

SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR'S SUNDAY**JUDGES 16:20-22 — A NEW START**

*And she [Delilah] said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" So he awoke from his sleep, and said, "I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!" But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison. However, the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaven.*

About fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Roman emperor Julius Caesar changed the calendar of the Roman empire from beginning in March, to beginning in January. We still follow the January 1 New Year. Two or three hundred years later when Christianity had become wider spread, Christian in the Western Empire around Rome picked December 25 as the day to observe the otherwise unknown date for the birth of Christ. Why they picked December 25<sup>th</sup> we do not know. At any rate, the two holidays are only a week apart.

For the Christian, these two holidays make a very special pair (there also is a non-Christian "christmas," as odd as that sounds). At Christmas we remember how the eternal Son of God humbled Himself, being born on earth a human baby, to grow and to die, to rescue us from our sin and our death, and hell. Then at New Year's as we bid farewell to the old year, we are re-assured that the sins of the past are forgiven in Christ the newborn King. We then welcome the new year with fresh assurance that, in the uncertainties of the future and the new year, we are safe in Christ.

Such an understanding in life is very important. Sinful human flesh does not readily stay on a high plain with the Lord. It veers into repeated sin and into deeper sin. Sinful flesh is reluctant—actually helpless—to find again God's favor. The Lord, in His mercy, steps in. Think of the Children of Israel coming out of Egypt under Moses. How often they murmured/grumbled against God and Moses. God sent them obstacles, like poisonous/fiery serpents. They repented and were restored; only in time to grumble again.

That same pattern continued. Joshua was God's appointed ruler after Moses. Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan, and God gave him victory after victory. While Joshua and the people of his generation lived, who had seen the Lord's great rescue from Egypt and wonders over the forty years of Israel's travels in the wilderness, the people remained faithful to God. After that generation died, a new generation arose that did not "know" the Lord. They were easily enticed into the idol worship of the Canaanite peoples around them (Judges 2:7-19). The Lord sent an enemy nation to oppress them. Israel repented before the Lord, and sought His forgiveness and help. God sent them a "judge"—a "deliverer"—to rescue them. God assured the people of His mercy and forgiveness. They got a fresh start. They remained faithful for a while. However, then the whole cycle would start again. The book of Judges records twelve such cycles and twelve different "judges/deliverers." This morning we look at the twelfth judge—a man with whom you are likely familiar—Samson.

Samson was a man appointed by God to be a Nazirite—one "separated" to God. "Nazirite" is not to be confused with "Nazarene"—someone from the village of Nazareth. Jesus was a Nazarene. A Nazirite was forbidden to cut his hair, drink strong drink, or touch a dead body. Samson, in addition, was blessed with great strength. Ten feats of Samson's great strength are recorded in Judges. They were intended by God to be used in freeing Israel from the control of the Philistines. Samson killed a lion with his bare hands, snapped two new ropes with which he was bound as if they were only charred flax, with the jawbone of a donkey killed 1000 Philistines who were attacking him, etc. Samson, like his fellow Israelites, was not faithful to God. God had long before forbidden Israel to intermingle with the idol worshippers. Samson had a weakness for Philistine women. A woman named Delilah was his undoing. She repeatedly asked him for the secret of his strength. Three times he lied to her. Three times she tried the lie. Each time she failed. Finally, Samson told her he must not cut his hair. When he was asleep, she called in a Philistine, who cut his hair. Samson's strength was gone. The Philistines took him, put out his eyes, locked him in prison, fastened him with brass fetters, and forced him to push the stone grinding wheel for grinding grain. He had despised and wasted his great gift from God, and his great privilege of freeing Israel from its oppressors.

Did his long hair make him strong? The Lord made Samson strong. The long hair was a sign of his willing service and his dedication as a Nazirite to the Lord. When he despised his relationship with the Lord and preferred to please Delilah rather than be faithful to the Lord, he put himself into a position where his hair was cut. The Lord left him to deal with his self-made troubles.

How have you done this past year? Have you served the Lord in your station in life or in your calling in life? Or have you despised Him? Have you kept Him number One in your life? Was He superseded by electronic devices, movies, ungodly movies, vehicles, firearms, horses, cows, lies, stinginess, dishonoring God's name, dishonoring the preaching of His Good News of Christ, stealing, coveting, disobeying, sexual lusting and other sexual misbehavior, words of unnecessary anger and temper etc.? Was your Christmas "to excess"? ---- Your weaknesses and sins may be different from Samson's, but nonetheless they despise God, and separate you from Him, rather than bind you to Him. You who know better, too. Honestly, you are all Samson.

Samson now was, and would be, blind for the rest of his life whether he lived thirty more days or thirty more years. The consequences of your sin follow a person around in a negative way every day. Every sin has consequences, whether you can see them or not. Maybe it's simply a step drawing you into a bigger and bolder sins. That's the devil's goal. To get you to follow sin and Him so completely, that you give up on God and your salvation in Christ. Samson was well on his way.

However, the Truths of God that Samson had learned earlier in his life began to work in his heart. What do you suppose he thought in the darkness of blindness, pushing the big grinding rock like an animal? "How stupid I have been. How foolish I have been. What a disappointment I have been to my Lord, to my father and mother, to the godly people in Israel. Dear Lord please forgive me." The Lord of mercy forgave him. The hair on his head, that had been the sign of his special relationship with the Lord, began to grow again. The Lord had not written him off. The Lord gave him strength in the hour of his death, to collapse the temple of Dagon and destroy more ungodly Philistines his death than in his life and complete the defeat of Philistia.

As you look back at the past year and Christmas last wee, where do you stand? If you do not see a wayward sinner, take off the blinders. Ask the Lord for forgiveness in Jesus the crucified and risen Savior. If consequences follow—and continue to follow—because of your sin, seek His forgiveness in Jesus, He will help you carry the load. That load serves as a reminder of how weak and foolish you can be. It drives you to the Lord's compassion in Christ. In His forgiveness your relationship with the Lord will grow again. Do not let go of Him. He loves you.

You are heading into a new year. It's time for a new start. I'm not talking just about making some New Year's resolutions which, by your own "grit," you think you can keep. Rather, let the Lord hold, lead, and guide you every day in your conduct. Let the Savior from sin, be your comfort, strength, and motive for following His commands every day. Samson trusted in the Lord, and the hair on his head began to grow again. In faith in the Lord, you bond to the Lord will also grow for you.

Do you remember Martin Luther's words from his catechism regarding Baptism and daily life?

#### ***BAPTISM IV What does this baptizing with water signify?***

*It signifies that our Old Adam is to be drowned by daily repentance, and is to **die** with all its sins and evil desires. It signifies that a New Man should daily arise—to live before God in righteousness and purity, now and forever.*

#### ***Where is this written?***

*St. Paul writes in Romans Chapter 6: "By baptism we were buried with Christ into death; in order that—just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father—so we too should walk in newness of life."*

Not only is this newness of life something to do on New Year's Day, but every day! In renewed assurance of forgiveness and, sing, pray, and live:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God! And renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit.*

--- Psalm 51:10-12

In renewed forgiveness and joy in through the Savior who was born the Christchild, executed on the cross, but risen in victory also for you; enter His rest with renewed zeal today, tomorrow, the next day which is New Year's Eve, and the next day which is New Year's, and every day thereafter, until, beyond death, you reach the eternal day of heaven! Your precious New Start is in Christ!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---