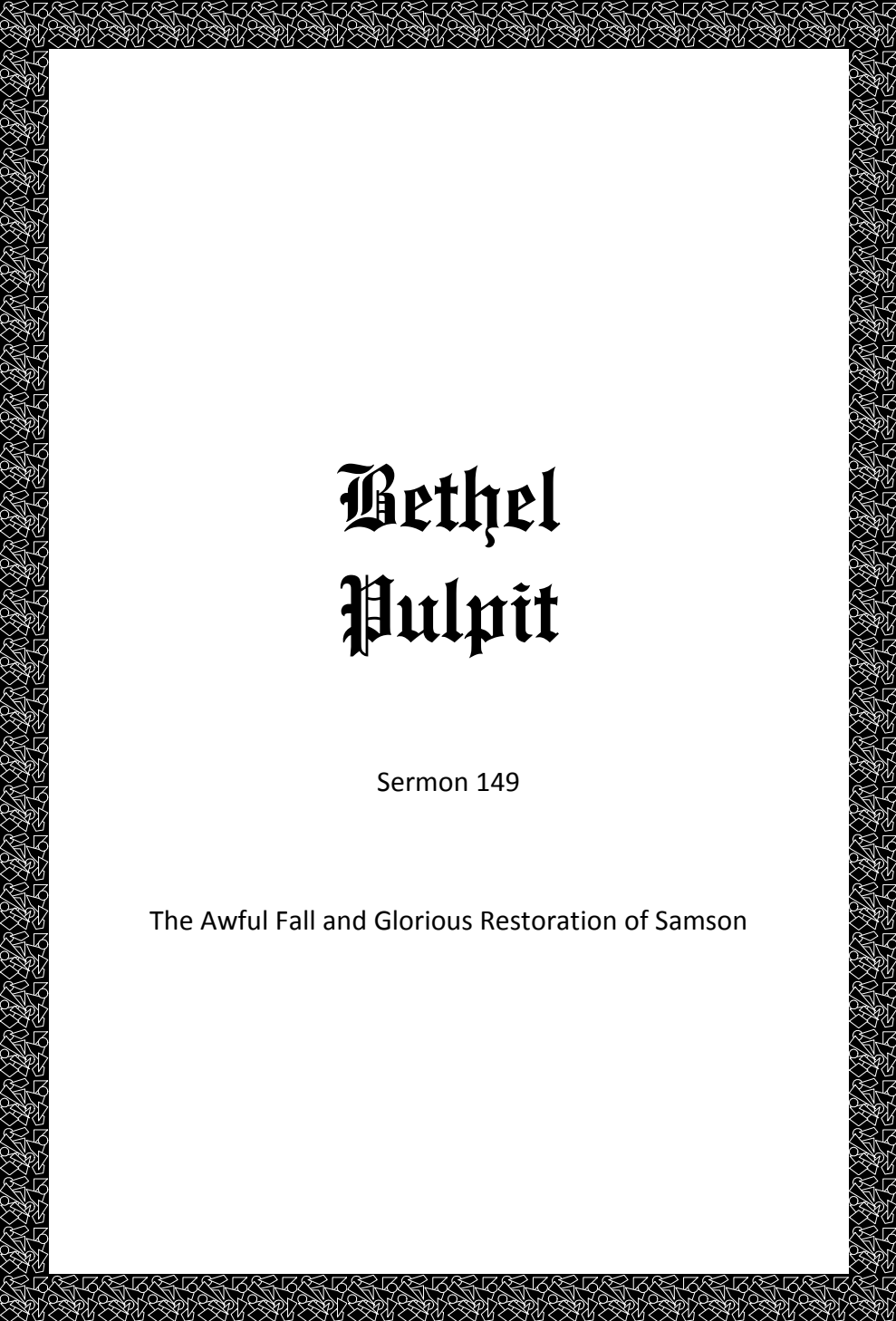




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 149

The Awful Fall and Glorious Restoration of Samson

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 24th August, 1997**

Text: *“And his strength went from him” (Judges 16. 19).*

“And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him” (Judges 16. 20).

“Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again” (Judges 16. 22).

Samson was a man specially raised up by God. The Word of God makes it abundantly clear to us that he was a gracious man. Perhaps we should have stood in doubt of him. There were so many faults. His fall was so dreadful. But when we come to the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle makes it abundantly clear there that Samson was a child of God. “These all died in faith” – Samson also. So in the life of this amazing man, we see that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” What a trophy of grace Samson was! Never forget that the Lord specially raised him up for a purpose and the Lord in a special way used him. Yet it is a very interesting thing that Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, and yet when left to himself, none was weaker. I wonder if you have ever noticed this in the Word of God, that the falls of the people of God were often on the point where they were strongest. Not where they were weakest: where they were strongest. Look at Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. Was anyone ever more foolish? Look at Job, renowned for his patience. “Ye have heard of the patience of Job.” Was anyone ever more impatient? Look at Moses, the meekest man who ever lived, yet his hastiness kept him from entering the Promised Land. Samson was the strongest man who ever lived, yet one woman could overthrow him.

When we come to the life of Samson, it is recorded in Scripture as a warning to us. There are two New Testament Scriptures that are a special commentary on the life of Samson. One is this: “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” And the other one: “These things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” So whenever we come to the life of Samson, may it be in the light of those two New Testament Scriptures, not just to read it as an interesting account, a

fascinating account, but to read it for our instruction, our admonition. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.”

There are many interesting things about the life of Samson. Like John the Baptist, his birth was clearly foretold beforehand. He had a most godly father and mother. He was clearly brought up in the truth, a Nazarite from his birth. And we are told this: “The Lord blessed him.” That is the great, the vital point. “The Lord blessed him.” And if the Lord blesses, none can reverse it. If the Lord blesses you and me with spiritual blessings in Christ, it is to all eternity. We can never lose them. Samson never lost the blessing. He lost the enjoyment of it. He dreadfully suffered. He was awfully chastised for it. He lost his eyes. His eyes were really the source of his sin, the lust of the eyes. He lost his strength. But he never lost the blessing. We can never sin cheaply. Sin always brings sorrow and sin will always mean that loss of spiritual strength. But there were one or two things in Samson which were good marks of grace. One was his humility. I do not think you will find a more humble man in the whole of Scripture than Samson. Some of the exploits of Samson were amazing. But his humility! We read how he was subject to his father and mother, how even when he was a judge in Israel, he asked their advice. When he had a remarkable accomplishment, “But he told not his father or his mother.” He was a great man by God’s appointment. And the second thing: his zeal for the honour and glory of God. He had a burning zeal for the Lord’s glory. He dearly loved God’s Israel. It was his desire to overthrow the enemies of the people of God. And he was willing again and again to risk his own life. He never once risked the life of any of his fellow countrymen. He risked his own life again and again for the honour and glory of his God.

Do not overlook the blessings that Samson knew; but he had this weak spot. One ancient writer compared the life of Samson to a strong city with perhaps seven or eight gates, and all of them are securely fast, securely guarded, except one, and that is left completely wide open. That is Samson. There was the inconsistency. And beloved friends, we need to watch it, lest we might be strong on many points in godliness and grace, and yet we might have that wide open gate like Samson. There might be that weak spot, that blind spot.

What do I mean? Let me give you one or two very simple illustrations. Here is this person so zealous for the cause of God and truth, so active, so busy, so firm in defending the truth, and he neglects secret prayer. Outwardly, everything is not only right: it is wonderful. But there is that wide-open gate, that weakness. Secret prayer is neglected. “They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” Watch that, beloved friends. Perhaps people regard you as a champion for the truth, faithful. What about secret prayer? Is it neglected? Is it restrained?

Let me give you another example: a person counted eminent in godliness and grace, so active in the things of God, so much being done and with a sincere heart – yet the children at home are neglected. They are not spoken to. They are not talked to. Alexander Whyte makes a very telling remark on Eli. He said how much he sympathised with Eli’s wicked sons! Their father was the high priest in Israel and also the judge in Israel. He had two full-time occupations and he had no time for his children.

But Samson was so strong, so valiant, and apart from when Delilah cropped his hair, for the most part Samson kept his Nazarite vow. Outwardly he was faithful to it. He kept from strong drink. Yet the shame, the inconsistency! So much zeal for the honour and glory of God, and this one gate left wide open, the immorality, the sin, the lusts of the flesh. May the Lord search our hearts, beloved friends, that we do not have one of the gates of the city left open, one of the gates of the city unguarded.

Well, I must try to speak to you about the Nazarite vow, and what seems strange to us at first: that Samson’s strength lay in his hair. No doubt you have noticed there is so much said in Scripture about a person’s hair, in the Old Testament and in the New, I suppose the reason being that it is the one part of our body, apart from our nails, which we can control. If a person has long fingers, he cannot make them any shorter. If he has short fingers, he cannot make them any longer. But the hair is the one thing about us we have control over. Now the vow of a Nazarite was that his hair would never be cut, that no razor would ever touch his hair. That seems strange to us, because the Word of God in the New Testament is so abundantly clear, so strong, that a man is to keep his hair short. So it was

in ancient Israel. In ancient Israel a man had to have his hair short. How was it, then, that Samson's strength was in his hair? Really, the Nazarite vow was this: Samson's hair had never to be cut (and the other Nazarites, Samuel and John the Baptist) – they had to be willing to surrender their dignity. They had to be willing to appear in a fashion that people would despise. Samson, though such a strong man, had to have an effeminate appearance. It was a complete surrender to God, a mark of complete dedication to Christ, the mark of complete separation from the world. It was the mark of complete sanctification. Really, the spirit of the Nazarite vow was this:

“Emptied of earth I fain would be,
The world, myself, and all but Thee;
Only reserved for Christ that died,
Surrendered to the Crucified.”

That is a spiritual Nazarite. He had not to touch strong drink; no razor had ever to come on his head, and he had not to touch anything dead. The Nazarite vow. To put it very simply, in its fullest sense, Samson's strength, which he received from God, did not literally lie in his hair, but it lay in his separation and sanctification and complete dedication to his God and Saviour. The hair in itself was nothing apart from obedience to the Lord, but it was the mark of the separation, sanctification, dedication. So it was a dreadful thing, an awful thing, for Samson to have his hair short.

The only illustration I could give would be this. The Lord's supper is just an ordinary cup, an ordinary plate. It is just ordinary bread and ordinary wine. But if someone was to take the cup and use it to play jokes at a party – that is the kind of thing. It is not the cup – it is an ordinary cup – it is what it symbolises. You would not think of dishonouring the bread and the wine, the communion cup and plate. Very simply, that is an illustration of Samson's hair, the Nazarite vow. Now he sacrificed the Nazarite vow. He lay with his head upon the lap of Delilah. He fell in love with a wicked woman, and breaking his vow his head was shaved. You know the circumstances, how Delilah pleaded with him to tell her the secret. He told her one thing and then another, and still his strength was there. And at length, because she kept on, he told her the secret: “I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other

man.” He told the secret of his strength to the world, the wicked, the ungodly, and he lost the mark, the symbol of his strength.

“She made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him.” What a solemn subject that is, the lap of Delilah, where strength is lost! Wasn’t it good William Tiptaft who said, “You will never leap out of the lap of Delilah into Abraham’s bosom”? It rests on my spirit in a few ways. Look at our country, England, at present. What is it? For many years, England has been like Samson with his head in the lap of Delilah and his locks being shorn. So we are a weak country, weak in every way, but especially weak morally, especially weak spiritually. “His strength went from him.” If someone writes a history of England in the twentieth century, that could be the title: “His strength went from him.” England with its head in Delilah’s lap – sexual immorality, the breakdown of marriages, awful adulation and worship given to sport, the dreadful greed, the covetousness, the gambling, the Sabbath-breaking. You could go on all morning like this, but that is the reason for England’s weakness at present. The country has placed its head in the lap of Delilah.

Let us bring it a bit closer. What about the church of God? Well, the world has come into the church and the church increasingly has been willing to lay its head in Delilah’s lap and to go to sleep there. “And his strength went from him.” I am speaking of the church generally. What about our own churches, our own congregations? Where are spiritual Nazarites? We have known them; we have loved them; we have admired them: spiritual Nazarites. They were dedicated to Christ. They lived to the honour and glory of Christ. They did not have their head in Delilah’s lap. But this is a new age, a new generation, and you even find the church of God with its head in the lap of Delilah. Yet Samson was a sinner saved by grace. He was a child of God. O beloved friends, beware of laying down your head in the lap of Delilah!

I want to speak especially to our young people. There were never young people in the history of England who had greater temptations than you have. Things which when some of us were your age were counted an abomination are now counted respectable. In the sight of God it is still Delilah’s lap and God’s people are still called to be spiritual Nazarites,

constrained by the love of Christ to surrender to the Crucified. To put it simply, what a thousand armed Philistines could not do, one woman did. That is the danger. There was only one serpent in the Garden of Eden, but O the fall of Adam and the ruin of the whole human race! O beware of Delilah's lap! And I will speak of it openly as it stands: a sinful, ungodly woman, immorality, sexual sins. They have ruined thousands and they ruined Samson. Gadsby has a hymn on this. (Perhaps it is not altogether suitable for public singing.)

“Sin has a thousand pleasing charms,
Which flatter to preserve from harms;
She richly gilds her pleasing baits,
And calls her trash delicious sweets.

“Young men and maidens, rich and poor,
Are pleased with her deceptive ore;
There's scarce an eye that views the light,
But she can charm by day or night.

“Her nature's serpentine indeed;
Her strength could make a Samson yield;
Nor David could against her stand,
When David's God withheld His hand.”

So much of the Book of Proverbs tells you to beware of the strange woman, the ungodly woman. Beware of this sin. I know that if you take it in its fullest sense, it is representative of the world and all the world has, but you can look at it both ways: literally these immoral sins and then secondly all the attraction and allurements of the world. There are a few verses that struck me this week in the Book of Proverbs. “The lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb.” She speaks so nicely to you. She says, “There isn't any harm; it is only this once.” “Her mouth is smoother than oil.” She is a really nice person. “But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.” Whether you take it personally, literally, as immorality and sexual sin, or whether you take it as the allurements of the world, or whether you take it as the pathway in life. “Her ways are moveable.” The ways of God are not moveable, but the world is moveable, and temptation is moveable. “Her ways are moveable, that thou canst not know them. Hear me now therefore, O ye children, and depart not from the words of

my mouth. Remove thy way far from her.” That is the way to look at temptation. You have to flee from it, to keep as far away from it as possible, avoid the occasion. “Remove thy way far from her.” Do not lie with your head in Delilah’s lap. “Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house: lest thou give thine honour unto others, and thy years unto the cruel.” You say, “She is not cruel.” *She is cruel.* “Lest strangers be filled with thy wealth; and thy labours be in the house of a stranger.” Now listen. These things, these sinful pleasures of the world, and these enjoyments, they seem so pleasant. You think it is happiness. “And thou mourn at the last.” All these things have got to end. A little word, that: *at the last.* “And thou mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof!” Beloved friends, over the years you have had a lot of instruction from this pulpit and a lot of reproof, feebly given, but I trust in love. I hope that *at last*, when you go down to the swellings of Jordan, when you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, none of you will say, “How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!” (Proverbs 5. 3-13.)

And the verse that follows (verse 14) seems to me very strange and unusual and very solemn: “I was almost in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly.” Here is someone in the midst of the congregation and assembly, there every Lord’s day morning, sitting with the rest of the congregation as a worshipper. But, “I was almost in all evil.” What a solemn thing to be almost in all evil during the week and in the congregation and assembly on the Lord’s day! Beloved friends, may you hear this instruction. “My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: that thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge.”

“His strength went from him.” He told his secret. He compromised with the world. He lay with his head on Delilah’s lap. He broke his consecration to Christ. His hair was shaven from his head. “And his strength went from him.” Sin always weakens. If you are a child of God and you fall into sin, outwardly or inwardly, if you fall before temptation, if you compromise with the Philistines, if you are bound up with Delilah, your spiritual life will be weakened, your profession will be dishonoured, and your strength will go from you. It is a mercy, ten thousands mercies, if

we have been kept outwardly, but with grief we have to say it, some of us feel in the later years of our life we have lost so much of that spiritual strength we knew in the days of our spiritual youth. Are there any of you, are there many of you, like this here this morning? You look back to your former days, your spiritual beginnings, and O the strength and the zeal and the love, and now you feel that your strength has gone from you – as a preacher, a pastor, a Christian, a church member. Some of us have to say like William Cowper,

“O! I have seen the day,
When with a single word,
God helping me to say,
‘My trust is in the Lord,’
My soul has quelled a thousand foes,
Fearless of all that could oppose.”

What a wonderful mercy that Samson was restored. Really, as I read the Word of God, Samson’s strength was greater at the end of his life than it ever was before. What a wonderful mercy that where sin abounds, grace does much more abound! We have to say, “Let me be by grace restored; on me be all its freeness shown.”

But, “his strength went from him,” and sin will weaken you, and association with the world will weaken you, and Delilah will weaken you, whatever that Delilah is. You will be weakened. Your zeal for the honour and glory of the Saviour will be weakened. Your love to Christ will be weakened. Your good hope through grace will be weakened. Faith will be weakened. It cannot be completely destroyed, but it will be weakened. Your spirituality of mind and heart will be weakened. O as professing believers in the name of the Son of God, may we ever remember our profession, whose worthy name we bear, by whose worthy name we are called, the name of Jesus; that life to which we are called, that life of separation and sanctification and dedication to God. But left to ourselves, we are in the lap of Delilah. Of course, there is such a thing as being in it in spirit if not in the actual fact.

But the whole of Samson’s life is a solemn warning. It is like a beacon. When you are at the seaside, there are some of these cliffs and there are the warnings that this is dangerous, you must not venture near here. The path is steep, or the cliff may crumble. Keep as far away from it

as you can. There is the old story I used to hear as a child of the nobleman who was appointing a new coachman. He asked one or two, how close could they get to the edge of the precipice without going over? One said, "About a foot." One said he thought he could go within a few inches, he was so skilful. But one said he was so nervous he would keep as far away as he could. He was the one who was appointed. Keep as far from the precipice as you can. If you have one fall, you will be weakened. That beautiful character, Mephibosheth, was lame on both feet. Why? When he was a baby, he had a terrible fall and injured both feet, and never really recovered. Falls will weaken you. But how we need to watch against this weakening of our profession, this weakening of our spiritual life, this weakening of our witness! It is sin that does it.

"His strength went from him." But what next? Well, Delilah cries, "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson." And he woke up from his sleep. He was asleep on Delilah's lap. He said, "I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself." It was not "as at other times before." There was a solemn difference. He was as weak as any other man. Then this awful word: "He wist not." That, of course, means he did not know. "He wist not that the Lord was departed from him." Of course, the Lord had not departed from him for ever, but He had departed from him for a season, that is, in the sense, the feeling of it. "For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee." It is a terrible thing when the Lord departs from a nation, and often when the Lord departs from a nation, it is for ever. It is a terrible thing when the Lord departs from a church. And it is a more terrible thing when that church *wists not*, does not know, does not realise it.

What a word that is in the minor prophets: "Gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not!" They come gradually, one by one, imperceptibly. When I came here as your pastor, my hair was almost completely black, and now it is almost completely grey, but I did not arrive one Lord's day morning and there was a change from black to grey. It was imperceptibly. But when the Lord departs from one of His children, the wonderful mercy is that it is not for ever; it is not to all eternity. Yet it is a solemn thing. Didn't Samson suffer! He lost both his eyes. He had much to endure, the indignity. "He wist not." That church in the Book of the Revelation was a wonderful church. It had nothing but blessing and riches and honour and everything else – *so it thought* – but its strength had

departed from it, and it wist not. “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.” That is terrible, isn’t it? “And knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked” – strength departed. “And he wist not.” “I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”

“He wist not that the Lord was departed from him.” I hope that is not true of some of us here this morning. I remember Mr. F. L. Rowell speaking to me about a very well-known and popular minister, and I will not mention his name. I never knew him myself, but Mr. Rowell said in his early days he was a much-loved minister, blessed by God, but in his old age his preaching became most unprofitable. What a solemn thing for a minister of Christ to come there!

“He wist not that the Lord was departed from him.” In closing, I want to speak of a complete opposite to this, but the language is similar. Samson “wist not that the Lord was departed from him.” Moses wist not that his face was shining with the glory of God (Exod. 34. 29). You have these two contrasts. Samson had come from the lap of Delilah. Moses had come down from the mount of enjoyment of communion with God, and his face shone with the glory of God, and he wist not. He was not proud of it. He was not thinking he was an eminent saint. He had enjoyed this communion with the Lord, but when he came down, the people could see that his face shone. Moses was not conscious of it, but the people could see a difference. Like the apostles, “they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.” Solemnly, beloved friends, today the usual thing seems to be, “he wist not that the Lord was departed from him,” rather than that he “wist not that the skin of his face shone.” But which of them is it with us? And are we concerned about it, which it might be?

(If the Lord will, the evening sermon on the same text will be published next month.)