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# **The Tragedy of Samson**

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The story of a great failure

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The Tragedy of Samson

A. O. Hudson

Bible Fellowship Union
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Chapter 1

NAZARITE UNTO GOD

The valley lay drowsily under the hot summer sun. The fields of Eshtaol stretched out, quietly beautiful, leading the eye to the white houses of the village of Zorah in the distance. The road winding through the valley was no more than a mule track, travellers were few and far between, and the inhabitants went on with their farming and stock rearing unmolested except for periodic raids of Philistine marauders from the south, scouring the quiet valley for plunder.

The Philistines were already there when the tribe of Dan entered the land, many generations ago. At first they had not anticipated trouble, for the Philistines were down in the flat lands bordering the sea, thirty miles or more away, and there was plenty of room in the land for both. But now with both peoples multiplying fast and wanting ever more and more land on which to settle, there was bound to be a collision, and for many years now, ever since the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, the two races were constantly clashing. For thirty or forty years past the children of Dan had been held in subjection to the hated Philistines.

Tall, muscular men, these Philistine soldiers, clad in coats of mail, wearing polished bronze helmets, armed with swords and spears and other weapons such as Israel had never seen before. They had come from the island of Crete in the days of Abraham, dispossessing the Canaanites who dwelt on the sea coast and settling there to grow corn for their native land. Crete was a civilised and progressive country, peculiarly like eighteenth century Britain in a good many respects, and having a lively power of mechanical invention, so that the primitive Israelites stood no chance at all against them. Not until the days of David, still a century or so in the future, was the power of the Philistines finally to be broken by Israel.

So it came about that Manoah and his wife, quiet God-fearing Israelites of the tribe of Dan, pursued their uneventful lives in Zorah in humble faith that God would protect them from all enemies and give them prosperity all the time they honoured him and obeyed his covenant. They had one great sorrow; no son crowned their union, no one to carry on their line and inherit their lot in the land. It seemed hard to understand, almost as though God had not kept his part of the covenant, for the covenant promised the blessing of children among other gifts. Strange to understand and hard to accept, until the day that Manoah's wife met the angel in the fields.

The matter of fact manner in which visitations of angelic beings to men is related in the Old Testament reads strangely to modern minds, and of course a good many, even among Christians, dismiss the whole thing as incredible--based on

nothing more than fanciful embellishments to the story. But there is no doubt that these things did happen, that emissaries from the celestial world did assume forms of flesh and appear to men as men, to carry out some element of the outworking of the purposes of God. The fact that so far as we know such instances do not occur to-day is no argument that they did not occur then; the whole basis of God's dealing with men since Christ is changed. We walk by faith, not by sight. God is selecting out from among the nations a church, a people for his Name; He speaks to them through the medium of his indwelling Holy spirit and there is no need of external agents appealing through the physical senses. In the next Age, when God turns again to deal with all mankind under the beneficent arrangements of the Messianic Kingdom, it is at least possible that the direct and personal ministry of angels will be restored. At any rate, there is no evidence that Manoah and his wife saw anything unusual in the proceedings. It is true that Manoah's expressed fear was the superstitious one common to that day that having seen a manifestation of God face to face, they must die, but his wife, more practical, pointed out that if the Lord intended to kill them He would not have accepted a sacrificial offering at their hands, and with that Manoah was content. They were left then with the gist of the angel's message, to wit, that a son was to be born to her who heretofore had been barren, that he was to be devoted to God, a Nazarite, under the ritual that distinguished the Nazarite fraternity, from the day of his birth, and that when grown to manhood's estate he would begin to deliver Israel from the power of the Philistines.

That last promise must have brought joy to the hearts of this pious couple. Deliverance was what every true Israelite desired. It is a safe deduction that the immediate past had been a time of national apostasy, for the fact that they were now subject to the Philistines instead of vice versa is a direct indication that they had failed to keep the covenant which, if kept, promised them immunity from such things. The barrenness of Manoah's wife is another evidence pointing to the same thing, for this also, on a national scale, was another result of failure to keep the covenant. The promise of a child, therefore, one who would only so much as begin to deliver Israel, was a Divine intimation that in some way Israel had shown signs of repentance, so that God, as ever, was quick to respond with the promised deliverance.

There are four cases of a child being born to a hitherto barren woman in the Scriptures, and in each case the child was destined to fulfil some specific divine commission. Isaac, Jacob and John the Baptist in addition to this son of Manoah, were thus born, and each birth was heralded by a Divine intimation of future destiny. It almost seems as if God took special measures to indicate a providential interference with the normal course of Nature in order to draw attention to the

significance of what He was about to do.

In this case the child was to be a Nazarite. The vow of a Nazarite was a custom ordained in the Mosaic Law to mark the dedication of a man to God's service, either for a stipulated time or for life. The man thus setting himself apart from his brethren was required to fulfil two obligations which made that separation a very real thing. He was to abstain from the fruit of the grape-vine in all its forms, whether as plucked from the vine, or as wine or drink, and he was not to pass any razor over his head--his hair and beard were to be suffered to grow unchecked. In addition he was not to allow himself to become defiled by death or a dead carcass. Such a man was peculiarly "God's Man" in a sense which was not true even of the Levites. They too, were set apart and dedicated to Divine service, but in the things of every-day life and among their fellows. The Nazarite was set completely apart for the performance of such direct duties as might be laid upon him by God. The intimation to Manoah and his wife that their son was to be a Nazarite implied therefore that he was separated from his birth for some very definite purpose of God; they were told too what that purpose was. *"He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines"*.

So began a life full of promise. Born of devoted, God-fearing parents, trained up in the strict self-discipline which strengthened character, sobriety and tenacity of purpose whilst at the same time it built physical strength and stamina of the highest possible order; conscious all the time of a Divine destiny and calling. What better inheritance for a young man on the threshold of life? What brighter hope for the future, as the inhabitants of Zorah watched his growth through boyhood into early manhood, and recalled the promise made at his birth *"He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines"*.

So, we are told, the Spirit of the Lord began to move Samson at times at the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol. The camp of Dan was evidently a tribal meeting place, where perhaps the elders of the villages and families gathered in conclave, and the youth of the tribe met to engage in sports and contests of skill. The superior strength and prowess of the youthful Samson would at such times mark him out among his fellows and give rise to much nodding of heads and earnest consultation among the older men. Surely, they would say to one another, God was about to fulfil his promise and raise up for them the deliverer for which their souls longed. Here was the man whose giant strength could prove equal to that of their armour-clad enemies. Surely God was about to deliver his people! Hopes must have run high in the villages and hills of Eshtaol and Zorah, and men begin to lift up their heads a little and talk, perhaps, of those far-off glorious days when Joshua and his hosts had won them this land by his own armed might. Here was another

Joshua, to lead them into battle with the high praises of God on their lips and the two-edged sword in their hands, to put to flight the armies of the aliens and bring peace and prosperity to Israel.

And none, in those golden days of hope, suspected the canker which lay in the heart of their hero and robbed him, and them, at the last, of the triumph they sought.

Chapter 2

DAUGHTER OF THE PHILISTINES

“And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. And he came up and told his father and his mother, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines; now therefore get her for me to wife.” (Jud. 14. 1-2).

Easy-going, casual words, but in one moment they destroyed a father's pride and a mother's hopes. That their son, dedicated to the Lord from his birth, marked out for Divine service and Divine honours, pre-ordained to deliver Israel from the Philistines, should deny all the high ideals inculcated in him from childhood, by choosing for his wife a woman of the godless aliens, must have caused heartbreak to his parents and consternation throughout Zorah. Where now were all the golden expectations of freedom from servitude and restoration of racial pride and dignity. Their champion had failed them; their idol had feet of clay. *“Is there not a woman of the families of Israel, that thou takest a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?”* expostulated his father bitterly. Samson only replied indifferently, *“Get her for me, for she pleaseth me well.”* There is all the arrogance and self-confidence of inexperienced youth in that remark.

It need not be thought that Samson was either repudiating his Divine calling nor even consciously violating his obligations as a Nazarite. The trouble ran much deeper than that. All the evidence goes to show that Samson interpreted his commission in terms of his own physical strength bestowed by God, and believed that his personal relationship to God was of no consequence provided he made use of his physical powers to inflict as much damage upon the Philistines as he could. Samson is a perfect example of the natural man who perceives not the things of the Spirit of God even though he pay God lip service and believe himself to be a favoured one of God. The obligations of the Mosaic Law and of the Nazarites' vow meant nothing to Samson the while he could go out and kill Philistines for God. It was only when the natural strength failed him and he was brought low in suffering that his mind became ennobled to better things. But at this time in his life that sequel lay far in the distant future.

Timnath was a village some six or seven miles from Zorah, lying just inside the boundaries of the tribe of Judah and only a mile or so from the Philistine frontier. It evidently had a joint Hebrew/Philistine population and mixed marriages were probably not at all uncommon, despite the prohibitions of the Law Covenant against such unions. Samson must have known the village well and some of his boyhood friends would have been Timnites. The athletic figure of the Hebrew

youth, his flowing locks and keen, clear eyes would make him attractive in the eyes of all the village maidens and even a Philistine father would not object to a match with a man of such known prowess. So the marriage was arranged. With heavy heart, assuredly, Manoah performed the distasteful task, demanded by the custom of the day, of consulting with the Philistine father of the girl and agreeing upon the details of her dowry, the guarantees and assurances necessary on behalf of his son, and all the arrangements which had to be made before the union could become effective.

This to the Hebrews was the real marriage, after which the bride remained at her father's house for a period of months before her husband came to take her to her new home. This part of the arrangement did not conform to Philistine custom and probably that fact was partly responsible for the sequel.

So it came about that within a little while Samson was striding along the narrow track which led from Zorah to Timnath, on the way to finalise the contract with the woman who had taken his fancy. Canaan was a fertile and tree-clad country in those days, and the wilder parts between centres of habitation harboured many wild animals, some of them dangerous to man, so that Samson may not have been altogether surprised at the sudden appearance, on the pathway before him, of a lion. The beast was probably the more frightened. The narrative says, "A young lion roared against him"--the prelude to its crouching for a spring. Samson, confident in his strength and agility, waited for the leap. As it came, he adroitly side-stepped and in a lightning flash got behind and above the animal, his hands round its throat, taking care to keep out of the way of its flailing limbs, bending its neck backwards until he had throttled its life out of existence. With, perhaps, a gesture of contempt, he flung the lifeless body by the wayside and strode on his way, revelling afresh in his strength and probably praising God for his victory. The account says that the Spirit of God came upon him to do this thing; we have to remember that there were no eye-witnesses so the account of the incident had in the first place to come from Samson himself. He must have accredited his power and deliverance to the Spirit of God and thus would be in all sincerity. He did believe that God was giving him this physical strength in every time of need and the chronicler of the story would repeat Samson's assertion in all good faith. And who, reading the entire story and viewing the life of Samson in relation to the onward development of God's purposes can doubt that the Holy Spirit did indeed give him strength above that of most men that he might work out the destiny planned for him, even though in the end he failed to make of it all that could have been had he been less a slave to his own fleshly passions?

The period of waiting ended, Samson again took the path to Timnath to claim his bride. It seems to have been an unusually casual proceeding for a son of Israel.

As a rule this was the festive occasion on which the bride waited with her maidens on the coming of the bridegroom, and that fortunate man set out accompanied by all his men friends, and with every manifestation of rejoicing and merriment, to bring his bride back to her new home. On this occasion it is evident that Samson set out by himself, and that his parents must have preceded him. Perhaps the marriage was not too popular in Zorah and his friends wanted nothing to do with it. When the feast finally was held it was at the bride's house and not the bridegroom's, and the companions of the bridegroom turned out to be Philistine men friends of the bride, facts which are significant. The casual nature of the whole proceeding is heightened by the fact that Samson, on his way to his bride, found time to turn aside to look for the carcass of the lion he had slain some months previously when last he had passed this way. He found the skeleton--the flesh would have been completely consumed by vultures within a very few hours of death--and in the skeleton a colony of bees. Without ado he scooped out the honey with his hands, *"and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave to them, and they did eat; but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion."*

They would not have eaten had he told them. Staunch supporters of the Law, they knew better than to eat that which was defiled by association with the remains of the dead. Samson committed two further breaches of his Nazarite vows in this incident. He defiled himself by touching the dead carcass, and he partook of that which was defined in the Law as "strong drink", i.e., anything fermented. The ancients used honey as a means of producing fermented liquors. For so paltry an immediate attraction as a mouthful of honey he ignored his obligation to God. There is a strong likeness between Samson and Esau. Esau also insisted on marrying alien women and sold his birthright for the present satisfaction of a mess of pottage.

The wedding feast proceeded, but the outcome was disastrous. Thirty full-blooded Philistine youths drinking Samson's wine almost certainly spelt trouble, and trouble was not long in coming. Samson, probably himself flushed with wine, challenged the thirty to a tussle of wits. He would propound a conundrum, a "riddle" as the Authorised Version has it, the loser paying to the winner thirty mantles ("sheets" in the Authorised Version), and thirty sets of inner garments. The youths accepted the challenge, and Samson, remembering his finding the honey in the lion's carcass, gave them *"out of the eater came forth food* ("meat" in the Authorised Version) *and out of the strong came forth sweetness."* It would seem to us a particularly difficult conundrum for anyone completely unfamiliar with the circumstances to solve; probably, however, the solution was arrived at by a series of replies to eliminating questions, after the fashion of some modern party games.

This, however, was no party game. These Philistine youths had no intention of being on the losing side, and when after three days they were still as far off the solution as ever they determined on more drastic steps.

This feast was a most elaborate affair. It was apparently designed to continue for seven days. The impropriety of such a period of conviviality with the people he had been commissioned from birth to oppose and fight, and if necessary destroy in order to deliver Israel, apparently had not entered Samson's mind. These men, Philistines or not, had come to celebrate his wedding and he intended to see that it was well and truly celebrated. And so he awaited in genial equanimity the thirty mantles and sets of inner garments, the price of their failure to guess his riddle.

Samson's newly married wife, however, was in a predicament. Her erstwhile friends had threatened her with the burning down of her father's house with her inside it unless she obtained the answer to the riddle and imparted it to them. It does not appear that she had sufficient confidence in Samson's ability to handle the matter to tell him of the threat; rather she used her woman's wiles--accompanied, according to the narrative, by floods of tears--until the hero's patience gave out and he told her the secret. After that, of course, it was all plain sailing. On the seventh day the Philistine youths triumphantly returned answer to Samson. *"What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?"* Samson knew how they had obtained the solution but there was nothing he could do about it. He contented himself with the contemptuous retort, *"If ye had not plowed with my heifer ye had not found out my riddle"*.

There remained the matter of the thirty mantles and sets of inner garments. It is sad to relate of a man professedly dedicated to God that this presented no problem. Samson went down to the Philistine town of Ashkelon, some thirty miles away on the sea coast and deep in Philistine territory. There, by means not recorded, he surprised and murdered thirty Philistine men, stole their garments and came back to Timnath to pay his debt.

Cold with anger, Samson returned to Zorah with his parents, leaving his Philistine wife in her father's house. At that moment he had finished with her; he never wanted to see her again. This was not the triumphant homecoming he had planned. It is not likely that his feelings were those of a man betrayed by one he loved; more likely they were those of wounded pride. His insulting reference to his newly married wife as "my heifer" shows that he had little genuine respect or love for the girl; more likely her appeal was purely to the animal passions, and now the fever had passed and he was morose and resentful. Accustomed as he was to admiration and hero-worship from the circle in which he had grown up, he now had been slighted in the very quarter from which he least expected it, and he was coldly furious.

What could have been the feelings of the older couple, trudging along wearily behind him? What had become of all the golden dreams which had coloured their up-bringing of this child of promise? How could they now expect this son of theirs to become a saviour in Israel, a champion of the people of God, going out in the power of the Holy Spirit to overthrow the enemies of the chosen people, restore the safety and prosperity of a covenant-keeping nation, and so enable its God-given destiny to be fulfilled. Rioting, gluttony, drunkenness, theft and murder; these were the fruits of Samson's wedding feast; these were embedded into the character of the man of whom it had been predicted before his birth, *"He shall be a Nazarite unto God": "He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hands of the Philistines."* And when the two arrived home and the full story of the week's disastrous happenings had been made known in Zorah, many there must have been who mourned for their fallen idol; many who uttered in their hearts, as long-cherished hopes faded, the oft-repeated plaint, "Hath God forgotten to be gracious?"

Manoah and his wife were not the only saintly couple whose devoted training of a loved child in the things of God seems in later days to have been wholly fruitless, when that child, grown to maturity, has turned aside into lawless or godless ways. So many have asked, in all sincerity, "How can such things be?" What was wrong with the early training that it proved unable to hold the one so instructed throughout life? Many disappointed parents have been plunged into the depths of despair because of some such outcome to their efforts. The fault does not usually lie in any inadequacy of training: the root cause goes much deeper. It lies in the well-nigh overwhelming power of Adamic sin. There is no answer to these problems unless the doctrine of the Fall is accepted with all its implications. *"As by one man sin entered and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."* The accumulated effect of all mankind's sin from the beginning lies inherent in every man born into the world. Every child starts life under this handicap. Our Adversary the Devil remains vigilant and active, ever seeking to maintain and increase the content of the world's sin. Is it to be wondered at that in many cases the earnest endeavours of the best parents just fails entirely to offset that inherited poison and eventually some external chain of circumstances tips the balance sufficiently to set the unhappy individual upon the downward track. In Samson's case it was a pretty face which started him on the road to ruin; in countless other instances it has been one or another of the varied aspects of those three cardinal influences, the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. Behind it all has been the dread influence of the god of this world blinding the minds of those who believe not.

But just as the seed of evil, sown in past generations, comes to its fruitage, so must the seed of righteousness, sown in prayer and faith by godly parents, bear fruit

one day. God is not mocked, and God is all-powerful. We do not understand all God's secrets, and our knowledge of his purposes is at the best immature. We do know that God desires not the death of the sinner, but rather that he may turn from his evil ways, and live. There is much in the prophetic Scriptures which speaks of a Day of righteousness in which, under the righteous rule of Christ, returned to earth in power and glory, the Devil will be bound that he might deceive the nations no more, and all men walk in the light of Christ's Kingdom to learn of righteousness and the call to become reconciled to God. Is it too much to expect that in some wonderful manner God, who knows the secrets of all men, will extend to all the Samsons of every age in whose hearts resides the slightest possibility of repentance, the opportunity to turn again from their evil and accept in sincerity the Christ whom once they knew, and from whom in ignorance and under the handicap of Adamic taint they turned away? Let every parent who mourns a son or daughter at present thus lost take comfort from the Scriptural truth that God is not less merciful than our own hearts, that his love for the erring one is not less than is ours, and that He will by no means loose his hold until in his own infinite wisdom He sees that all hope and possibility of repentance is dead. It was Dr. Paterson Smyth many years ago who suggested that it may take the supreme crisis of physical death eventually to awaken some wayward ones to the evil of sin and the goodness of God, and who can doubt that repentance in such circumstances, as in the story of the prodigal son, would find the Father ready to come out and meet the lost and returning one?

But here in the story, Samson is farther away from God than ever. Of what use to say that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, when the only result was to nerve and strengthen him to great physical feats but never to reach his heart. Until then he could in no sense of the word be God's man. So he returned to Zorah, a disappointed, frustrated, vengeful man, consumed only with the desire to execute further retaliation upon the authors of his wounded feelings.

Chapter 3

MAN OF BLOOD

It was probably not very long after the disastrous sequel to his wedding at Timnath that Samson decided to go to the wife he had abandoned, presumably with the idea of bringing her back with him to Timnath and making her his wife in fact. His anger had abated; his nature was probably not capable of maintaining any deep emotion for very long, and in the casual way which seems to have characterised so many of his actions he apparently assumed that all that had happened would by now be forgiven and forgotten and that he would be received as cordially as when he first came to Timnath, a prospective son-in-law.

His easy-going hopes, however, were soon dashed. His father-in-law was by no means pleased to see him. *"Is not her younger sister fairer than she? Take her, I pray thee, instead of her"*. The aggrieved husband was in no mood to discuss the relative merits of the two sisters' physical charms. He had been slighted once again, his vanity wounded even more deeply than before. One can well imagine the swift revulsion of feeling, the transformation of genial placidity to blazing anger as he strode out of the house vowing vengeance for this, the supreme insult of all. *"Now shall I be blameless from the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure."* To describe the ensuing wholesale and wide-spread destruction of the Philistines' standing crops as "doing them a displeasure" is such a masterly understatement of the facts that one is justified in concluding that if the word Samson used actually does have the meaning of the English phrase then he could hardly have been fully conscious of the enormity and significance of what he did. The whole story of Samson yields the picture of a man whose mind had not developed in pace with his body, a giant not aware of the moral significance of his actions. Now he went out possessed of one idea only, revenge, revenge upon the whole Philistine community which he blamed for the miscarriage of his dreams and plans.

One of the commonest of small animals in Canaan at that time and during most ages since is the jackal (mistranslated "foxes" in the Authorised Version). Samson was a country lad born and bred and he would well know how to track them to their holes and catch them. The time was the time of wheat harvest, when the standing grain was dry and ripe. The early rains had ceased and there would be no more rain for several months. The watercourses were dried up or drying up as is usual in the summer. Samson started catching jackals, tying them in pairs tail to tail and fixing a burning truss of straw or similar material to each pair of tails. The terrified animals struggled frantically with each other, darting madly about as each sought to rid itself of the flaming encumbrances, setting fire to the growing grain

in a myriad places as they fled. The account says Samson thus treated three hundred of them. It is not necessary to suppose that he caught the entire three hundred at once and released them simultaneously; rather it is more reasonable to think that he went about the countryside catching and releasing jackals wherever he could. The Philistines, desperately endeavouring to quench the rapidly spreading flames which burst out anew in one place as fast as they extinguished them in another, would have little time to spare to hunt down the instigator of the trouble, who in any case could easily keep one jump ahead of them all the time. By the time the last fire was out and order had been restored, Samson was nowhere to be found.

The loss to the Philistines must have been enormous. It was not only a question of their grain supplies for the coming year; it was the fact that the land of the Philistines was the main grain producing centre for their own homeland of Crete, seven hundred miles away across the Mediterranean Sea. An area of something like a thousand square miles, some of the richest agricultural land in Canaan, was held by the Philistines for this purpose, and Samson's three hundred jackals could easily have destroyed crops over the major portion of this territory. In the dry season, with water scarce and the fields packed with ripe grain, the conflagration must have grown to epidemic proportions and raged for days, leaving at the end miles of blackened fields and burned out homesteads. The disaster might easily have been the turning point of Philistine fortunes in Canaan. They had been in the land for

more than eight hundred years without their power being seriously disputed; from Samson's day onwards the Hebrews waged what was a gradually increasingly successful warfare, until in the days of David, not much more than a hundred years later, their power was broken and they were finally subdued. It might well be that the Philistines never recovered from the damage done by this widespread catastrophic fire and that this event marks the real fulfilment of the prophecy "*He shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines*". But if so, there is no credit to Samson on that account. This is one more instance in which God "makes the wrath of man to praise him". Samson may have diverted the course of history but all he was thinking of at the time was personal revenge.

The Philistine authorities were also in the mood for revenge after this. Samson himself was beyond their reach, but the mob, as mobs always do, demanded a scape-goat. It would appear that the whole trouble had been started by the betrayal of the husband's secret by the wife, and the betrayal of the husband's rights by the father-in-law. Mob justice is seldom conducted on judicial lines and is characterised more by expedition than discernment. "*The Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire*". That did not restore the ravaged grain fields but it probably did help to pacify the homeless and hungry mob. It also did something

else. It raised Samson to fresh fury. Throughout the story his intention to be the one to strike the last blow stands out. The Philistines should not have the last word. He had destroyed their crops, but now, learning of the fate that had befallen his ill-fated wife, he declared *"Yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease"*. He sallied forth once more across the frontier, *"smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter"*, and withdrew as quickly back into the territory of Israel.

This brought out the Philistine army. Samson was becoming too much of a menace to be ignored. An occasional frontier skirmish in which one or two men were killed could be treated as beneath official notice, but the way things were going it could be that this Samson would be putting himself at the head of an Israelite army of rebels and that would be a very different thing. The five rulers of the Philistine colony gave orders and the soldiery advanced into Judah to apprehend the trouble maker.

Samson had taken refuge in the precipitous crags of Etam, a jagged peak in the centre of Judah some thirty miles from Zorah and fifteen from the frontier. As he looked down upon the plain he found that he had roused a veritable hornet's nest this time. *"The Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi"*. For the first time he was on the defensive. The men of Judah, in whose territory he had taken refuge, were not disposed to help him. Apprehension for their own safety outweighed any feeling of support they may have had for the man who would fain be their national champion. *"Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?"* they asked him plaintively *"What is this that thou hast done unto us?"* Samson's sullen reply *"As they did unto me, so have I done unto them"* did not influence their attitude, perhaps understandingly, for the Philistine soldiers had only just told them that they sought Samson *"to do to him as he hath done to us"*. The craven-heartedness of the men of Judah is shown by their willingness and even

anxiety to hand over Samson, bound, to his enemies in order to save their own skins. Samson might well have asked himself if Israel was worth delivering, but he submitted to being bound in confidence that he himself could bust the bonds when it suited him so to do.

So it came about. The Philistines shouted for triumph as their enemy was brought into their lines, securely trussed up with fine new ropes; their exultant shouts changed to cries of alarm as the wild-looking Nazarite's bonds snapped like flax under his muscular efforts, and alarm became panic as the giant seized the only handy weapon, an ass's jaw bone lying on the ground, and advanced threateningly into battle.

There must have been a great deal of superstitious fear in the Philistine attitude to Samson. In this case a thousand men are said to have been slain. A man

even of Samson's calibre and physique can hardly have been expected to prevail against an army of that size. The nature of his past exploits and the fact that he had always emerged unscathed, coupled with the terror induced by his personal appearance, a giant of a man, flowing locks and beard, enormous muscles, probably a grim and fear-inspiring countenance, all might well have built up a legendary atmosphere about him which could easily throw the Philistine ranks into confusion once their opponent was seen to be free.

It is quite likely that the men of Judah, seeing him free himself and advance into combat, shook off their fears after all and rallied spontaneously to his support. The account says *the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him*" and something of that Spirit might have communicated itself to the watching men of Judah and caused

them to remember the past glories of Israel when their ancestors fought to establish a foothold in the land. Perhaps the Battle of Lehi that day was in very fact the first real blow Israel struck for her independence from the Philistines. It is much more reasonable to think that Samson, wielding his jawbone to good effect in the midst of the Philistines, was assisted by a goodly contingent of men of Judah armed with whatever they could lay hold of, since the result of the battle was the defeat of the enemy with a thousand left dead on the field.

There is a strange little sequel here. Samson, after the victory, thirsted, and for the first time in the story of his life is shown calling upon the Lord. Regrettably, it was only for an immediate benefit, a drink of water, but it does at least indicate some acknowledgment of God. *"Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant"* he said *"and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?"* His mind was still on himself and the material things, but God, ever ready to respond to the slightest trace of faith, gave answer. The hero found water suddenly bubbling out of a cleft in the rock, and drank, and was revived. There used to be a queer idea that God performed a miracle here in bringing forth water from the discarded jawbone; the Authorised Version says *"God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw; and there came water thereout"*. The translators were confused by the fact that the Hebrew word for jaw, *lehi*, is the same as the name of the plain on which the battle took place. Rightly rendered, *"God clave an hollow place that was in Lehi. . . ."*

The result of this battle established Samson as the recognised leader of at least the southern half of Israel, including Judah, Benjamin, Simeon, Dan and Ephraim, and possibly the remainder of the tribes also. He remained "judge" of Israel for twenty years although at no time during that twenty years was Israel freed from the Philistine yoke. Such law and order as there was in Israel was vested in Samson. Such freedom from oppression and victory over enemies as was achieved

was due to the leadership and prowess of Samson. But there was no religious revival, no national return to God, no restoration of the covenant. The fact that their subjection to the Philistines continued is evidence of that, for whenever Israel did repent and return to God He gave them actual deliverance from servitude to their enemies; that was a condition of the covenant. The rule of Samson, Nazarite though he was, remained a purely secular one, without God. Small wonder that it ended in disaster.

Not very long after Samson's death another Nazarite child, born of a God-fearing mother, and devoted to God from his birth, was born in a village of Ephraim. Samuel, like Samson, was brought up under the Nazarite discipline, but Samuel, unlike Samson, had an ear to listen to God's voice from earliest years. Samuel also had to contend with the Philistines but Samuel put his trust first in God; and Samuel it was who did deliver Israel for at least part of his life from Philistine domination. Samuel, the last and greatest of the Judges, has the story of his judgeship recorded in extreme detail in the Old Testament and every incident in the story reflects his abiding faith in God and sterling loyalty to the laws of God. The only incident in the judgeship of Samson that is recorded concerns his visit to a harlot in Gaza, the Philistine capital. It is not a particularly edifying story. The Philistines had observed his coming and had shut the city gates and laid in wait for him with the intention of capturing him in the morning. Samson remained with the woman until midnight and then, finding his egress from the city barred, pulled down the closed gates complete with gateposts and crossbar and carried the lot to a hill near Hebron, full forty miles away in the territory of Judah. He would have to cross fifteen miles of Philistine territory in order to get to the frontier and one wonders how he could have done that without interference and what was the size and weight of the gates that he carried. The action seems to have been a completely irresponsible one and the record of this incident seems to serve no other purpose than to indicate that Samson during his judgeship manifested the same characteristics as at the beginning, overwhelming indulgence of his animal passions and complete absence of any consciousness of responsibility toward God. It seems that the Philistine endeavour to capture him was at all times a half-hearted one; he came and went to the Philistine cities more or less as he pleased, and for twenty years figured in the public eye as the leader of Israel. He seems to have remained in possession of prodigious physical strength coupled with a flair for outwitting his enemies on every occasion so that they despaired of ever getting him into their power. It is almost certain that during those twenty years he was a constant thorn in the side of the Philistines and probably waged a desultory guerilla warfare against them, leading sudden raids into their territory and generally keeping them always in a state of tension. But he did nothing whatever to lead Israel to trust and faith in

God and in consequence he never achieved real deliverance. At the end of the twenty years the Philistines were still their masters, and Samson himself was still a man in whose life God had no place.

Chapter 4

DELILAH

Samson had now exercised rulership over Israel for twenty years without having made any contribution to the moral or religious progress of his people. The period was one of stagnation. Israel remained uneasily under the yoke of her Philistine masters, although it is very probable that while Samson lived the Philistines left them more or less alone, probably contenting themselves with the exacting of a certain amount of tribute in kind--wheat, olives, grapes, cattle, and so on. It was probably not as heavy a bondage as they had known in earlier times, and for that the credit went to Samson. It was not a time of religious revival; Israel in the main went on worshipping other gods and no voice was raised in the land calling them back to the God of their fathers.

The blame for this has to be laid at the door of the ruler. Samson had every possible advantage fitting him for the role of a national religious leader as well as political ruler. His Nazarite upbringing and early training coupled with unusual physical attributes should have marked him out as a leader whom all would follow.

Had the power of God been behind him he would have been irresistible; but God can work only through men who are utterly and sincerely devoted to him, and Samson was not. He was too much a slave to his own fleshly desires and passions. It is impossible to read the story without realising that the women in Samson's life were the cause of his undoing and his failure to achieve what otherwise would have been a memorable destiny. Now after twenty years of unchallenged rule we find him entangled with yet another woman, Delilah of Sorek in Judah, forty miles from his home village of Zorah and not far from Etam where he had taken refuge from the pursuing Philistines twenty years earlier.

The nationality of Delilah is not known. She was not necessarily a Philistine-living in Judah so far from Philistine territory it is in fact unlikely that she was a member of that race. It has been thought that she was probably an Israelite, but there is something that does not ring true in the idea of any Israelite woman, however abandoned, betraying the hero of her nation to the unbelieving Philistines.

It is perhaps more likely that she was an Amorite, a daughter of the people which inhabited Canaan when the children of Israel first entered the land, and whom Israel never succeeded in completely driving out. Traces of Amorite descent still linger in even the present inhabitants of the land. The Amorites like the Philistines, were exceptionally tall and well built, usually having fair hair and blue eyes; it is quite possible that Samson himself a giant among his fellows, would feel a natural

preference for the tall Amorite and Philistine women as against the more slightly built Hebrews. At any rate, we are told quite frankly and brutally that "*Samson loved a woman in the vale of Sorek named Delilah*". There is no intimation that he was married to her or had any intention of marrying her. The setting of the story lends colour to the supposition that he visited her whenever he saw fit and interspersed such times of dalliance between periods of attention to such of his duties as ruler in Israel that he chose to discharge. He had long ago given up any apprehension that he stood in any danger from the Philistines; twenty years' confidence in what men would today call his "good luck", and reliance on his personal strength and agility, had built that impression firmly in his mind. As for the things of God, it is evident that he never gave them a thought.

Samson's infatuation for this woman did not go unnoticed. Such things rarely do. In this case it proved the subject of interested discussion in very high quarters indeed--no less than the councils of the five "lords of the Philistines". This word "lords" is the Hebrew "*seren*", describing an official rank amongst the Philistines which denoted a member of the quinvirate, or ruling executive of five, which governed affairs in the Philistine colony in Canaan. Samson had proved too elusive for all their efforts of twenty years past but they still wanted to get him in their power. His personal prowess had hitherto defied their schemes; could they get at him through this woman? Samson was neither the first man or the last to be brought to ruin that way.

The upshot of all this was a visit to Delilah by duly accredited representatives of the five rulers. For information leading to successful apprehension of the hero they would each contribute the sum of eleven hundred *keseph* ("pieces of silver" in the Authorised Version). Five thousand five hundred silver *keseph* amounted to a sum which would have the purchasing power of about six thousand pounds sterling, or seventeen thousand dollars, in our day. Such a sum of money must have represented a big temptation. True, no scope for spending it or even a fraction of it could possibly have existed in the primitive villages of Judah, but the emissaries would not have been slow to point out that life could be very different in any of the five Philistine cities, Gaza, Askelon, Ashdod, Lachish or Gath, all on or near the seacoast and replete with all the luxuries, the pleasures, and the vices also, of the Cretan civilisation from which they had sprung. A smart girl like Delilah, they might well have pointed out, was wasted in a backwoods village like Sorek and upon a country-bred Hebrew like Samson, when with her looks and money she could enjoy life and see life to the uttermost in the Philistine cities or even, perhaps, travel to Crete and move in the highest of Cretan society. There is nothing fantastic or impossible in all this, for human nature is much the same in all ages, and these arguments have been advanced, and accepted, in similar circumstances a myriad

times in the world's history.

Delilah accepted the proposition. She agreed to betray the man who, for all his faults, trusted her, and to learn from him the secret of his great strength and how that strength could be nullified. One incidental evidence which might indicate that Delilah was not of Samson's own people is the fact that a Hebrew woman, unless profoundly and improbably ignorant of the Mosaic Law, would have known the Nazarite secret without having to worm it out of the man.

One would have thought that Samson, after a similar disastrous experience at his marriage twenty years earlier, would have been proof against a repetition. He would by now be at least in his early forties and, presumably, wiser in the ways of men, and women, than he had been in those past days. But there is no indication that he was any wiser, or at any rate more discreet. Perhaps the guileless blue eyes of the fair-haired Amoritish damsel persuaded him that she was incapable of the

villainy once perpetrated by his dark-eyed Philistine love. More likely it is that he had become reckless in the conviction that he was invulnerable, and that come what may, the Philistines could never capture him, so that whilst fully aware of the danger of revealing his secret he was prepared to "play with fire" in a spirit of bravado, purely to torment the Philistines with false hopes which would not be realised. So to Delilah's tearful entreaties he responded with an entirely fictitious story, to the effect that if he could be bound with seven green withs (the stem of a rush-like plant) that had never been dried, his strength would go from him and he would become like any ordinary man. Delilah, being after all, only a simple country girl, believed him, and next time Samson visited her she had a suitable party of Philistines concealed in the chamber where she waited to receive him. Samson probably had a shrewd idea they were there, especially when Delilah proposed a pretty little piece of play-acting in which she would bind him with seven green withs just to see if his strength really would go from him. The giant probably assisted in adjusting his bonds, and stood there laughing as Delilah, believing that her fifty five hundred keseph were as good as in her purse, called out the pre-arranged signal "*the Philistines be upon thee, Samson*". Even as his would-be captors burst forth from their hiding-place he had snapped his bonds "*like a thread of tow in the fire*" and was gone, laughing uproariously at the joke.

It was not long before the moth was again fluttering around the candle, to be met by more tears and reproaches. There was probably a certain amount of comforting to be done, and in order completely to restore friendly relations Samson indicated to Delilah that the real trouble was that the green withs had snapped unexpectedly. What were actually needed were two new ropes that had never been stretched. This sounded reasonable enough; it may be imagined that Delilah, in consultation with her advisers, took a few lessons in knot tying. It was not desired

that the fiasco of the last occasion be repeated. It was then necessary to wait until Samson's next visit was due; it does not seem however that he allowed affairs of State to interfere too much with pleasure, so that before very long the Philistines again lay concealed in Delilah's room--but with no better result than before.

This was discouraging. Delilah would have a hard time explaining to the Philistines that all this was not her fault; she was doing her best. She was probably told she had got to do better; there may even have been threats of possible unpleasant consequences in the event of failure. At any rate, perhaps with some misgiving, she approached her admirer once again.

Samson was getting reckless. Mischievously, as his eyes fell upon the loom standing in the corner of the room--a loom was a very necessary implement to every woman in those days--he suggested that an effective method of curbing his strength would be to weave his long hair in with the web of the partly made cloth even then standing on the loom. Delilah would look at the loom too, appraisingly, and realise, as Samson most likely intended her to realise, that a man whose hair was woven in with the cross-threads to make as it were a piece of cloth, tightly stretched on the loom, would be quite unable to break free unless he scalped himself. The more Delilah considered the idea the more foolproof she felt it to be. The loom was a heavy timber construction and once securely fastened to that a man's enemies could easily make short work of him.

The next step was to persuade Samson to act the part he had facetiously suggested. He may or may not have demurred a little. Some thought may have crossed his mind that he could conceivably tempt his good fortune too far. Perhaps Delilah intimated to him that the continued granting of her favours would be dependent upon compliance with her wishes, and he, infatuated man that he was, would comply rather than risk losing the object of his desires.

So it came about that on a set night the hopeful captors crouched in their hiding place while the loom creaked and turned as Delilah steadily wove her lover's luxuriant hair with her balls of yarn into the strangest cloth ever woven by an Amorite woman. When it was finished the weaving lay wound tightly around the roller (the "beam" of the Authorised Version narrative) which Delilah thoughtfully locked with the "pin" to avoid any possibility of unrolling. Samson must have presented a pitiable and undignified sight with his head drawn close up to the roller, around which his hair was now wound, and his body sprawled across the woodwork of the loom. What more fitting a picture could there be of a man who had become a complete slave to his own weaknesses? Could the writer of the Book of Proverbs, a couple of centuries later, want any better inspiration for his pen-picture of any man caught in the same kind of snare? *"With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway,*

as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life” (Prov. 7.21-23).

So, for the third time, the Philistines sprang out expecting this time that there could be no escape. But they had still under-estimated their quarry’s strength. With one mighty heave Samson wrecked the loom, tearing free the roller with its roll of cloth into which his hair had been woven, together with the broken pin and such parts of the loom as could not be detached from the cloth, and was away. The account does not record how, on arrival home, he explained the peculiar condition of his hair and perhaps beard, ostensibly sacred to God, but now inexplicable and extricably woven in with some woman’s weaving material. Neither does it say how many women of Samson’s household laboured, and for how long, to disentangle the yarn from the hair and restore his flowing locks to their usual luxuriance. In any case Samson’s own people must by now have become well used to his eccentricities and only a few of the older ones who had regard for the God of Israel and remembered the circumstances of Samson’s birth, would shake their heads sadly and look hopelessly at one another.

Here in this story is enshrined all the tragedy of a man who flirts with temptation and whose successive escapes from serious consequences only encourage him to live even more dangerously. In a sense it is the story of mankind, fallen into sin. Only utter disaster and heartbreak at the end brings him to a consciousness of his own folly and the true means of reformation and eventual happiness. So it was with Samson; so it is with all men who tread this way.

At this stage the Philistines apparently lost interest and went home. The attempt to capture Samson with the help of Delilah was written off. But Delilah had no intention of giving up so easily. The promised reward still dazzled her. So she resumed her efforts with Samson and began to wear down his resistance. He was apparently seeing a great deal of her now, for *“it came to pass when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death, that he told her all his heart”* Wearied by her importunity, and lacking strength of character to resist, he at length imparted the fatal secret. *“There hath not come a razor upon my head, for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my birth”.*

With that admission Samson signed his own death warrant. Delilah’s instinct told her that this time he had revealed the truth. Maybe she waited a while to lull any suspicion on Samson’s part that she might make use of the information; his utter blindness to possible consequences is almost incomprehensible except on the supposition that he relied again on his own physical ability to extricate himself from any difficulty into which Delilah might seek to involve him. But he was now altogether entrapped in the snare of his own folly and he could not escape. Delilah

was clever enough and unscrupulous enough to know how to hold and keep him. The expression in Judges 16.19, *“she made him sleep upon her knees”* is almost identical with an ancient Sumerian allusion which would indicate that Delilah held him in an intimate embrace from which he had neither strength nor will to loose himself. Devoid of all feelings of modesty or shame, she held him thus fast whilst

her confederate deftly shaved the luxuriant tresses from the head of the unheeding giant, oblivious to all but his passion. The task completed, triumphantly and cruelly she jerked him back into consciousness with the familiar words *“The Philistines be upon thee, Samson”*.

The tragic highlight to the story demands more careful consideration than any other part of the narrative. Samson, shorn of his locks, found himself suddenly bereft of the mighty strength which had so long been his and in which he had trusted. He himself had apparently believed that the secret of his strength lay in his standing as a Nazarite, the symbol of which was his long hair. And the symbol meant more to him than the reality. It would seem that he could break every law of God and every aspect of his vow without considering his status as a Nazarite imperilled but he must retain his long hair. Samson’s tragedy was to hold to the symbol whilst rejecting the reality behind the symbol, and that has been the tragedy of a great many Christians and has led them into excesses as great, or greater, than those of Samson.

Must it then be assumed that the removal of the hero’s “seven locks of hair” was in fact the actual cause of his loss of vital strength? As a medical or physical reason the idea is absurd. It has also to be noted that nowhere in the story of Samson, or elsewhere in the Bible, is unusual physical strength said to be inherent in the Nazarite’s long hair. Samuel was a Nazarite but no indication is given that he was of other than ordinary physique. The idea that the strength was in his hair rests entirely on Samson’s own testimony and represents only his own belief.

If then Samson’s physical strength was not affected by the shaving of head, to what must be attributed the fact that at this moment his strength evidently did desert him and at last he fell into the power of his enemies? What was it that happened in the instant he said *“I will go and shake myself, as at other times before. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him.”*?

He had betrayed his God! . . . That was the terrible realisation which smote Samson with all the force of a sledge-hammer blow as he leapt up and realised that the hair in which he had taken such pride was gone. He was no longer a Nazarite and God was departed from him. It had been so long since he had given any thought to the things of God that he had become quite unable to distinguish between the reality and the symbol. Whilst he kept his unshaven locks he gloried in the

strength which he believed they conferred on him and cared not one jot about the remainder of God's commands. Now he had lost that which had been his glory and in one moment of acute self perception he saw himself as he was, a man whose persistent self indulgence had separated him from God and blinded him to the calling of God and at the end had betrayed him into the hands of the enemies of God. The bitterness of that moment deprived him of all power to resist, and as his exultant enemies led him away securely bound, he went with them passively, helplessly, a broken-hearted and despairing man. His own foolishness and wickedness had led to the loss of that which made him a man of God and with that loss he had lost all. God had departed from him and he would never again possess strength with which to outwit and overcome his enemies. Those were the bitter thoughts which possessed his mind as he trudged wearily into Gaza and through the cheering crowds, come to gloat over the capture of the man who had been their scourge for twenty years.

Chapter 5

LIGHT AT EVENTIDE

There, in the prison house at Gaza, Samson found God. There is really not much doubt about that. Blinded, in chains, condemned to spend the rest of his life trudging round and round a circular path pushing the bar of a heavy cornmill, work that was normally performed by animals, he had time to think. Not now for him the admiration of the multitudes, the excitement of skirmishes and battles of wits with the Philistines, the indulgence of his tastes and desires. Men and women alike had deserted him and he was left entirely alone, alone to reflect on his past life and his failure to accomplish that mission which had been his from birth. What passed between Samson and his God during those dark hours is not known to any man; all we do know is that at their close Samson is found supplicating God in a manner which is entirely alien to his former attitude. That is the evidence that in prison Samson became a changed man. There he saw himself in his true light; there he repented; and there God, who desires not that any should die, but would that they turn from their wickedness, and live, accepted that repentance, and wiped Samson's slate clean. And something happened in prison which must have been an outward evidence to Samson of God's acceptance of his repentance. His hair began to grow again!

The Philistines had apparently overlooked that contingency. The thick, long tresses began to fall around the shoulders of the poor slave labouring at the mill, and as they grew Samson began to flex his muscles and discover to his surprise that he still possessed his tremendous physical strength. It is perhaps understandable if he

concluded that there was a connection between the growth of his Nazarite locks and the re-discovery of his physical powers. But this time there is no attempt to deliver himself. It does begin to look as though now he is waiting upon God. The recovery of his long hair became a sign to him that God had forgiven. But he made no attempt to escape; submissively he waited God's leading and God's time.

So it came about that on a set day when all Gaza was gathered together for some particular celebration of which a feature was acknowledgment to their god for delivering Samson into their hands, the blinded giant was led out of prison and into the arena to be made a public spectacle. The five lords of the Philistines were there and all the appropriate nobility and gentry, and on the roof of the building some three thousand of the proletariat, shouting themselves hoarse. It is said that Samson was brought forward and compelled to "*make sport*" for them; it is not very clear what this implies. The word means "to play" and it is probably that in his blindness

he was baited in various ways to the vindictive delight of the barbarous crowd which formed his audience. Tiring perhaps of this after a while, the people looked on interestedly as the lad appointed to guide Samson's steps, began, at his request, to lead him toward *"the two pillars upon which the house was built and whereby it was held up"*. What was he going to do next?

There is a well-known painting of this scene in which Samson is depicted with his arms clasping two solid stone columns each about three feet in diameter, in the act of pulling them down by main force. In fact, of course, no man, not even one of Samson's reputed powers, could dislodge massive stone structures of that nature. It is necessary to visualise the type of building which was probably concerned in order correctly to appreciate the story.

This function was apparently a public celebration and a public holiday, not a religious proceeding. The building concerned was not the Temple; more probably it was the local games stadium. There would almost certainly be an open-air arena in which the players performed, with a kind of "grandstand" of which the interior was reserved for people of importance and the roof thrown open to the public. A clue to the size of the building is given by the intimation that there were three thousand people standing on the roof. To accommodate such a crowd, even if closely packed as at a modern football Cup Final, would demand a structure something like eighty feet long by thirty from front to back. Both the interior seats and the standing space on the roof would be sloping upward from front to back so that all could see. If made like modern grandstands the front of the building would be open throughout its length and the roof supported along the open front by light wooden posts, perhaps little more than slender poles, with a balustrade along the roof to keep the excited crowd from falling off. The five lords of the Philistines would of course be seated in the middle of the interior in the best seats, surrounded by the nobility and gentry of Gaza.

Upon arriving at the pavilion, Samson can be imagined as taking his stand between the two centre pillars, grasping them in his strong arms. There then follows one of the most tragically pathetic prayers of the Old Testament, a prayer noble in its utter dependence upon the power of God. Samson had never prayed like this before; he had always relied on and exulted in his own strength. Now when that strength, misused, had brought him to this sorry state, he prayed God that he might do at least one deed of valour, though it should be the last deed of his life, in the strength and power of God instead of his own. *"O Lord God"* he prayed *"remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes."* And so saying he bore with all his might on the two posts around which his strong arms were braced.

Jostling humanity to a total weight of something like two hundred tons

occupied that roof. Samson had for the moment disappeared from sight just under its front. Human nature being what it is, there was undoubtedly a movement of people to the extreme edge of the roof in the endeavour to look over and see what he was doing. The distribution of weight on the roof was altered and a strain imposed on the front portion and the front pillars which they were never designed to take.

It is a fundamental mechanical property of any long thin column supporting a superstructure that its power of support decreases rapidly so soon as it is bent or bowed from its normally straight position. When bowed beyond a certain point it will tend to collapse without any additional strain being applied. This is evidently what happened in this case. The excited crowd of people crowding to the front of the roof and craning over the edge had already increased the load on the front pillars to danger point. Then Samson voiced his prayer, braced himself against the two

columns--they would be of wood probably no more than four or five inches in diameter, and already creaking and bowing under the undue strain--and heaved with all his might. The more he was able to bend the columns out of the perpendicular, the greater would be the crippling effect of the human load above, until at length he reached the "point of no return" after which the roof would begin perceptibly to sag, the milling crowd above start to shout their apprehension, and the sardonically smiling nobility under the roof jump up in sudden alarm at the reality of what a few seconds earlier had seemed but a foolhardy gesture of the blind captive.

At this point the wooden pillars would have to fracture under the tremendous strain, and then, with a rending and cracking of heavy timbers accompanied by cries and shrieks from above, the entire roof cave in and fall forward, with its three thousand occupants, upon the seated audience below. The heaviest casualties would be among those nobility, crushed and buried beneath a tangled mass of timber and struggling survivors. The story infers that when at last the wreckage was cleared away and the victims extricated, more than one third of the people in the building were dead. Among them lay the body of the Nazarite. True to his nature he had the last word with the Philistines after all.

"So the dead which he slew at his death were more than those which he slew in his life." It is not a particularly creditable epitaph, but it is spoken of a man who despite twenty years of failure to live up to his calling repented at last in time to justify the angel's original prediction. In life an apostate, in death Samson was a true Nazarite, in communion with God, putting his trust in God, and invoking the power of God. His was a wasted life, but before his death he saw the light.

The disaster must have shaken the Philistines, for without interference *"his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought him*

up, and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the burying place of Manoah his father.” It is evident that his parents were already dead. They were spared the final heart-break of seeing him captive to the Philistines. He judged Israel twenty years, the chronicler says, but he never delivered Israel as did the other judges. He shook the Philistine power but he did not destroy it. If, as is very probable, the five lords of the Philistines perished in the catastrophe at Gaza, there would be a period of political uncertainty in the country which would help to explain the evident decay of Philistine power over Israel in the time of Samuel, which was only a generation or so later. Samson, the Nazarite who failed his commission, was the one judge who wrought no deliverance in Israel. He did at least *“begin to deliver Israel out of the hands of the Philistines”*.

It might reasonably be wondered why the name of Samson appears in the gallery of “heroes of faith” in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. His life was not one of service to God; he had nothing of the faith of Abraham, the loyalty of Moses, the devotion of Samuel. There is nothing in his story to hold up to emulation or to glorify as an example to be followed. He does not appear as a leader of the type that will be wanted in the next Age when the law of the Lord goes out from Zion, and there will be princes of God established to direct and lead men in the ways of God. Yet his name is included as one of those who having *“received a good report through faith, received not the promise, God having provided some better thing for us”* (the Christian Church) *“that they without us should not be made perfect.”* It is possible that God, who knows the secrets of all men’s hearts, saw something in Samson’s character that the story, written by onlookers, does not reveal and that we cannot see? Could it be that the lad Samson up to, say twenty years of age or so was sincere and devout in his profession of God’s service, that he was swept off his feet by the attractions of the woman he wanted for his wife and thereafter floundered twenty years without God, basking in the light of popular admiration and flattery, and that the final tragedy of blindness, captivity and neglect brought him to his senses so that, like the prodigal son in the parable he said to himself “I will arise and go to my Father”--. In such case we know the Father would go out to meet him and bring him home. In such case, although the consequences of those twenty years of folly could not be avoided, the Father put them behind his back and they were no more seen. Might it not be that the character of Samson while in the Gaza prison was purified and ennobled by this sequel to his life’s experiences so that in the future, whether he lived or died, he would forever be God’s man? If this be so, then he suffered physical blindness and death in order that he might receive spiritual sight and eventual life. So it might well be that Samson, at the end, in the all-embracing sight of God, was after all seen worthy and suitable for a place in the procession of “Old Testament Saints” or “Ancient Worthies” as they are variously

called, who will occupy positions of influence in the new Kingdom when Christ reigns on earth. If such be the case we can only praise God who alone can produce characters of sterling worth from such weak clay.

As a pictorial representation of the entire history of man the story of Samson is very apt. Mankind, in the persons of our first parents, was created for the divine purposes to fulfil a divine commission, and endowed with every possible blessing and advantage. Like Samson, mankind turned away from God and into paths of self-indulgence, dissipating the marvellous powers given by God in unworthy ways. At the end mankind's own wilful course leads him to utter ruin, as is evident when we look at the world around us today and realise that we are now face to face with that ruin. But after the wreck of all that his own hand has created mankind will find God, and "whosoever will" become reconciled to God. For God has appointed a day, the coming Messianic Age, in which men, chastened by their experience of sin, will be led in better ways and brought face to face with the ultimate choice between good and evil. The salvation of Samson at the eleventh hour is our guarantee that God will never let go of the sinner whilst there is any hope whatever of his seeing the error of his ways, coming to Christ in sincere repentance and acceptance of him, and so being reconciled to God and becoming a citizen of God's world. That is why in the wisdom of God there is an Age appointed to follow "this present evil world", an Age in which Satan is to be bound that he might deceive the nations no more, and Christ reign as King over the restored and perfected earth. In that Age the entire human race will continue their lives' experience with full opportunity to compare the equitable administration of the Kingdom of righteousness with the darkness and injustice of this present world of sin. Only after that final lesson in God's school will the ultimate choice be demanded; the incorrigibly unregenerate reap the inevitable wages of sin and the regenerate be received, like Samson, into full fellowship with God and into eternal life. That is the gospel of the Kingdom, the good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. That is the sublime truth which lies behind the words of Jesus "*The son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost*". And it will always be gloriously true that *there is joy among the angels of heaven over one sinner that repenteth.*"

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