

## Power in the Familiar

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We find comfort and reassurance in the familiar. It doesn't matter how many times we watch a sunrise, feel the ocean breeze against our face, stroll in the woods or dive into a good book, each time it happens we find ourselves at peace with our little corner of the world. There's power in the familiar too; no words need to be exchanged when a couple in love walk hand in hand or when we touch the soft skin of a newborn child or when we catch the eye of a friend or loved one and exchange a knowing look.

So what is it about these "familiar" experiences that never grow old? We may have a daily ritual or a favorite biking route or a regular vacation spot which we use over and over again. The external trappings, the landscape, the views, the routines; these tend to change very little but something is changing in us. We grow and mature. Our tastes and sensibilities change. Priorities change. Perspectives change.

This is why we never tire of being in the presence of a newborn child or tire of watching the sun rise - it's because the Lord is using these external sense impressions, these fixed moments in time, as "building blocks," as a way of adding new levels of affection and understanding in us, new states of mind (see AC 2272, 5804).

This is especially true of the Lord's Word. We have an affectional tie with the stories of Scripture going all the way back to childhood. This is why we take comfort in the familiar and recite the Lord's prayer or the 23rd Psalm in times of crisis or need. We remind ourselves of the Golden Rule and going the Extra Mile and Turning the Other Cheek when confronted with a challenging situation. Even though we've heard the stories many times, we find hope and promise in the Garden of Eden or Noah's Ark or Daniel in the Lion's Den. There's tremendous depth and power in these well-loved stories too: think of the gospel account of the Birth of Jesus Christ or the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Great Red Dragon: even though we know the ending (and in many of our congregations re-enact these sacred stories every year during Christmas and New Church Day) something deep inside us rejoices at the triumph of good over evil.

Today, we'll be using several parts of the David and Goliath story to see how the Lord leads us by means of His Word, how He uses our affectional tie to the familiar parts of the Word to propel us forward. By using that which we already know and believe, the Lord (if we are willing and open to it) takes us deeper, revealing to us a potential we didn't know we had. He reveals the tools and steps necessary to overcome the obstacles that stand in our way, so that we may reach new levels of peace and understanding, so that we may, as one teaching says, become aware of new truths we "did not, and could not see before" (see AC 5804).

As is the case with most things in life, we need to get comfortable with the basics, the "general idea" before diving into the specifics, otherwise we'll get lost in the details, lose patience and give up (see AC 5454). So we have the basic storyline: the Philistine and Israelite armies are camped opposite each

other in a stand-off. King Saul and his army are paralyzed by fear at the prospect of sending one warrior after another to face almost certain death at the hands of the Philistine giant, Goliath. The young shepherd boy, David arrives at the Israelite camp with food for his older brothers, and through a series of remarkable events, becomes the unlikely champion to single-handedly eliminate the Philistine threat.

But as adults we yearn for more. We need specifics. We want to know how to face the “giants” in our lives, how to face our fears and regrets because life rarely unfolds the way we expect it to and we find ourselves ill-equipped to face our disappointment. So the Lord meets us in the familiar parts of His Word, the ones with which we have an affection, and He encourages us to look around, look closer. We notice, for example, the description of Goliath’s armor and we discover the most complete, detailed description of armor ever mentioned in the Word! Not only is each piece identified; a shield, a helmet, coat of mail, a javelin, and greaves (leg armor from below the knees), but we’re also told what kind of material each piece of armor is made of, and how much it weighs (see I Samuel 17:5-7). Why? Why does Goliath’s armor warrant such detailed attention in comparison to true heroes like Gideon or Joshua or Michael and his angels? One answer is because the Lord wants to teach us the tactics of the hells. He wants us to become so well-versed, so familiar with their strategies, their tricks, their lies, that we simply no longer fear evil, just as the shepherd boy, David demonstrated no fear of his opponent. Goliath’s full body armor represents the destructive nature of evil, how it is highly skilled at defending itself, protecting itself with clever arguments from head to toe, from the “head,” representing the thoughts evil spirits inject into our mind, to the “chest,” representing the unregenerate feelings they stir up in our heart, to the “legs,” representing the deeds they want us to carry out.

One practical way to think of Goliath’s armor is to think of how we use justifications. There’s the saying that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” but it would be more accurate to say the road to hell is paved with justifications. Good intentions are what the Lord and His angels use to propel us forward. Yes, we are prone to procrastination, putting things off, saying one thing but doing another, but good intentions are nevertheless the spiritual fuel that keeps us going. Justifications, on the other hand, are like the full body armor of Goliath in that they “deflect” all personal accountability and responsibility. With justifications we can explain away almost anything, claiming it wasn’t our fault, we’ll do it tomorrow, we didn’t mean it, our problems are bigger than anyone else’s, and so forth. And like Goliath, there’s a defiance to our justifications in that we convince ourselves we are right and everyone else is wrong.

There’s another thing we learn about armor; it can have a good or bad representation. We see both kinds in our story. Before the fight, David tries on King Saul’s armor but takes it off again since he isn’t familiar with it and hasn’t had a chance to test it properly. Being the Lord’s anointed, Saul’s armor represents the truths of the Word which are used to defend and protect ourselves against evil and falsity. The fact that David wasn’t comfortable in the armor and took it off illustrates, again, how the Lord leads us by means of the familiar. We all learn truths from the Word. Over a lifetime we accumulate many, many truths. But like David, we don’t have time to “test” all of this armor. Some of the truths we learn are not fully understood by us and then there are others that we haven’t actually used or put into practice. The truths of the Word we don’t fully understand or which we don’t use immediately are like Saul’s “untested” armor on David. Therefore, if we are to overcome the “giants” in our lives it becomes crucial that we use truths from the Word we are familiar with.

We're taught that the influx of the Lord and His angels is into that which we "know and believe, not into that which we don't know or believe" (see AC 6206). On the surface, this sounds obvious. We're not going to do something we don't believe in. But human behavior is not that simple. When we allow fear or anger or resentment and disappointment to cloud our thinking, the influx from heaven is temporarily distorted and interrupted. We start to believe the negative chatter in our mind. We look at the familiar and struggle to see anything special. We look at the natural beauty around us and fail to see the Lord in it. We struggle to find peace and order in our simple, ordinary days.

This is why the Lord encourages us, like David, to equip ourselves with what is comfortable and familiar, in David's case, with the tools of his trade, his staff, sling and five smooth stones picked out from a brook. And then the Lord draws our attention to another detail - these stones were taken from running water, not from the still water of a pool or well. The truths in our memory are represented by the standing water of a "pool" or "well," whereas the truths that we have made a part of our lives are represented by running water, an endless source of living, refreshing inspiration (see AC 7324; AE 405:15; AR 956). Taking the stones from the running water of a brook is a picture of how we need to use those truths from the Word that we have found to be effective in the past. And the emphasis on their "smoothness" points to the fact that whatever truth we use to do battle against the "giant" in our life needs to be "rounded out" by experience and frequent use.

All it took to bring down the giant was one smooth stone. There's tremendous power in "one," in the simple but highly effective approach of deliberately compelling ourselves to do one small thing differently today than we did yesterday. Our effort needs to be "deliberate" because much of our daily routine runs on autopilot, we're not typically thinking deeply about what we say or do. So we read: "If from [our] will and intellect...we deliberately refrain from one evil because it is a sin, [we] refrain from them all. For as soon as [we]...deliberately refrain from some evil because it is a sin, we are kept by the Lord in a purpose to refrain from the rest" (CL 529, cf. CL 528). This is the "one" smooth stone shot from David's sling. We disrupt the huge, looming sphere and influence of evil in our lives by confronting one, tiny manifestation of it in ourselves, by deliberately choosing not to say that unkind word, by not clicking on that website link, by not responding with anger to that email.

When the Lord was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, He did not argue or reason with him. Instead, the Lord used three short quotes from Scripture as His defense, three "smooth stones" as it were, and each truth which the Lord quoted destroyed the threat, the temptation, with deadly precision. The same is true for us. When we use a familiar piece of Scripture or a New Church doctrinal concept (we love and find helpful) we open ourselves up to the Lord's direct guidance and, with the precision of a slingshot, hit our target.

Hitting our "target" in everyday life is a process of becoming more and more aware of the Lord's presence in our lives. It's a process of inviting the Lord to take us to the familiar parts of His Word and then asking Him to show us something new, something we haven't seen before. It's a process of doing the work of regeneration, of facing our "giants," of breaking them down to size by doing one small thing differently today than we did yesterday. This is how the Lord helps us grow and mature. When we do it, we find that our tastes and sensibilities change. We have a different perspective. Our priorities change. We see beauty in the ordinary. Everything seems to come alive (see HH 489) whether that be the simple routine of opening the Lord's Word each day, or praying, or holding hands with a loved one, or taking a

walk in the woods, or spending time with our children and grandchildren. We hit our mark. We find ourselves at peace in the world.

There's an ancient proverb that says, "the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." We face the big, looming "giants" in our lives by stepping forward with one, simple truth. With the confidence and trust of David we say to that "giant" in front of us, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord" (I Samuel 17:45).

Amen.