



# *A Sermon for the New Year*

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## *Readings*

### Leviticus 25:3-4 (NKJV)

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.

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### Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* §9274

The Lord is present with each and every human being. He exerts insistent pressure on us to receive him. When we do receive him, which occurs when we acknowledge him as our own God, Creator, Redeemer, and Savior, his First Coming occurs [in us], which is the twilight before dawn. From then on, we begin to be enlightened intellectually in spiritual matters and to grow into deeper and deeper wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*. Wheaton, IL: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1984.

We can see a reoccurring theme in the Word around the number seven. The Word of the Old Testament begins with the story of the seven days of creation. Six of these were days of labor and the seventh was a Sabbath – a day of rest. The Ten Commandments, dictated by the Lord, makes these seven days into a binding law:

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work ... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth ... and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8-11)<sup>3</sup>*

In addition to this observance of the seventh day of the week as a Sabbath, or day of rest in which there is to be no work, the Israelites were commanded to observe every seventh year as a year of rest, or Sabbath, for the land. They were not to sow or reap crops nor prune their vineyards. And then every forty-nine years, that is, 7×7 years, they were to celebrate a year of Jubilee in which not only were they not to plant nor harvest nor gather from their vineyards, but everyone's hereditary land was to be returned to him if it had been sold.

There is a distinction between the six days or years of labor, and the seventh day of rest, because of the signification of the six days and of the seventh day. The six days, or periods, signify the successive states of a person's regeneration. They are days of labor because during them a person works according to what is true to do what is good. The emphasis during these days or states of labor is on acting according to the truth, that is, on living according to what we have learned and believe to be true. This is said to be a spiritual state.

In contrast, the seventh day, the Sabbath, signifies a celestial state, when a person from a love of what is good knows and does what is true. By means of the work done during the six days of labor, that is, living according to the truth, a person at length comes into a state of good in which they do what is good as if from habit, and from the good in which they now are, they perceive what is true. This contrast is illustrated by the difference between the first and second chapters of Genesis as described in the Arcana Coelestia. We read:

*(The second) chapter treats of the celestial man, as the preceding one did of the spiritual, who was formed out of a dead man. ... A spiritual man acknowledges spiritual and celestial truth and good; but from faith, according to which also he acts, but not so much from love. A celestial man believes and perceives spiritual and celestial truth and good, acknowledging no other faith than that which is from love, from which also he acts. (Arcana Coelestia 81)<sup>4</sup>*

This brings to mind that when we practice doing something long enough, it tends to become a habit, so that we no longer have to think consciously about how to do it. Driving a car or reading are good examples of this. When we first started driving or reading, we had to remember and apply all the rules. But eventually the time came when we could do these things automatically, and did not need to think about how to do them. Likewise, in our spiritual lives, we first need to know truths and practice

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*. Wheaton, IL: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1984.

living according to them until the time comes when doing the right thing becomes like a habit – we just do it without needing to think about it.

Now as you can imagine, if you were living in an agrarian civilization, that is, one that depends upon sowing and harvesting crops every year so that there would be food to eat, you might be concerned about the command to do no sowing or harvesting every seven years. What are you going to eat for a year? In giving this law, the Lord is anticipated this very question, and provided the solution. As we read in Leviticus 25:20-21:

*And if you say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year, since we shall not sow nor gather in our produce?" Then I will command My blessing on you in the sixth year, and it will bring forth produce enough for three years. (Lev. 25:20-21)*

When that seventh year comes around resisting the temptation to not go out and plant crops requires putting a lot of faith in the Lord – in the Lord's Providence – that He will provide as He said He would. Put yourself in that situation, realizing that if the Lord does not bring forth enough produce for three years in that sixth year, you and your family will starve during the seventh and eighth years. Did the Israelites have enough trust in the Lord's providing for them? Perhaps many of them did, but also many of them did not. Look at the story about the Lord providing manna in the wilderness.

*The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily." Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none."*

*And it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none.*

*And the LORD said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? (Exodus 16:4-5, 26-28)*

Now if some of the people did not have even enough trust in the Lord that there would be enough manna for them on the Sabbath, can you imagine the trouble with trust that they would have every seven years? And this was even after they saw a double portion of manna given on the sixth day, and would see a triple portion of produce during the sixth year preceding the seventh year of a Sabbath for the land.

This lack of trust in the Lord goes back much further than the Israelites. Consider the story of the serpent tempting the woman in the garden of Eden:

*Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' "*

*But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:1-6)*

What opened the woman to temptation was lack of trust in the Lord's words to her, and the subsequent doubt. Perhaps the serpent was right? Perhaps we would not die? Perhaps the fruit would make us wise so that we would know good and evil? And perhaps there would not be enough manna on the seventh day, or enough food for the seventh year?

What opens us up to a lack of trust in the Lord's words, in His Word, and in his Providence, is self-love which leads us into the idea that we can judge for ourselves what is true and what is good. We can read of this in connection with the story of the woman's temptation as described in Arcana Coelestia 205:

*... in consequence of the ascendancy of self-love, they began to think that they could lead themselves, and thus be like the Lord; for such is the nature of the love of self that it is unwilling to submit to the Lord's leading, and prefers to be self-guided, and being self-guided to consult the things of sense and of memory-knowledge as to what is to be believed. (AC 205)*

To be led by the Lord or to be led by ourselves – that is the question. That is the question for this new year – starting tomorrow. And how do we know the difference? Well, let's look at our two stories.

The woman tempted by the serpent could have known the difference by simply reflecting that she was disobeying a simple commandment of the Lord not to eat nor touch the fruit of the tree that was in the midst of the garden. Instead of concentrating on the simple command, she devoted her attention to the idea of being wiser, knowing good and evil for herself.

The Israelites could have known the difference by simply reflecting that they were disobeying a simple commandment of the Lord not to go out and look for manna on the Sabbath. Instead they were concentrating on their own welfare, whether they would have enough food to eat.

So perhaps in many situations that will arise during this new year we can ask ourselves, "What is the simplest command that the Lord gives us for this situation?" Perhaps the answer will be found in one of the Lord's Ten Commandments, or perhaps it will be found in our looking to the Two Great Commandments. And we need to avoid complicating the Lord's answers to us. Don't weigh down His answers with our reasonings. Keep it simple! Look in His Word and in our heart for the simple brief answer He is giving us to our questions of what we should do.

Amen.

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