

Getting Strength from the Word

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“If I am shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man” (Judges 16:17).

We are fascinated by incredible strength. The feats of a strong man go on record. Samson is no exception. His deeds of strength against the Philistines are recorded in the book of Judges: how he killed a lion with his bare hands, slew a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey, and pulled down the temple of the Philistines.

There was a secret to Samson’s strength. It was his hair. He had superhuman strength until his hair was cut. Then he lost his special strength, was captured by the Philistines, blinded and imprisoned. The significance of Samson’s hair relates back to the circumstances of his birth and the obscure Israelitish law of the “Nazirite” (see Numbers 6). “Nazirite” is a Hebrew word that means “separated” and refers to a man set apart from others by a vow to the Lord. While accomplishing his vow, the Nazirite is pledged to let his hair grow uncut. This is a sign that he has made a vow of some kind.

The remarkable circumstance of Samson’s birth was that an angel of the Lord first appeared to his mother, who was barren, in the dark days of Philistine occupation, announcing that she would bear a son. This son, the angel said, would “begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines,” and being set apart for this mission from birth would be “a Nazirite to God from the womb” (Judges 13:5). This explains why Samson’s hair was not to be cut and why he lost his strength against the Philistines when it was. However, it does not account for the origin or source of Samson’s remarkable strength. This came from the Lord. Whenever Samson was about to accomplish some superhuman feat it is said that “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him” (see Judges 14:6,19; 15:14; 16:28).

Samson was given special strength from the Lord to accomplish his deeds against the Philistines. He actually received the power to do those things as they are recorded. They are not legends or myths. They were the dramatic demonstration on earth of the Lord’s spiritual power. Samson was born and raised to represent the Lord and His strength (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3301). Samson, in a great show of strength, slew 1000 uncircumcised Philistines single-handedly with the jawbone of a donkey, and in his death he brought down the temple of Dagon upon the heads of its worshippers. So the Lord single-handedly fought and subjugated the power of evil and falsity by His own power. The strength of Samson therefore represented and foreshadowed a kind of strength that the Lord took on at His incarnation, and a kind of strength that we can have, too.

It is strength from the Word. But what is this strength? How can we find it and use it in our life?

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church use a certain phrase that describes an important general principle about power: there is “power in ultimates.” By “ultimates” we mean “last things” or external things—the “outer covering”. For example, in relation to a person, the body is the ultimate. The spirit and mind are internal, the body external. And it is only through the words or deeds of the body that the spirit has the power to effect anything. While we may talk about the

“power of an idea”, that power is unrealized until the idea is expressed or executed in outward form. A good intention is not enough. It must be carried out in some tangible way. The importance and power of ultimates applies in the workaday world. Contracts are written and signed. Even a “gentleman’s agreement” is usually confirmed by some outward sign, if only by a handshake.

How does this principle apply to the Word of the Lord? The power of the Word is in ultimates, too. It resides in what the Heavenly Doctrine calls “the sense of the letter.” The Heavenly Doctrine explains: “This power in ultimates was represented by the hair with the Nazirites, as with Samson, for the hair corresponds to the ultimates of the Divine truth” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1086:5). Samson, with hair uncut, represents the Word in that ultimate form in which there is power—the Word in the sense of the letter.

What is the “sense of the letter”? This is the sense or meaning of the Word in its literal form. It is the natural meaning we derive from reading its words. It is the Word accommodated to our understanding.

There are truths in the Word in this literal sense. The Lord has given commands there, laws of order and genuine truths for salvation. But there are other teachings which are appearances only. “The truths of the sense of the letter of the Word are in part not naked truths,” we are told, “but appearances of truth, and are as it were likenesses and comparisons taken from things such as exist in nature, and thus accommodated and adapted to the apprehension of the simple and of little children” (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures* 40).

Because of this, some who read the Word find its style and content unpolished and irrelevant. In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church we read these things:

The angels said that although the style of the Word seems simple in the sense of the letter, it is such that nothing can ever be compared to it in excellence, since Divine wisdom lies concealed not only in the meaning as a whole but also in each word.... Again, they said that without such a Word there would be no light of heaven with the people of our earth, nor would there be any conjunction of heaven with them (Heaven and Hell 310).

From this it is that if the Word is read even by a little child, the Divine things therein are perceived by the angels (Arcana Coelestia 2899).

It was said by the angels that the Word of the Lord is a dead letter; but that in him that reads it is vivified by the Lord according to the capacity of each one; and that it becomes living according to the life of his charity and his state of innocence... (Arcana Coelestia 1776).

It is through the sense of the letter of the Word that we are to approach the Lord. The Lord can be with us in our understanding of the Word. With it we can fight and overcome the evils and falsities that infest us. Without it, we would be lost. The communication of heaven with earth depends upon the integrity of this ultimate form—the Lord’s Word in its literal sense.

Consider this remarkable teaching:

[J]ust before...[the Lord's]...coming there was no Divine truth in ultimates with people in the world, and none whatever in the church...that had not been falsified and perverted, and consequently there was no foundation for the heavens; unless, therefore, the Lord had come into the world and had thus Himself assumed the ultimate, the heavens that were made up of the inhabitants of this earth would have been transferred elsewhere, and the whole human race on this earth would have perished in eternal death. But now the Lord, on the earth as in the heavens, is in His fullness, and thus in His omnipotence, because He is in ultimates and in things first. Thus the Lord is able to save all who are in Divine truths from the Word, and in a life according to them, for He can be present and dwell with such in ultimate truths from the Word... (Apocalypse Explained 726:7).

How precious then is the Word of the Lord! It is, in the words of Jacob, “none other than the house of God, and...the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17)!

For many people today, however, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is dismissed as a book of myths, having little or no significance for modern people. Therefore, few believe that it has any power to change the world or our personal life. But how mistaken they are. The Word has great power. Without it we would become like a shorn Samson, weak and blind, captive to our spiritual enemies. We must seek to restore to the world a new understanding of the importance and power of the Word of God.

There is power in ultimates. The sense of the letter of the Word is the foundation for our spiritual life. We should read it with reverence and prayers for understanding, knowing that we are inviting the Lord into our mind as we do so. We should remember that the power of the Word in the sense of the letter is “the power to open heaven...and also the power to fight against falsities and evils, thus against the hells” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1086:6). What more important powers are there for a person to have on earth?

The power of the Word to open heaven is from the correspondences or internal meanings in it. By such correspondence we are “conjoined closely with heaven, and through heaven with the Lord... (*Arcana Coelestia* 3735). Concerning the power to fight hell we are told, “The power of Divine truth is directed especially against falsities and evils, thus against the hells” (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 49). This passage continues, pointing out the importance of the Word in its natural sense in the combat with falsities and evils, for “the fight against these must be waged by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word” (*ibid.*). The passage also states, “Moreover it is by means of the truths in a man that the Lord has the power to save him; for man is reformed and regenerated and is at the same time taken out of hell and introduced into heaven, by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word” (*ibid.*).

The study of the Word is also important in the development of our doctrinal understanding, for all things of doctrine must not only be drawn from, but also “confirmed by the sense of the letter of the Word...and whatever of doctrine is not confirmed from the sense of the letter of the Word has no power” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1089e; *De Verbo* 57). After the doctrines of the church are

learned, we are told, “then exploration is to be made from the Word as to whether they are true.... When this is done from an affection of truth, then a person is enlightened by the Lord so as to perceive, without knowing whence, what is true....” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6047). Indeed, we are told that we can inquire of the Lord “in doubtful matters of faith, and can receive answers from Him, but nowhere except in the Word” (*ibid.*).

What, then, could be more valuable to us than the regular and frequent reading of the Word?

We all face times of spiritual need. Oppressed by evils and falsities, we need strength to regain our faith. The strength is at hand—in the Word. Open the Word to the Psalms and let the Lord speak to you: “Do not fret because of evildoers.... Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass” (Psalm 37:1,5). Or turn to the 91st Psalm to learn of the angels who have charge over you to keep you in all your ways. Find the 6th chapter of John and know that the Lord is the “living bread” from heaven. Or read chapter 10 to know that He is the “good shepherd” and the “door of the sheep.” If you feel abandoned in your spiritual combats, gain perspective by reading about Elijah in the 19th chapter of the first book of Kings. Rejoice with the angelic hosts in the birth of the Lord in Luke 2. Give thanks to the Lord with the 100th Psalm. Pray to Him in the 61st Psalm.

The Word is like a heavenly shield. Use it to protect yourself from the attacks of hell. Find refuge in the shelter of its wings. The Word is like a well of water. Drink from it and discover unending truths springing up into everlasting life. The Word is like a garment, a coat of many colors. Wrap yourself in its warmth and beauty.

When we speak of the sense of the letter of the Word, we include the Heavenly Doctrine. It, too, presents Divine truths in natural form. It is the “rod of iron” to rule the nations. We are told, ““And He shall rule them with a rod of iron’ signifies by truths from the literal sense of the Word, and at the same time by rational things from natural light” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 148). So, in the Heavenly Doctrine, explore the spiritual world. Learn the laws of Providence. Discover the delights of wisdom about Conjugal Love.

In His many books, the Lord is ready to teach us. There is no penalty for assignments not done. There is no embarrassment about ignorance or asking the wrong questions. He is patient. He is wise. Above all else, He is loving. He invites us to come, to take of the water of life freely and to follow Him.

Amen.

Lessons: Judges 16:4-6, 16-22; Revelation 1:10-16; *True Christian Religion* 223