in the light of other passages, in which the spiritual sense is clear - I and the Father are one; he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; the Son of God who would be born would be God Himself, the Father from eternity.

In the letter of revelation there is spiritual strength when it is interpreted and understood according to Divine guidance. To the New Church such guidance has been given in the writings.

### **The Book of Judges – XIII: THE PHILISTINES**

*Readings:* Judges 15: 9-20

One of the most common temptations to come upon New Churchmen as they grow up and enter more deeply into the mysteries of faith, is to believe that the whole of religion consists in knowing and understanding the tenets of their faith. If you can give a rational explanation of the Trinity, showing that the whole of it exists in Jesus Christ; if you can explain how an eternal, conjugal marriage is effected by the union of the will of the wife and the understanding of the husband; if you can show that the Lord's purpose in creation is a heaven from the human race; - well, then you are really New Church, intelligently and rationally New Church.

Or so we are tempted to think, making religion to consist solely of doctrine, separating it from life. But what good is it to be able to explain the Trinity, but not live the explanation? - and a person who allows himself to be guided by teachings other than the those of the Lord Jesus Christ is not living the doctrine of the Trinity, for, above everything else, this doctrine teaches that the human words spoken by Christ are the words of God Himself, and that there is no Divinity elsewhere. And what good is it for a boy to be able to prate beautifully of marriage and conjugal love, if, as a boy, he is not preparing himself for that love by purity of word and thought? And what good is it to speak of an eternal purpose in creation, if one lives as though all that mattered in life is the present here and now?

Religion is not merely what you say you believe. Religion is the way you live according to your belief. Yet, as we mature, we are constantly tempted to make the whole of religion consist only of knowledge and doctrine.

Each of the nations who conquered the Israelites as they were settling in their promised land signified not only the particular evil into which Israel had fallen, but also one of the various evils that attacks the Church in each of us. The Philistines, the Writings say, signify the evil of which we have just spoken, the evil of making religion to consist merely in doctrine and knowledge, while ignoring 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 the Writings. And it is the literal sense of the Word which alone can deliver us when, tempted by spiritual Philistines, we would make the whole of religion to consist of mere knowledges and doctrine. It is in the letter of the Word that we will find the strength of Samson, if only we will turn to it again and again is such temptation.

We can explain the Trinity, can we? (Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven – but he hath My words and keepeth them.) We believe in the eternity and holiness of marriage, do we? (For everyone who from early youth loves and desires and asks of the Lord a legitimate and lovely companionship with one, and who spurns and detests wandering lusts, a conjugal marriage is provided.) We believe in an eternal purpose in creation, do we? (Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.)

The letter of the Word – its plain and simple, homely teachings. In intellectual conceit we are tempted to despise it as a lowly weapon for the battles of life. But in it is the strength of Samson, who could take the moist jawbone of an ass and with it slay a thousand Philistines – “heaps upon heaps”.

### **The Book of Judges – XIV: SAMSON**

***Readings:*** Judges 16: 1-5

The few verses read today from the story of Samson tell one full incident of his life and the beginning of another – the last. One of the most remarkable features of the letter of the Word, incidentally, is the brevity of its stories. Probably forever there will remain in your minds a picture of Samson ripping off the huge gates of the city of Gaza, and carrying them off into the hills. It took exactly three verses of Scripture to tell that whole story and to describe the incidents that led up to it.

The story of Samson, the Writings say, is literally true, and is to be accepted as such. It is not what the Writings call “made-up history”, such as we find in the first few chapters of Genesis - stories made up for the sake of their internal meaning - the flood of water, for example, to describe the “flood” of evil and falsity that practically destroyed the human race at the end of the Most Ancient Church. Nor is the story of Samson mere legend or fable, such as we find in the ancient Greek tales of Hercules. The story of Samson is literally true. There was a man named Samson. He was strong - almost unbelievably strong. And - note this most carefully - his strength

actually lay in his hair. Literally, when his hair was long he had strength; when his hair was shorn he was powerless.

To us today, this seems almost impossible. We accept it only because revelation tells us that we must. And yet, the Writings give some indications of how such things could be, and, to some extent, so does common experience. There seem to be on record authenticated cases wherein men, under great emotional stress, have performed almost superhuman feats of strength. The most common examples of this which we usually hear tell how two or three men will carry some such thing as a huge piano out of a burning building, and then, once outside, are unable to lift it. Whether these particular tales are factual or not is unimportant. What is important is that they illustrate the general truth that under emotional stress men can sometimes do that which they are incapable of under ordinary circumstances.

Where does such strength come from? Not the body by itself - that remains unchanged. No, it is rather that something from the mind has entered the body and has given it unusual strength. And it is this line that the Writings speak when they explain how Samson's strength literally lay in his hair. The mind into the body. But, the Writings say, first, something special into his mind, and then the mind into the body.

For when the Lord set up the Jewish Church and commanded it to go through its representations and rituals, He associated the angels of heaven with those rituals and representatives in a very peculiar way. Today, with us, there may indeed be angels present in our repetition of the Lord's Prayer. There will be, if we are shunning evils as sins and otherwise living the Lord's commands. But if our hearts are evil, there will be no angelic spirits at all associated with our saying of the Prayer. With the ancient Jews the case was otherwise.

It did not matter what the spiritual state of the Jew was. As long as he stuck to the representatives commanded by the Lord, the heavens were associated with him, and he could use their power as his own. Hence his superhuman strength. But when his hair was shorn there was no representative left in him with which the heavens could be associated, and he became as any other man.

And at the end of the reading today we find Samson about to be thus bereft of his strength, betrayed by that woman he loved in the valley of Sorek - betrayed by Delilah for a bribe of about four thousand dollars.

### **The Book of Judges – XV: SAMSON AND DELILAH**

**Readings:** Judges 16:6-31

Samson, mightiest of the heroes of Israel, now has fallen, fallen 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.

He had fallen in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek. 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 for that day - she would discover the secret of his strength, and would reveal it to his enemies.

She started to plead with him for his secret. He toyed with her, told her to bind him with seven new bowstrings. She did and then called the Philistine ambush lying in wait in her house. Samson snapped the cords as though they had been tallow.

He must have known she was out to betray him. Nothing could have been more obvious. But back he came for more. She nagged. Again he lied - unused ropes. Again the Philistine ambush. Again he freed himself. And came back for more. And now he began to weaken. Not the whole secret yet, but close to it, Bind my hair with a weaver's beam. Once again he walked away free - and came back for more. She nagged again. Vexed to death, he at last told her his secret: "Shave my head and I shall be as any other man." He sat at her feet; she stroked his head; he fell asleep at her knees. The deed was done, and he was captured, for when he rose to escape, though he knew it not, the Lord had departed from him.

Three things are very evident here. One: It is dangerous to throw oneself into temptation, or, as we say colloquially, to play with fire. Two: No male can withstand the constant nagging of a female. And three: Man can do that which will cause the Lord to depart from him, as it were.

As foolish as it may sound, there has been many a person who purposely has 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 man 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. Why should we lead ourselves there? The outcome is inevitable, and if anyone has ever escaped it, it was by blind luck, and not because of his own power - much less because of his own intelligence.

The Writings teach that the male acts primarily from intelligence; the female, primarily from the will. The understanding is inconstant, vacillating; the will is forever persistent. Hence the Writings teach that in any marriage wherein one partner sets out to dominate the other, it is always, invariably, the woman who wins, even as the weak Delilah conquered the mighty Samson.

"And Samson wist not that the Lord had departed from him." Actually, the Lord never departs from anyone. He is infinite eternal, and unending love. But for the Lord's love to do man any good, there must be in man something to receive it. What? A knowledge, a living knowledge, of the plain teachings of His Word. Cast these away from yourself, and 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 the head represents these knowledges. Samson's hair had now been shorn. The Philistines took him, blinded him, and threw him into prison.