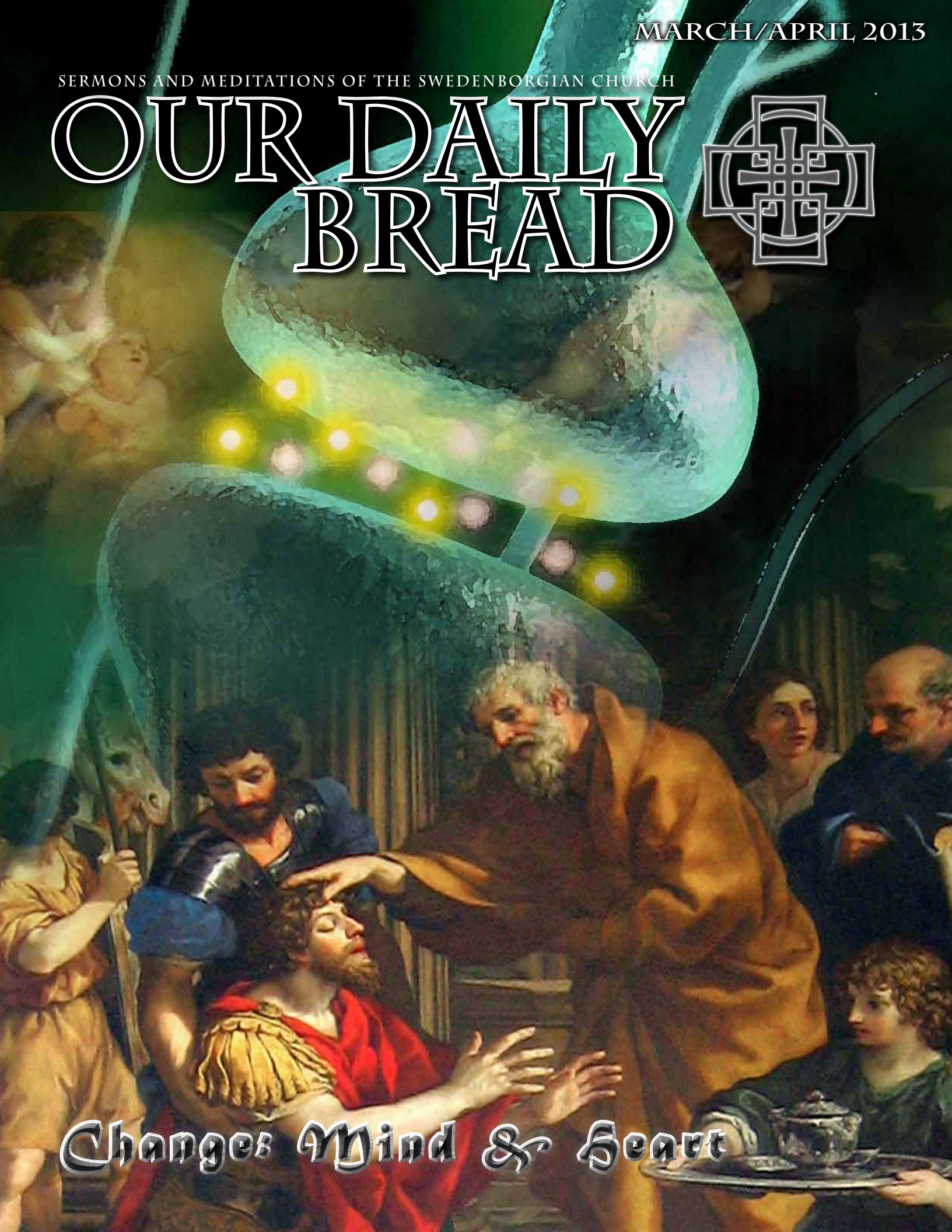


MARCH/APRIL, 2013

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

# OUR DAILY BREAD



*Changes Mind & Heart*

# Prayer

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

- Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur"

## Cover Image:

The blind Saul of Tarsus (later the apostle Paul) receiving the Holy Spirit from Ananias, overlaid with an image of neurons forming a synapse, part of a pathway in the brain.

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Dear Reader,

Change is hard. Taking on (or leaving behind) habits, living situations, relationships, perspectives, opinions, beliefs, priorities—it takes effort to heave ourselves in new directions. But still, we *can* change and adapt, and we do!

As it turns out, change takes not only spiritual but also physical work. Our ability to change is the result of something called "neuroplasticity": our brains transform throughout our lives, developing new neural pathways and synapses as needed. Relearning to speak or walk after an accident? Have a new hobby? Coping with a loss? Your neuroplastic brain is making new connections. When we change our minds, we are literally *changing our minds*.

Our tradition believes that the Lord occupies every realm of existence, from the highest heaven to the most physical things. Visible or invisible, tangible or ethereal, all of creation is "charged with the grandeur of God." It shouldn't surprise us, then, that spiritual change also manifests its holy mystery in our bodies. Our ability to change is a God-given miracle written on our brains.

The Christian story is all about change: from darkness to light, failure to triumph, hate to love, grief to joy, death to life. The Lord lived and taught, died, harrowed hell, and rose again so that humanity could change, so that we could find the soul freedom to seek rebirth. He paved the road for all our transformations, now and evermore. Alleluia!

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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# MAR 3 A NEW HEART AND A NEW SPIRIT

Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete

## Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

## Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed

his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

## Sermon

The prophet Ezekiel states something that sounds simple: he tells us that if we turn from wickedness, we will live.

He tells us further that God will judge each of us according to our ways. He enjoins us to acquire a new heart and a new spirit. We find in the prophet's words a beautiful statement about God's love for the whole human race. God says in Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone." Our reading concludes with the statement, "Turn, then, and live!"

This reading is all about personal responsibility: we are to take an active role in our spiritual life. The prophet is very optimistic about human power, simply saying, "Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall." In this reading, no suggestion is made that we may not have the power to turn from our offenses. It appears simply to be assumed that we have the power to refrain from evil.

The question of whether or not we can, of our own free will, refrain from evil is a heated one among the various Christian traditions. A clergy colleague from another tradition who disagreed with my perspective on the role of faith and works in salvation once called me a "semi-Pelagian." Pelagius was a Christian living in the fourth century after Christ who taught that we have the power to save ourselves without divine aid. He was declared to be a heretic. His teachings are called "Pelagianism." My colleague was not far off in calling me semi-Pelagian. In fact, given the qualifying prefix "semi," I rather appreciated this title.

As Ezekiel teaches us, we have to power to turn from evil and do good. God continually knocks at the door, but we must open it. We must respond to God's call. We cooperate with God in our own salvation. We see our relationship with God as if it were a love relationship. God loves the whole human race—and, as with all lovers, God asks us to love him back. He gives us total freedom to love him or to turn from

him. Only with free will can our relationship with God be genuinely loving. If we were powerless in our relationship with God, it would have no mutuality. We would be programmed human computers. We all know that we cannot compel someone to love us who doesn't—this is a law of love. Think of all the love songs and poems that have been written about lovers being spurned by those they love! God's love is the same. He wants us all to return His love and to unite with Him, so he gives us the power to reciprocate.

But we also need to keep in mind those two words, "as if." While it looks like we are turning from evil and doing good by our own efforts, this is an illusion. It is God in us that gives us that power. Without those two words, "as if," we would be Pelagian all the way. But we are semi-Pelagian. We acknowledge that God gives us the power to turn from evil and do good. Unlike Pelagius, we believe that we need God's aid. But God's aid comes in the form of personal responsibility; God gives us the water and soap, and then we need to wash ourselves. That is an image used by Swedenborg to show how we are to turn from evil and do good, as Ezekiel calls us to do.

A person must purify himself from evils and not wait for the Lord to do this immediately; otherwise he may be compared to a servant with face and clothes fouled with soot and dung, who comes up to his master and says, "Wash me, my Lord." Would not the master say to him, "You foolish servant, what are you saying? See; there are water, soap, and towel. Have you not hands, and power in them? Wash yourself." And the Lord God will say, "The means of purification are from Me; and from Me are your will and ability; therefore use these My gifts and endowments as your own, and you will be purified." (*True Christianity* 436)

This process of turning from evil and doing good is a growth process. Swedenborg uses several images of growth to explain our regeneration. At first, I had the idea that regeneration was linear; that is, we shun one sin at a time in a series. Thinking that way, I ignored those passages that suggested growth. But I now see that as we turn from evil, heavenly love enters us. The process is actually a separation of evil from our souls so that we can be filled with God's love and goodness. So as our evil enjoyments are separated from us, we are filled with good enjoyments. Our whole personality is transformed. This is the new hearts and spirit that Ezekiel talks about when he says, "Get a new heart and a new spirit." Swedenborg comments on that very passage:

A new heart here means a new will, and a new spirit means a new understanding; for "heart" in the

"Word" signifies the will, and "spirit," when joined with heart, signifies the understanding. It knows from reason that a regenerate person has a new will and a new understanding, because these two faculties make a person, and they are what are regenerated. Therefore, every person is such as he is as to those two faculties. (*True Christianity* 601)

As evils are separated from us, heaven is implanted in us. We receive heavenly loves and enjoyments in exchange for evil loves and enjoyments:

It follows that evils with a person are removed and separated, . . . and that evils, as they are removed, avert themselves, and that this takes place in the same degree in which heaven is implanted, that is, as a person is made new. (*True Christianity* 613)

All the enjoyments we know flow from the things we love. I love music, and so I enjoy writing it and listening to it. I love Carol, so I enjoy being with her. The process of regeneration is a process in which we grow out of one type of enjoyment into another type of enjoyment. Here, Swedenborg uses words that no one today likes to hear about. He talks about sin and evil. Perhaps it is a reflection of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lutheran culture he inherited. In fact, Ralph Waldo Emerson was very annoyed by what he called the "Lutheran preacher" that kept "rearing its ugly head" in Swedenborg.

Maybe today Swedenborg would have used different language. Maybe he would talk about behaviors being changed—about survival behaviors from dysfunctional environments being replaced with healthy behaviors. Whatever you call it, I agree with Swedenborg that spiritual growth is growth. We move from one state of being into another. We move from one way of enjoyment into another way of enjoyment. This is what is meant by the blessing we hear from time to time—"The Lord keep our going out and our coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore." The "going out" is leaving behind our old way of being, and the coming in is acquiring the healthier, more heavenly ways of being. The main point, though, is that we come into healthier and more heavenly enjoyments. Our old enjoyments become distasteful as we encounter healthier enjoyments.

All affections have their enjoyments; but such as the affections are, such are the enjoyments. Affections for evil and falsity also have their enjoyments; and before a person begins to be regenerated, and receives from the Lord affections for truth and good, those enjoyments appear to be the only ones; so much so, that people believe that no other enjoyments exist, and consequently that if they were deprived of these, they

would utterly perish. But they who receive from the Lord the enjoyments of affections for truth and good, see and feel by degrees the nature of the enjoyments of their former life, which they believe to be the only enjoyments—that they are vile in comparison, and indeed filthy. And the farther one advances into the enjoyment of affections for truth and good, the more does the person begin to regard the enjoyments of evil and falsity as vile, and at length to be averse to them. (*Arcana Coelestia* 3938)

As we feel healthy loves that are good, and as we delight in truth, maladaptive ways of life become distasteful to us. We just don't like them anymore. I think of addictions when I read this passage. Addicts come to a point where they are sick and tired of their addiction and the ruin it causes. Then they become sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. When they reach despair, they put down their addiction. Then they begin to discover all the warm feelings of love and healthy enjoyments—enjoyments that were masked by the numbing effects of substance abuse.

This is true on the spiritual plane as well. Lutherans and Methodists call this “sanctifying grace,” and the Reformed tradition calls this “sanctification.” One Reformed minister I talked with called it “God shining a flashlight on our lives.” We see in ourselves limitations and maladaptive ways of living, and begin to feel the enjoyments of spiritual love. We begin to turn from those areas of self on which God has shined the flashlight. As Paul says, we put off the old self and put on a new self:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4: 22-24)

And as we turn away from our limitations, we begin to feel the enjoyments of heaven. As we enlarge our hearts to receive life from God, with His love, we are elevated upward into heaven. The whole process is like our biological birth. It is like conception, gestation in the womb, birth, and education. Our conception is when we begin to see our evils, or survival mechanisms that no longer work for us. The gestation, birth, and education are like the new heart and spirit we acquire. This biological process is a natural image of our spiritual rebirth. It is what Swedenborg calls a correspondence. The whole natural world corresponds to spiritual realities. And this is the case with the birth process. Swedenborg also compares it to the growth of a tree.

That a person can be regenerated only by successive steps, may be illustrated by the things existing in the natural world, one and all. A tree cannot reach its growth as a tree in a day; but first there is growth from the seed next from the root, and afterward from the shoot, from which is formed the stem; and from this proceed branches with leaves, and at last blossoms and fruits. . . . They who have a different conception of regeneration know nothing of charity and faith, and of the growth of each according to a person's cooperation with the Lord. It is evident from all this that regeneration is effected in a way analogous to that in which a person is conceived, carried in the womb, born, and educated. (*True Christianity* 586)

As we are perfected by God, with our cooperation, we become that fruit tree planted by the still waters of Psalm 1. We become the tree bearing good fruit of Matthew 7:17. With the new heart and new spirit in us, we become angels—whether on this earth or in the next life. Amen.

### Prayer

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I have set my God always before me: for he is on my right hand; therefore I shall not fall.

- Psalm 16:9

### ODB Online Sign-up

The vast majority of *Our Daily Bread's* funding comes from the Swedenborgian Church. In these troubled economic times, we are all forced to make budget cuts and live within our means. We would love to send a paper version of ODB to everyone who would like it, but we are not able to do that. If you wish to receive the magazine in print, it is essential that you subscribe!

But please do not forget that you can download ODB on your computer and print it on your printer. The electronic delivery is free, and it is also more reliable than the USPS, which delivers it when it fits into their schedule (the magazine is not sent first class).

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**Step Three:** Enter your email address.

**Step Four:** Select “*Our Daily Bread*” & fill in the required information.

## Monday, March 4

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Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." *Acts 8:9-10*

The reason divine providence focuses on what is infinite and eternal particularly in its intent to save the human race is that the goal of divine providence is a heaven from the human race. *Divine Providence n.58*

## Tuesday, March 5

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And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. *Acts 8:11-13*

Since this is the goal, it follows that the main focus of divine providence is reforming and regenerating us, that is, saving us, since heaven is made up of people who have been reformed and regenerated. *Ibid.*

## Wednesday, March 6

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Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. *Acts 8:14-17*

Since regenerating us is a matter of uniting what is good and what is true, or love and wisdom, within us the way they are united in divinity that emanates from the Lord, divine providence focuses primarily on this in its intent to save the human race. *Ibid.*

## Thursday, March 7

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Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." *Acts 8:18-19*

There is a clear image of what is infinite and eternal in the angelic heaven. The angelic heaven is also one of the things we need to know about. Every religious person thinks about it and wants to go there. *Divine Providence n.60*

## Friday, March 8

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But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." *Acts 8:20-23*

Heaven, though, is granted only to people who know the path to it and follow that path. We can know the path to heaven to some extent simply by considering what the people who make up heaven are like, realizing that no one can become an angel or get to heaven unless he or she arrives bringing along some angelic quality from the world. *Ibid.*

## Saturday, March 9

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Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me." Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans. *Acts 8:24-25*

Our whole spirit is desire and its consequent thought; and since all desire is a matter of love and all thought a matter of discernment, our whole spirit is its love and its consequent discernment. This is why our thinking flows from the desires of our love when we are thinking solely from our own spirit, as we do when we are in reflective moods at home. *Divine Providence n.61*

# MAR 10 GOING UP? Go DOWN

Ms. Eli Dale

## Mark 1:4, 7-13

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And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. . . . And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

## The Heavenly City #187-88

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We go through spiritual struggles only if we are being reborn. Spiritual struggle is psychological distress brought on by harmful spirits when we do good things and have true ideas. We experience the anguish of inner struggle when these harmful spirits stir up the bad traits in us. Since we do not realize this is the source of these struggles, we have no idea where they come from.

We all have harmful spirits and good spirits with us. The harmful spirits are associated with our bad traits, and the good spirits are associated with our good traits. When the harmful spirits approach us, they bring out our bad traits, while the good spirits bring out our good traits. Then there is a conflict and a fight, which brings on anguish inside us. This anguish is inner struggle.

So you can see that inner struggles are brought on by hell and are not from heaven. This is part of Christian belief, which says that God does not torment anyone.

## Sermon

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What is this ritual that is so important that even Jesus did it? What does a ritual do for anyone, let alone for Jesus?

Starhawk, in her book *The Spiral Dance*, gives us a hint: "To communicate with the High Self, the

Goddess/God Within, we resort to symbols, art, poetry, music, myth, and the actions of ritual that translate abstract concepts into the language of the unconscious. . . . For this reason, religious truths have not been expressed throughout time as mathematical formulas, but in art, music, dance, drama, poetry, stories, and active rituals. As Robert Graves says, 'Religious morals, in a healthy society, are best enforced by drums, moonlight, fasting, dancing, masks, flowers, divine possession.'"

Personally, I am a big fan of ritual. So is our culture. Saying "How do you do?" and "Pleased to meet you!" upon introduction are rituals meant to provide order and keep the peace. A graduation is a ritual to mark the transition of a young person out of one institution of learning into another, or into the world. A wedding is a ritual that effects a change of state: we come in single and go out married. A funeral is a ritual that brings some order to the tangled mess of loss so that we can get on with our grieving.

What does baptism do? Some religious traditions claim that it too effects a change of state: we start out pagan and end up Christian; we start out damned and end up saved. But Swedenborg will not let us make these claims. Rather, he says it brings us to the threshold where a change of state is possible; where we are invited to change from a material person to a spiritual person. Baptism is a ritual that works, yes. But it is not a magic bullet. It is a promise. Only living will fulfill the promise.

In *The Heavenly City*, Swedenborg starts the chapter on baptism with this statement: "Baptism was set up as a symbol that we are religious, and as a reminder that we are meant to be reborn."

A symbol and reminder. It makes baptism sound like nothing special, almost empty, something we could do without. Yet he goes on to say, "The washing in baptism is spiritual washing, which is rebirth."

Rebirth! That's much clearer . . . and not empty.

I was looking, the other day, for a description of the Swedenborgian church's mission. That is, if a church hasn't discovered its own particular mission and needs a guiding principle to better understand its identity and to guide its own decision making, what is it about being a Swedenborgian church that would provide that knowledge of purpose? Swedenborg tells us that the Lord's purpose in creation is to make angels for heaven. And we make angels by having humans go through "regeneration," or rebirth. So the function or mission of a Swedenborgian church could be to create an environment that invites and



encourages rebirth; to companion each other in rebirth; to provide the waters for rebirth.

That sounds all very positive and progressive, until we remember two things. First, most people don't really want to change very much. Minor tailoring adjustments are tolerable, even desirable; but total overhauls aren't very popular. Swedenborg describes the six days of creation in Genesis as stages of the regeneration process—and he tells us that most people don't make it past day three! That's *most* people, not "average" people. So even those who appear to be striving for spiritual growth can bog down halfway to the "finish line."

It would therefore take great courage for a church to provide the waters of rebirth, because it would not only require the church to provide an unpopular service—which means the church may be small in numbers—but would also require those who are within the church to lead the way, to demonstrate what rebirth means.

This brings me to the second reason why we may wonder whether founding a church on a mission of becoming the waters of rebirth is all that terrific an idea. Spiritual growth—regeneration—occurs as a result of spiritual combats. The minute you say, "Okay, Lord, I want to go your way, I want to face the light, I want to play on your team," you're in for a struggle. In spiritual combat, better known as "temptation," your psyche and soul become the battleground between heaven and hell.

Our inborn natures are not naturally attuned to embracing the Lord. This is something we teach ourselves, and each other, to do over our lifetimes. Our natural bent is to love ourselves. Life is a process of changing our basic orientation by reordering our loves. The Lord is fighting on the team of the reborn, the reordered. And hell—that is to say, selfishness, or our own natural inclination—is fighting to preserve the status quo. Regeneration is a process of turning ourselves end-over-end until we are eventually right side up!

John offered the baptism of repentance. He called for people to "repent"—the word means "turn around." The direction we are supposed to face is toward the light of heaven. We might think that heaven would be so totally irresistible that, once we knew about it and were invited to turn around, we would snap

around like iron headed toward a magnet. But we don't—unless perhaps we have a religious conversion experience. The turning is slow, and it occurs through spiritual combat.

So when we go down into the waters of the Jordan, as Jesus did, we are not signing up for a life of pink clouds and angelic wisdom—not yet, anyway. We go *down* to get the promise of regeneration—which includes the promise of spiritual combat.

In fairy tales, the protagonist never gets the prize without having to go through trials to prove him- or herself. You are the hero of your own fairy tale. But there is one thing to know. Even though you will be convinced that you alone are tackling all the trials set before you, the reality is that the Lord is doing the fighting for you—and the Lord wants you to win. Swedenborg tells us that the Lord does the fighting, and yet that "in all temptation, there is something of doubt about the Lord's presence and mercy" (*Arcana Coelestia* #2334). We act from ourselves because we need to feel invested in these battles. And in fact we

can, despite the Lord's participation, bring defeat upon ourselves by deciding to be loyal to some unheavenly thing, such as our greed, our unhealthy patterns of relating to others, or our fear.

Baptism is not enough. The only way to succeed is to fight from *faith*, because, as Swedenborg says, "All rebirth comes from the Lord through the true things in faith, and by living

in harmony with them" (*The Heavenly City* #203). But, as he goes on to say, "Baptism itself gives neither faith nor spiritual well-being. It only shows that we should accept faith, and that we will be rescued if we are reborn" (*The Heavenly City* #207). And "Baptism without faith in the Lord is of no avail" (*True Christian Religion* #685.2).

This prompts the question: What is faith, and how does it work? "What is faith" may seem like a totally stupid question; but as any professor will tell you, that's the best kind! So I invite you to think for a moment about how you would answer the question, "What is faith?"

This is kind of a trick situation, because faith is not something we can reason about (see *Arcana Coelestia* #215). It is an inner orientation of the heart and mind. Just as your physical body is the body that your soul uses to get around, and just as truth is the body that good uses to get around, faith is the body that love

*The Lord is fighting  
on the team of the  
reborn. Hell is  
fighting to preserve  
the status quo.*

uses to get around (see *Arcana Coelestia* #668). But faith is like a fruit: it grows. It starts small, and eventually gets plump enough to be nourishing. It shouldn't surprise us that Swedenborg says, "True and real faith is love to the Lord and toward the neighbor" (*Arcana Coelestia* #1964.2). I particularly like what Swedenborg has to say about faith and love to the Lord:

Those who receive and have faith are continually mindful of the Lord, even when they are thinking or speaking of other things, and also when they are carrying out their public, private, or domestic duties—although they are not aware that they are then mindful of the Lord. For the remembrance of the Lord by those who are in faith reigns universally with them, and what reigns universally is not perceived except when thought is directed to it. (*Arcana Coelestia* #5130)

But we are talking here about the ripest fruit.

Notwithstanding his own admonition that one cannot reason about faith, Swedenborg, of course, has lots to say about it. Here he starts with what faith isn't:

Some suppose that faith is mere thought; some that it is an acknowledgement of something to be believed; some that it is the whole doctrine of faith, which is to be believed. . . . Thus in the bare knowledge of what faith is they wander in error. . . .

Faith, however, is not mere thought, nor is it an acknowledgement of something to be believed, nor a knowledge of all things that belong to the doctrine of faith. No one can be saved by these, since they can take root no deeper than in the thought. Thought saves no one, but rather the life we gain for ourselves in the world through the insights of faith. Such life remains with us; but all thought that is not in keeping with our life dies away, even to the point of becoming none at all. In heaven it is people's lives that bring them into one another's company. (*Arcana Coelestia* 2228.2)

So if we want to have faith, we have to go down deeper than thought, and down deeper than knowing our doctrine, and into the living of our lives.

Okay, so faith is reflected in how we live down here on earth. We knew that, right? But how do we get faith? The same way we regenerate: little by little. We soak it into our lives by encountering truth in our religious teachings, and by encountering truth through daily living. We soak it into our lives by loving what we have been taught about truth, love, charity, and heaven. Regeneration and faith circle around each other, strengthening each other, feeding each other: a little faith, a little temptation, a little regeneration; a little more faith, a little more temptation, a little more regeneration. Faith starts in the memory, in what we have been taught. Then it

moves into our understanding. Ultimately, it moves into our hearts. Without faith, there is no progress.

Now let's revisit the question: Do we really want to regenerate? Here is a truly Swedenborgian both/and answer: yes and no.

Swedenborg was writing at the end of the era of the "former Christian church," at the dawn of the New Church. He was speaking of his contemporaries when he wrote these words: "Those who are being regenerated do not all arrive at [the celestial] state. The greatest part, at this day, attain only the first state; some only the second; others the third, fourth, or fifth; few the sixth; and scarcely anyone the seventh" (*Arcana Coelestia* #13).

We have been in the era of the New Church for over two hundred years, and the world has undergone some fundamental changes since then. (This assumes that the people who appear on *Jerry Springer* and *Geraldo* are not representative of the average human being.) I'm sure you have noticed the booming "self-help" industry: books, retreats, gurus, workshops, methods, and support groups. Surely this means that people are willing to do their regeneration work! Surely you yourselves would tell me that spiritual growth is on your personal agenda. It is certainly on mine.

But isn't life full of pitfalls and distractions? I think it is also full of false prophets. While some of the self-help industry is valid and helpful (AA comes quickly to mind), too much of it is about our own evil tendencies dressed up as "growth." Walk down the bookstore aisle and you will see titles that invite you to "have the life you want," "get the partner you want," "get the job you deserve," "experience the love you ought to have."

Folks, this is not turning toward the Lord; it is entrenching in the world. It is difficult, in my experience, to discern the true voice of the Lord amid all the hue and cry of the voices that beckon us to invest in ourselves for the sake of ourselves. I want to remind you that a faithful life lived according to the Lord's leading beckons us to invest in ourselves for the sake of something *greater* than ourselves—true self-improvement. Yes, you benefit, but it's not about you. And it's not easy.

So are we the waters of rebirth? Do we want to be? If every church person were collecting on the promise of baptism; if every church person were accepting the paradoxical gift of spiritual combat; if every church person were turning, turning, "till we

come round right," the conditions of our lives would be so attractive that we would be irresistible to anyone who saw us.

Is personal transformation, regeneration, rebirth really unpopular? It wouldn't be if there were more valid models of what it looks like walking around in workplaces, in supermarkets, on the sidewalks, down school corridors, and any other place that people meet people.

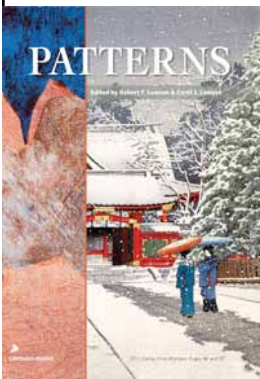
Yes, it takes a lifetime of living to get to day seven, to become a celestial person. But if we come to day three, or four, or five, or six, we will be so much brighter, fuller, stronger, more centered, more whole, and more holy than we are now! There is no point in worrying about how far along the path we have gone. One way to love the neighbor is to be a living, breathing demonstration of what it means to be reborn; to be able to show others the way; to "companion" people through their temptations, and on into the light of the Divine.

We gaze up to heaven with longing, wanting to go up. We begin by going down, down into the waters; down into temptation; down into the way we live in the material world; down into the inner meaning of the Word; down into our centers. Like a dancer preparing for a beautiful, graceful leap, to go up, we bend our knees and go down.

## Prayer

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Dear Lord, our eyes look upward to you, and we long to be in the spiritual place where you fill our lives. Yet as we tread that journey toward you, our feet take us down, down into valleys of struggle and temptation. Be with us even in the valley of the shadow of death, and lead us toward the mountain of your presence. Amen.



### **New Book: *Patterns: Make 'Em and Break 'Em***

**ISBN:** 978-0-87785-244-5

**Editor:** Robert F. Lawson & Carol S. Lawson

**Length:** 272 pages

**Medium:** Book - Paperback

**Item Price:** \$15.95 US

**Description:** What are the patterns that define our lives? How do we create them? How do we know when it's time to break them? How do we handle it when they're broken for us? The twenty-eighth edition of the Chrysalis Reader series, which includes both the quarterly journal *Chrysalis* and the annual *Chrysalis Reader* anthology, explores all these questions through poetry, essays, and short fiction.

Among more than seventy entries in this volume are works from poet laureates, acclaimed authors, and up-and-coming voices alike. Patty Christiena Willis tells the story of a woman from a family of holistic healers who suddenly is unable to use her special gift. Michael Barber paints a poignant picture of a soldier's return from Baghdad. Richard Lines steps back into the past to explore a debate among early followers of Swedenborg about whether or not to split from existing Christian churches to establish one of their own. Rounding out the volume are two Bailey Prize winners: Katherine Noble, a young poet whose work is already winning awards; and Kristin Troyer, whose essay moves between descriptions of being an actress in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* and life as a university student dealing with her father's illness.

# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, March 11

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Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)

*Acts 8:26*

All motion in the spiritual world is the effect of changes of inner states, to the point that motion is nothing but change of state. *Heaven and Hell n.192*

## Tuesday, March 12

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So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. *Acts 8:27-28*

Whenever people move from one place to another, whether it is within their town, in their courtyards, in their gardens, or to people outside their own community, they get there more quickly if they are eager to and more slowly if they are not. The path itself is lengthened or shortened depending on their desire, even though it is the same path. *Heaven and Hell n.195*

## Wednesday, March 13

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Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. *Acts 8:29-31*

One person can live like another in outward form. As long as there is an inward acknowledgment of the Deity and an intent to serve our neighbor, we can become rich, dine sumptuously, live and dress as elegantly as befits our station and office, enjoy pleasures and amusement, and meet our worldly obligations for the sake of our position and of our business and of the life of both mind and body. *Heaven and Hell n.359*

## Thursday, March 14

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Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" *Acts 8:32-34*

So we can see that it is not as hard to follow the path to heaven as many people believe. The only difficulty is finding the power to resist love for ourselves and love of the world and preventing those loves from taking control, since they are the source of all our evils. *Ibid.*

## Friday, March 15

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Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. *Acts 8:35-38*

The reason the Lord's yoke is easy and his burden light is that to the extent that we resist the evils that well up from love for ourselves and the world, we are led by the Lord and not by ourselves. Then the Lord resists those things within us and removes them. *Ibid.*

## Saturday, March 16

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When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. *Acts 8:39-40*

After death, our ruling affection or love awaits each one of us. This is never rooted out to eternity because our spirit is exactly like our love; and (what has not been known before) the body of every spirit and angel is an outward form of her or his love that is completely responsive to the inner form that is the character and mind of that spirit or angel. *Heaven and Hell 363.*



# WAIT. LISTEN. GET UP.

Rev. Kathy Speas

devouring fire. A God who suddenly, without warning or explanation, changes Jesus into a body of such incredible light that Peter and James and John are overcome by fear. Nice.

# 17

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## Exodus 24:12-18

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The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

## Matthew 17:1-9

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

## Sermon

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If God wants us to love him, follow him, God would do well to quit scaring the bejeepers out of us.

No doubt about it, we've got some difficult images of God here. A God who summons Moses in no uncertain terms, and then makes him wait for a week in an obscuring cloud, before appearing, like a

I like the God who leads me beside the still waters and restores my soul, the one whose very touch heals years of woundedness, the one who tweaks the self-righteous authority figures, the God with his eye on the sparrow. That one's fun to preach about.

But when I am scared speechless, everything I know about deep, empathetic listening goes right out the window.

I am a hospice chaplain, and I spend a lot of time with fear. People's fears—what's it going to be like to die from the disease I have? How in the world will I handle the physical, emotional, financial stress of caring for my loved one? How long will it take?

And I carry plenty of my own fears around with me. What if this happens to me? What will old age bring?

When I was writing this very sermon, I got a message from a nurse I work with. "You'd better call Mrs. Martinez; she really needs to talk to you. I told her you'd call her tomorrow."

I called the nurse back. "I just talked to her yesterday. I'm going over there on Monday. Is her husband not going to make it through the weekend?"

"Oh, yeah, she said she'd talked with you, but she didn't remember when, or what you'd said. You might want to call her to confirm. She's really overwhelmed."

We don't process information when we're overcome by fear. We can't be truly present for another when we're lost in our own fear. Fear shuts us down. It makes our world tiny. It builds a dwelling around us.

And if the simple command "Don't be afraid" worked, there would be no need for hospice chaplains—or ministers or theologians either, for that matter. When you're scared, is it helpful for somebody, usually the person who's freaking you out to begin with, to tell you, "Fear not"?

Oh. OK. I'll stop being afraid now. Why didn't I think of that?

Fear is instinctual. Animals know that if you don't fear, you will be eaten. We cannot simply "fear not." Nothing in Buddhist or Christian or any other spiritual teachings suggests that enlightenment comes from cultivating fearful experiences. Peak mountaintop experiences, those transcendent encounters with the

divine that are so intense you don't really want to tell anybody else about them—this is not the goal of spiritual growth.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron, speaking of existential angst that remains at the top of the food chain, says, "Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth"—a truth that Swedenborg says is so beyond our capacity to make use of that it appears obscured with clouds. These are necessary clouds, to keep us from being blinded by the reality of the infinite, eternal I AM. The clouds around God allow love and wisdom to appear to us in ways we can use, make visible in our lives.

On a little Russian church out at the edge of the world in Alaska, there's a sign that says, "You were transfigured on the mount, O Christ God, revealing your glory to your disciples *as far as they could bear it.*"

In today's scripture passages, we get closer to God than we think we can bear. And Jesus doesn't give us any explanations, or any comfort, or any direction. He tells us, "Don't say anything about this until after I have been raised from the dead."

After what?

No "Go out and spread the Good News." No "Go make disciples of all people." No "Go forth and sin no more." No. These scary, incomprehensible encounters with the Mystery don't send us out to witness, to live our faith out loud. They draw us inward, make us face what we think is out of bounds, out of control, what we can't explain or make the best of in the moment.

Pema Chodron writes of three ways we cope with the myriad of fears that weave in and out of our lives—from the little worries and anxieties to the great 4 AM Meaning of Life ones.

One: We create clouds of Form—we use external, material things to keep us grounded. Our homes, nature, work, our lists—we retreat into tangible things to center ourselves and feel that we are on solid ground. Peter wanted to build three dwellings. Am I just keeping fear at bay when I go down to the creek to get hypnotized by the water going by?

Two: We create clouds of Speech—our beliefs, ideals, and religions give us the illusion that we understand and possess the truth. It's easy to dismiss whatever doesn't meet our standards of right and wrong. Peter's first impulse was to express his opinion, until

God interrupted him. Is this the cloud I'm creating when I judge somebody whose ideas about God seem all wrong to me?

Three: We create clouds of Mind—we work hard to cultivate states of mind that block out what we consider to be "negative" emotions. We fall in love, we meditate for the sake of bliss, we seek peak experiences, we seek that bright, blinding light—on our terms. Peter says, "This is a good thing! Yes, a good thing!" I spend a lot of effort avoiding anything in life that will make me uncomfortable, threatened, angry, or out of control. My calm, sunny disposition is actually me avoiding fear and uncertainty like the plague.

Form. Speech. Mind. Maybe these describe the three houses that it was Peter's first instinct to build. Maybe they're the clouds that we build low to the ground. We don't always trust that God will give us the clouds we think we need, closer to the mountaintop. God's idea of "as far as we can bear it" and our idea of this concept are not always the same.

So if we can't avoid fear, can we make it useful? The Buddhists have some great teachings in this vein.

First, allow yourself to be aware of your fear, or whatever uncomfortable difficult emotion is arising. From Pema Chodron again: "To be encouraged to stay with our vulnerability is news we can use." Simply stay present with it. Breathe. Fear has a tendency to take our breath away. Take it back.

Stay with it, without judgment, without trying to overcome it, without trying to make anything of it. Simply notice it. Come up on the mountain and wait.

Second, poke around in what you are noticing. Acknowledge the visitor. Hello, fear and anger. What do you want? What are you doing here? Where are you in my body? Are you in my jaw? My back? My belly? What thoughts are you leading me to? Do you have a message for me? OK, you are here for a little while, but you are not all that I am. *You are not all that I am.*

Staying compassionately with our weakness, trusting ourselves to abide in the wilderness of unknowing, without having to judge it or rationalize it, or overcome it, or protect ourselves from it: this is how we listen to the Beloved in Whom God is Well-Pleased.

*God's idea of "as far as we can bear it" and our idea of this concept are not always the same.*

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# Daily Meditations

**Monday, March 18**

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Remaining present and gentle with yourself, knowing that the fear is not all that you are: this is how we listen to Him whose very presence embodied a healing, compassionate love for all life, a love that is larger than our experience of self and our opinions about how life should be.

Stay with it. This is how we listen to the One whose wisdom outshines science's ability to explain the hows and religion's ability to explain the whys of life.

Nonjudgmental attention to what is: this is how we listen to the Word Made Flesh, who invites us to abundant love beyond the boundaries of even our own flesh and blood. We first must be compassionate to our own fearful selves, before we can be fully present to others.

Today's texts reveal an awesome truth embodied in the presence of the Beloved. Jesus radiates the truth of our full and whole humanity, and the reality of the divinity within and around us. Fathom it or not, people saw in Jesus the compassionate God of healing and light that outshines human experience.

These encounters suggest a different kind of spiritual practice to me.

I hear the Buddhist teachings about staying present to our vulnerability, and the Christian message of trusting beyond our defenses.

Come up on the mountain and wait.

I hear the wisdom that the thoughts and beliefs that keep me safe from fear can make me deaf to the truth of God's infinite compassion.

The Beloved is here. Listen to him.

Maybe I'll get up from my safe place, and give up my ongoing efforts to defend myself from fear. Maybe you will, too. Amen.

## **Prayers**

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Make us, blessed Master, strong in heart, full of courage, and fearless of danger. Whatever lies before us on our path, may we be strengthened by the might of your Spirit and delivered by your holy and gracious hand; and this we beg for your name's sake.

- F. B. Meyer (1847-1929)

Lord, remove the fear that makes us strident and vengeful; take away the woolliness of thought that makes us sentimental. Give us clear eyes to see the world as it is, and ourselves and all people as we are; give us hope to go on believing in what you intend us all to be. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. *Acts 9:1-2*

People who cut themselves off from the church and from heaven by denying the existence of God close their inner selves on the side of the will and shut themselves off from its positive love. (The will in us is a vessel for love and becomes its dwelling place.) Their inner selves on the side of the intellect, however, they are unable to close, because if they could and did they would no longer be human; but [evil] love in their will does befuddle their higher intellect with false ideas.

*True Christianity n. 14.2*

**Tuesday, March 19**

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Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. *Acts 9:3-9*

[People who are cut off from the church] come into their spirit, so to speak, when they are at home alone and let their thoughts be guided by their pleasure in the evil and the falsity they have conceived and given birth to in themselves. In that state, their thought about God is that he does not exist: God is only a word intoned in the pulpit to constrain the lower classes to obey the laws of justice that are society's rules. *Ibid.*

# Daily Meditations

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**Wednesday, March 20**

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Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." *Acts 9:10-16*

The one God is substance itself and form itself. Angels and people are substances and forms from him. To the extent that they are in him and he is in them, to that extent they are images and likenesses of him. Because God is the underlying reality, he is also substance. Unless the underlying reality becomes substance, it is a figment of the imagination; but as a substance it becomes an entity. And one who is substance is also form, for substance without form is another figment of the imagination. We can attribute both of these to God, provided he is seen as the sole, the only, and the archetypal substance and form.

*True Christianity n.20*

**Thursday, March 21**

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So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." *Acts 9:17-20*

God is God because he is life in itself.

*True Christianity n.21*

**Friday, March 22**

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When Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. *Acts 9:26-27*

In the Word God has revealed not only himself but also the existence of heaven and hell, and the fact that every single one of us is going to live in one or the other realm to eternity, each of us according to our life as well as our faith. God has also revealed in the Word that he is "I Am" or the underlying reality, and is the Absolute and the only one to exist in and of himself; he revealed therefore that he is the First or the Beginning from which all things come.

This revelation makes it possible for the earthly self to rise above nature, even above itself, and see what belongs in the realm of God. It appears to be far away. Yet God is actually close to each of us, for God is in us with his essence. Because he is, he is near to those who love him—people who live by his instructions and believe in him. In a sense, they see him.

*True Christianity n.22*

**Saturday, March 23**

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So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. *Acts 9:28-31*

The faith of the new heaven and the new church in universal form is this: The Lord from eternity, who is Jehovah, came into the world to gain control over the hells and to glorify his own human nature. If he had not done this, not one mortal could have been saved; those who believe in him are saved.

*True Christianity n.2*



# SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

# 24 MAR

## Ezekiel 18:21-32

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But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die. Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

## John 5:39-47

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"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse

## Revelation Unveiled 898

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"Having a wall great and high" means the Word in its literal meaning as the source of the theology of the new church.

Given the fact that the holy city Jerusalem means the theological aspect of the Lord's new church, its wall can only mean the Word in its literal meaning as the basis of its theology. You see, that meaning protects the spiritual meaning that is within it the way a wall protects a city and the people who live in it. On the literal meaning as the grounding, container, and support of its spiritual meaning see *Teachings of the New Jerusalem on Sacred Scripture* 27-36. See also 97 of the same work on the fact that this meaning is a guard to prevent the more inward divine truths that are its spiritual meaning from suffering harm; and on the fact that the theology of the church is to be drawn from the literal meaning of the Word and supported by it, see 50-61 of the same work.

## Sermon

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*Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me. (John 5:39)*

This verse from the Gospel of John greets everyone who enters this sanctuary. It stands front and center on above the Bible on the altar, and it raises questions. Whether or not that was the intention of those who chose it, that may well be a very good thing. To ask a question is to open our minds to receive something new, and a little bewilderment is a small price to pay for learning.

What are some of the questions the verse may raise?

An obvious one is simply, "Why is there no cross?" The newcomer may wonder whether this really is a Christian church. There is a very simple answer, namely that we do not focus on the crucifixion but on the resurrection. According to the Book of Acts, the first apostles went forth not with the message that Christ had died for our sins, but as witnesses to the

resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). This leads straight into the heart of our theology: the belief that Jesus was the embodiment of divine love and wisdom. God was not angry with us. God does not want to punish us. There was no need of an atoning sacrifice. Ezekiel heard this, and heard it well: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:23).

But why was this particular verse chosen? For that, we may look at its three main components.

"Search the scriptures" (which could equally well be translated "You search the scriptures") says that we are a Bible-centered church; and it calls us not only to read the scriptures but also to *search* them, to probe for meaning, to come to them with a questioning mind. Our third reading was taken from the interpretation of the Holy City found in the Book of Revelation, the only description of "the new church" found in Swedenborg's theological works (sadly neglected by the churches that identify themselves as "the New Church"). The wall of the city is mentioned no less than six times in that description, which surely gives impressive prominence to "the Word in its literal meaning." That wall stands as a kind of boundary of the church.

Obviously, though, we are not simplistic literalists. The gates of the wall stand open day and night, inviting us in. The value of the literal meaning is as a container of deeper meaning. In and of itself, it is highly problematic. The little work *Sacred Scripture* (§51) referred to in the Swedenborg reading alerts us to the fact that scripture contradicts itself, saying, for example, that God repents (Exodus 2:12,14; Jonah 3:9, 4:2) and that God does not repent (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29); and saying that God visits the iniquity of the fathers on the sons (Numbers 14:18) and that the father shall not die for the son (Deuteronomy 24:16).

So Swedenborg's use of the literal meaning is not to select one or two "proof texts" but to survey the whole field, so to speak. A most striking example of this is in section 4 of *Sacred Scripture*, where he presents no less than a hundred and one references to the day of the Lord. The clear implication is that there is a common, unifying theme to them all, a theme that can be expressed in many different ways and wordings and that therefore cannot readily be seen in any single verse by itself.

The ambiguity of scripture is central to a particular incident in Jesus' life. All three of the synoptic gospels tell of Jesus being asked what commandment was most important (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-35, Luke 10:25-28). There are a great many of them, far too many for the average person to keep track of. Jesus identified the command to love the Lord above all (Deuteronomy 6:9) as the most important, and the command to love the neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18) as the second; in Matthew he added the statement that "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40). This, then, for the Christian, should be the meaning for which we should be searching when we "search the scriptures"; and while at times it is beautifully clear, as for example in the twenty-third Psalm, at times it is most definitely not.

Why should we search? Not just out of idle curiosity, but "because in them ye think ye have eternal life." We share the belief that the Bible is truly the Word of God, a lamp to our feet, showing us the path to eternal life. Again we might turn to the Book of Revelation, to the judgment scene where the books of our lives are opened and compared to the contents of the book of life (Revelation 20:12).

This brings us to the closing statement, "And they are they which testify of me." The scriptures, that is, are all about the Christ. Bearing in mind that "the scriptures" that the Gospel of John is talking about are the Law and the Prophets, basically the Old Testament, there is some literal truth to this. The Christ is the Messiah foretold by the prophets, and that Messiah is the successor of a hereditary line of kings stretching back to David, who in turn is a climactic figure in a story that begins with Abraham, set in a world whose beginning is described in the first chapter of Genesis. The Gospel of Matthew in particular is concerned to present Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies; and the gospels are unintelligible in a number of respects apart from their roots in "the scriptures."

For the theology of this church, though, the "testimony" goes far deeper than narrative continuity. Swedenborg wrote copiously of deeper levels of meaning in the biblical narrative, of an inner story of our own spiritual growth and of an "inmost" story of the spiritual transformation of Jesus, by which an indwelling divine nature gradually cleansed and filled a more external mortal nature until at last the

*The gates of the wall  
stand open day and  
night, inviting us in.*

whole was divine. The defeat of the body on the cross was the victory of the soul.

This is not just a matter of abstruse theological pedantry. In traditional terms, the Lord's glorification is the model for our regeneration. In less abstract terms, the best in us is parallel to the divine in him, and the worst in us is parallel to the mortal in him. To be human is not merely to have a certain physical form and physical abilities, not merely to have certain mental abilities, but to be in process. "The way of the Lord" and the Lord as "the way," the image of "following the Lord," and the image of being led, all imply motion.

So it is entirely appropriate, even inevitable, that the scriptures are essentially a story. It is a story that contains songs, yes, but it is not a hymnal. The songs are part of the plot. It is a story that contains laws, but it is not a law code. The laws are part of the plot. It is the story of a people called into being by God and led by God toward goodness, drawn by dreams of greatness, following often very reluctantly, and finally reaching a point of convergence at which Deity itself, the embodiment of divine love and wisdom, could become manifest. It is a story that leads from the Garden of Eden to the Holy City.

It is an intensely human story, so much so that many find it impossible to believe that it is "the Word of God." Yet we can readily see its divine origin in the candor with which it shows us at our worst, our usual, and our best. We can see its divine origin in its testimony to a God who never gives up on us, especially when we give up on ourselves. We can see its divine origin in a God whom we can perceive as angry, unjust, loving, capricious, patient, and even absent—as we in fact are.

It is the story of a people, remarkable particularly for its length, since it purports to cover a span of almost two millennia. It is remarkable because for a national epic, it is singularly lacking in idealized heroic figures. It is not a story in which virtue is always rewarded, either. Jehu loyally eliminated the worship of Baal from the northern kingdom and lost all the territory east of the Jordan valley (2 Kings 10:32-33). Jeroboam the Second "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," but ruled for forty-one years, and apparently regained much or all of the territory that Jehu had lost (2 Kings 14:25). Josiah, the greatest reformer of all (2 Kings 23:25), was killed in battle at the age of thirty-nine (2 Kings 23:29). The list could go on and on.

There is also a most revealing situation that is actually hidden in plain sight. The prophet Isaiah, for example, comes into the narrative of the divided kingdom only for his engagement with King Hezekiah (2 Kings 19-20). When we turn to his book, though, we find him passionately opposed to the whole sacrificial system that centered in the temple and justified the monarchy. This was not the opposition of Elijah, protesting the worship of Baal; this was protesting orthodox, state-sanctioned and state-sanctioning worship of the true God instead of practicing the truer worship of justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow (Isaiah 1:17).

This "testifies of the Christ" in the most meaningful sense of pleading the case of the Messiah who was to bring the mighty down from their thrones and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53), the one who came not to be ministered to but to minister (Matthew 20:28).

The scriptures contain this and much more—the whole story, including prophecy and fulfillment, transgression and forgiveness, tragedy and triumph, doubt and faith, cross and resurrection. That is why the focal point of our worship is the Bible on the altar—it contains the *whole* story. It is why our service begins with the opening of the Word and its illumination, and why that illumination is dimmed when the Word is closed. We might see the inscription as rising from the Bible on the altar below it, inviting us to open it, enter into its world, and search it for the light it can shed on our own path. Amen.

## Prayers

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Eternal God, you are a deep sea, into which the more I enter the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek. My soul hungers in the mystery of your depth and longs to see you in and through your own clear light; as the deer yearns for clear spring water, so my soul yearns for your truth.

- After St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Open wide the windows of our spirits, O Lord,  
and fill them with your light.  
Open wide the doors of our hearts,  
that there we may receive and entertain you  
with all the powers of adoration and love;  
through Christ our Lord.

- Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, March 25

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To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
*Psalm 25:1-3*

Love or volition also prepares everything in its human form so that it can act in unison with wisdom or discernment. *Divine Love and Wisdom n. 403*

## Tuesday, March 26

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Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.  
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!  
*Psalm 25:4-7*

The first union is with a desire for knowing, which gives rise to a desire for what is true. "After the wedding" means our state after birth, beginning with a state of ignorance and continuing through a state of discernment all the way to a state of wisdom.  
*Divine Love and Wisdom n. 404*

## Wednesday, March 27

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Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.  
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.  
For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. *Psalm 25:8-11*

The second union is with a desire for discerning, which gives rise to a sense of what is true. Anyone can see this who is willing to explore the matter with some rational insight. *Ibid.*

## Thursday, March 28

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Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.  
They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land.  
The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.  
*Psalm 25:12-14*

The third union is with a desire to see what is true, which gives rise to thought. A desire for knowing is one thing; a desire for discerning is another thing; and a desire to see something is something else again. *Ibid.*

## Friday, March 29

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My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.  
Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.  
Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.  
Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.  
Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. *Psalm 25:15-19*

We may conclude from all this that these three abilities—the desire for what is true, the grasp of what is true, and thought—follow in sequence from love and are nowhere manifest but in our discernment. When love enters discernment (which happens when the union is realized), then it first gives rise to the desire for what is true, then to the desire to understand what it knows, and finally to a desire to see in physical thought whatever it understands. *Ibid.*

## Saturday, March 30

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O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.  
May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.  
Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.  
*Psalm 25:20-22*

Thinking is actually nothing but an inner sight. Thinking does happen first because it is a function of our earthly mind; but when it comes to thinking on the basis of a grasp of what is true because of a desire for what is true, that happens last. That kind of thinking is the thinking of wisdom, while the other is thinking on the basis of memory, using the sight of our earthly mind. *Ibid.*



# INSIDE THE EMPTY TOMB

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Sermon

31 MAR

*And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there...and the handkerchief that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. John 20: 5, 7*

## John 19.38-20.10

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

## True Christian Religion 603

Our mind has several levels. There is an earthly level, a spiritual level and a heavenly level. Each one has its place and is different. As we are regenerated and come into more love and understanding, these levels open up and become active, but the newer level which is one of perception is very different from the earlier one. It sees every level or everything but the earlier one can only see itself. So we call this new level a higher level. Everyone realises how we can see something in a single moment which would take ages to put together or describe in words.

Not long after we came to Australia, I went to Lindfield to hear Kel Richards talking about his new book on the events of the resurrection, *The Case of the Vanishing Corpse*. It was a detective story going into the how, what, and why of Easter, the empty tomb, and the risen Jesus. Nice chap, good talker. He went on to write another one, *The Case of the Dead Certainty*—a great title, but I've no idea what it was about.

In new and original ways, people have kept on trying to get their heads round the Easter story—this challenging, scientifically unbelievable, awesome, "it's either true or the whole Jesus thing is ridiculous" event. It was the resurrection that sparked the beginning of Christianity, as people went round and proclaimed that Jesus had come back to life. And boy, it took off! Within just a few years, there were new communities in Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus, Alexandria, and so on. It really was a successful marketing exercise, with the perfect product—and I'm not being facetious in the slightest. Christianity had what no other religion had ever had before. It had a man who showed he was God by coming back to life. All the other religions, including that of the Israelites, had a deity (or several), but always only a deity "up there."

So you and I have come into existence after a whole two thousand years of Christianity. We've come along pretty late in the day, when Christianity is definitely not brand new but rather old and possibly faded. We're terribly dependent on "brand new," whether that is the iPhone 4 (which immediately makes every prior model embarrassing to be found using) or Chilli Marmalade chips (which if you haven't tried, you haven't lived).

But Jesus coming back to life is the start-out "original" flavor. And this empty tomb...

Let's go back there. First, Mary Magdalene came and saw an open tomb. People honored the dead by visiting the grave within three days of death, before decay set in. Mary couldn't come on the second day because it was the Jewish sabbath and she would have broken the law, so she came on the third day and saw it open. She immediately thought that people had

come and stolen the body of her rabbi, Jesus—and she probably had no idea that the Romans had set guards to watch over the place in case of exactly that, and that the chief priests had bribed these guards when they heard that the tomb was empty and given them money to go around and say that people had come in the night and taken it away. (I'm really sorry this is getting complicated, but you see the enormity of the event!)

So Mary told Peter and John, who did an amazing run to the tomb, which almost deserves a whole book by itself. Peter started running, but John overtook him and got there first, looked inside, and saw the graveclothes but didn't go in. Then Peter arrived, following John, and (typical of Peter) he went straight in and saw the cloths lying there, and also the cloth that would have been around Jesus' head, not lying with the other cloths but folded together in a place by itself. (Hold on to that fact for the moment.) Then John—who, we're reminded, had got there first—went in, and he saw and believed. And apparently, it says, neither of them knew the scripture that he must rise again from the dead. Don't forget, they didn't have access to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, none of which would exist for another hundred years.

And then it just says that they went home. How ordinary!

How do you end a good story? My nine-year-old pupils, once upon a time, tended to visit Mars or meet dinosaurs, but something inside them needed to end the adventure by having tea and going to bed. Security and everything is really all right! Is this Peter and John, perhaps?

No. I think the real point is that, having seen the empty tomb for themselves and believed it, they were already "at home," if you see what I mean. If you can believe Easter—if you can believe it, not just historically but in terms of everything it suggests, like newness, hope, meaning, security, and the idea that God has actually got everything under wraps—then you are home and dry. But don't forget that it also brings you *your* responsibility, in terms of what you are going to do with that newness, hope, meaning, and security. Otherwise, you're just sunbathing.

So there's the evidence, but not quite enough. Question: Why did they believe that Jesus had risen back to life? Why did they not believe that people had come along and simply stolen the body? You could

say that if anyone would have done so, it would have been Peter and John, of course, or they would have heard about it. This was a pretty tight-knit group.

No, the logic would be right there, in what they actually saw for themselves. Put yourself in the place of someone who is going to go and steal a dead body, and don't forget that it is being guarded. For one thing, there is a huge stone over the entrance. Shh! Can't you roll it more quietly? No, and you're grunting like a steam train (or whatever the first century AD equivalent would have been). So logic suggests that the stone moves because of the inside, not the outside. And of course you know what I mean. So let's do a Peter and then a John, and go inside.

There isn't much, but it's still enough to make them believe. The linen cloths are over here, and the cloth for the head is over there, folded, in a place by itself. If I were stealing a body and I'd managed to deal with the stone somehow, I would not be waiting around to unwind the shroud and, much less, to tidily fold up the handkerchief or napkin (which was actually placed over a body's face, out of respect for the departed). I would lift the lot, over the shoulder or in my arms, and get out of there—and I would hope that I wouldn't have to explain my poor sick friend to anyone I met. Then, because I couldn't re-roll the stone in my present circumstances, I would get out fast.

What we're given is all we need. The cloths would have been exactly as they were with the body inside, but now the body isn't, because it has transmogrified: it has taken on a new substance and composition.

We could talk about atoms and energy and  $E=mc^2$ , but transmogrification covers it. We could talk about the divine celestial of the internal spiritual, but transmogrification moves me more miraculously. You cannot eradicate God, because you cannot annihilate love—which, because it is energy, can only be passed on into something else—transmogrified.

Now, the shroud is lying there the same as ever, minus the body. But the handkerchief is folded up and in a place by itself. Normally, of course, you just wouldn't say that, because it would discredit the whole possibility of this transmogrified resurrection. A shroud, yes, but a folded napkin moved elsewhere? This is not a hotel room! If this aspect of the story does one thing, it adds paranormal mystery to something that is already beyond belief. Did Jesus pick it up and fold it before leaving? Did he do that to leave

*Easter brings you  
your responsibility,  
in terms of what you  
are going to do with  
that newness, hope,  
meaning, and security.*

us puzzling over it for the next million years, with a smile? Work that one out, dear friends.

I can't say, and part of me hopes he did. What I *can* say is that it fits beautifully. Let's put it like this. Jesus came into a dangerous mess (a hell of a mess, literally) and what he did was to put it all back into its intended proper order, so that we can all start out in our spirit with newness, hope, meaning, security, and everything under wraps because of God. Jesus spent his whole life folding this handkerchief. Jesus went around folding handkerchiefs wherever he saw one—with a blind person who couldn't even find his, and so on. Jesus is folding your handkerchief right now, and you'll screw it up tomorrow and he'll do it all over again, because he loves you and he wants you to be all right. It's as crucial as that.

Easter is proverbially difficult to explain, especially to children. They can't get a body that's no longer there. We're hard pressed. So perhaps Easter needs to celebrate handkerchiefs and how they get folded so that they're layer on layer on layer, clean and ready. That is something we can all understand, something we can use—and, Lord Jesus, something we can be eternally grateful for. Amen.

## Prayers

Lord of all life and power,  
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son  
overcame the old order of sin and death  
to make all things new in him: grant that we,  
being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ,  
may reign with him in glory;  
to whom with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit  
be praise and honor, glory and might,  
now and in all eternity.

- Frank Topping

In the beginning, O God,  
You shaped my soul and set its weave;  
You formed my body and gave it breath.  
Renew me this day in the image of your love.  
O great God, grant me your light;  
O great God, grant me your grace;  
O great God, grant me your joy this day,  
And let me be made pure in the well of your health.

- J. Philip Newell, from *Celtic Prayers from Iona*  
(Paulist Press, 1997)

## *Songs of Innocence* by Missing Rachel

It has been about eight years since Missing Rachel, a philanthropic a capella ensemble, released its 2004 first album, *The Thundered Word*, to benefit the restoration and ministry of Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, MA. It has been a busy and blessed time since: several weddings, a few professional transitions and career advances, new homes, new academic heights, six kids (and counting!), an epiphany or twenty, and of course lots of laughter and tears and singing and living. Although most of the group's members no longer reside in the immediate Cambridge area, in July of 2011 they gathered at Swedenborg Chapel to record a new album.

*Songs of Innocence* is a collection of beloved hymns, lullabies, and children's songs (written by New Church musicians Lori and John Odhner; the album also includes a setting of the Lord's Prayer by the late Heather Childs. The album's title is derived from William Blake's poetic anthology *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and the album in fact includes a setting of Blake's poem "The Lamb." *Songs of Innocence* offers the same ethereal harmonies and clear voices that characterized Missing Rachel's first album.

Missing Rachel is devoting the funds generated by this album to the protection of innocence; the proceeds will go to several organizations that aid and protect children. These organizations vary in their mission focus: some are orphanages, while others assist children within the family setting. Visit <http://missingrachel.baxtonia.com> for more information, track samples, and bulk-ordering details.

CDs are \$15 (\$10 if you order five or more) plus shipping and can be purchased through the Bryn Athyn Cathedral bookstore, the Cambridge Swedenborg Library, one of the members of Missing Rachel, or by sending a check made out to Rebecca Esterson to the following address:

Missing Rachel CD  
c/o Leah Goodwin  
43 Hobart Square  
Whitman, MA 02382



# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, April 1

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Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. *Psalm 1:1-2*

There are civic good, moral good, and spiritual good. Civic good is that which a man does from the civic law: by means of and according to this good is the man a citizen in the natural world. *Doctrine of Life n.12*

## Tuesday, April 2

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They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

*Psalm 1:3*

Moral good is that which a man does from the law of reason: by means of and according to this good is he a man. Spiritual good is that which a man does from spiritual law: by means of and according to this good is he a citizen in the spiritual world. These goods succeed one another in the following order: spiritual good is the highest, moral good is intermediate, and civic good is last. *Ibid.*

## Wednesday, April 3

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The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. *Psalm 1:4-6*

A man who possesses spiritual good is also a moral man and civic man; but a man who does not possess spiritual good may appear to be a moral man and a civic man, yet is not so. The reason why a man who possesses spiritual good is also a moral man and a civic man, is that spiritual good has the essence of good within it, and moral and civic good have this essence from spiritual good. *Doctrine of Life 13*

## Thursday, April 4

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Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies? *Psalm 4:1-2*

The essence of good can be from no other source than him who is good itself. Think the matter over from every point of view, and try to find out from what it is that good is good, and you will see that it is so from its inmost being [esse], and that that is good which has within it the esse of good; consequently that that is good which is from good itself, thus from God; and therefore that good which is not from God, but from man, is not good. *Ibid.*

## Friday, April 5

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But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him.

When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

*Psalm 4:3-5*

That a man who is not spiritual can yet think rationally and speak from that thought, like a spiritual man, is because man's understanding can be uplifted into the light of heaven, which is truth, and can see from it; but his will cannot be in the same way uplifted into the heat of heaven, which is love, so as to act from that heat. It is for this reason that truth and love do not make a one in a man unless he is spiritual.

*Doctrine of the Lord n.15*

## Saturday, April 6

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There are many who say, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"

You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. *Psalm 4:6-8*

Insofar as a man shuns evils as sins, just so far has he faith, because just so far is he in good.

*Doctrine of the Lord n.45*

# WITH UNVEILED FACES

Rev. Leah Goodwin

## 2 Corinthians 3:1-6a, 17-18

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Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

## Matthew 24:36-44

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“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

## Sermon

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I’m going to begin this sermon with the sort of blanket generalization that one is never supposed to use. But I feel fairly certain that I am on the money in this case, so here goes.

Everybody wants to be known.

Deep down, beneath all our talk of privacy and appropriate boundaries, everybody wants to be understood, to be truly known. And, fundamentally speaking, we also want to know ourselves.

By “known,” I mean something more than a handshake, a warm smile, or a familiar slap on the back, although these signs of familiarity go a long way toward making us feel at home. Remember Norm, from *Cheers*? We really do, as the song goes, “wanna be where everybody knows” our names. Few things match the reassurance we feel when surrounded by a circle of friends or a bevy of admirers.

But what I really mean when I talk about being “known” goes far beyond the ease we may or may not feel in a social setting. Feeling accepted is one thing; indeed, it is foundational to our sense of self-worth. It is good, in our Hollywood culture, to feel that we have tucked in our emotional shirttails and put our interpersonal lipstick on straight. It is good to feel that we know the rules of the game, that we have figured out how to cover over the complicated personal tangle we often feel ourselves to be, so that we are acceptable in the sight of other people.

But that is not enough. Social graces and friendships—even profound friendships—are not enough.

They are not enough because, in these four weeks of Advent, we are speaking about a way of being known that demands far more from us, and gives far more to us, than polite acquaintance and social familiarity. We are speaking about the coming of Christ. We are speaking about what that coming means to us. We are speaking, to put it bluntly, about apocalypse.

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Advent, despite (or perhaps because of) the joyful scene at Bethlehem in which it culminates, is not a season characterized by its fuzzy-wuzzy scripture readings. In the four weeks leading up to the birth of our Lord, one most assuredly will *not* find statements about God’s cuddlier side. Oh, no. What the unsuspecting reader will find instead is transformation, the end of the world, the Second Coming of Christ.

There isn’t much of a soft side to the eschaton.

So here we are, confronted with the end of the world. But what are we supposed to make of these predictions? What is apocalypse, and why does it



give us such a case of the existential willies? How are we to prepare, as our gospel text clearly commands us, for “the coming of the Son of Man”?

What are we all so eager about, and WHY, for goodness’ sake, are we so eagerly calling this whole thing down on ourselves by singing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”?

\* \* \*

A little definition of terms might give some perspective on this topic.

Kathleen Norris tells us that “the word ‘apocalypse’ comes from the Greek for ‘uncovering’ or ‘unveiling.’”<sup>1</sup> So apocalypse has less to do with the end of the world than with showing someone, or something, for what it truly is. But this in itself is often enough to make an ending, to shatter something precious into pieces. There are, as Norris goes on to point out, tremendous possibilities in an unveiling, but there is potential for a certain embarrassing indecency, too. Apparently some things are better left safely covered up.

Ah. So perhaps the terror we feel when we talk about apocalypse (or about any kind of ending in our lives, for that matter) sits only partially in stars falling from the sky, eclipses of the sun and moon, and assorted other catastrophes. Perhaps the terror resides not only in the ending itself, but also in what is revealed in that end time. The person we truly are emerges, unbidden and beyond our control, at the fault lines in our lives, at the cracks in the armor—at the end times.

But, Norris continues, “while uncovering something we’d just as soon keep hidden is a frightening prospect, the point of apocalypse is not to frighten us into submission...its purpose is to teach us to think... in a way that sanctifies our lives here and now.”<sup>2</sup>

And that, my friends, is precisely what Paul is talking about in this morning’s epistle reading. Two thousand years ago, Paul understood our predicament. As much as anybody else, he needed desperately to be known. His anxiety is palpable at the start of this morning’s passage. “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, recommendations to you or from you, do we?”

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1 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998), 318.

2 Norris, 318-319.

Letters of recommendation carried tremendous power in the Roman Empire. They are powerful now in our networking efforts (ask any college applicant), but in the world of Paul’s day they were as valuable as currency. Letters of recommendation were written by higher-class patrons for their clients. They determined one’s access to nearly every privilege in life; their power extended far beyond employment. Paul wrote this particular passage in response to a group that had apparently entered his church with letters of recommendation which Paul, perhaps, could not match. His authority at Corinth was in jeopardy.

Given the circumstances, Paul’s response is interesting. He could have gone scrambling for recommendation letters of his own. Instead, though, he manages simultaneously to utter a profound spiritual insight and to make a magnificent political maneuver. “You are our letter,” he writes to the church—and while he happens in the process to deflect the church’s question about his authority right back onto itself, he also does something far more important.

He reminds the church at Corinth that, even as they demand epistolary evidence of Paul’s wherewithal, they themselves, in all their mess and magnificence, reflect more about his efforts and their own responses than any wax-sealed scrap of vellum could. “You are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all,” claims Paul.

And more than that, he says, none of us can claim our successes. They come from God. Our competence is from God. Our being, in fact, is from God, who very quietly (at least most of the time) dwells within us, giving us life and motion and what we know of wisdom, the holy of holies within our own bodily and spiritual temple.

The next line Paul writes is sheer poetry—with teeth.

“All of us, with unveiled faces,” he says, “will see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror.”

Unveiled faces. Oh, dear.

I smell apocalypse.

As I have noted, unveiling has its advantages and disadvantages. Unveiled, we may see God’s beauty all the better, but unveiled we also see every one of our own imperfections. We realize how obvious they have been to God this whole time, and—even worse,

## *How are we to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man?*

since we can imagine it more vividly—we realize how glaringly obvious they have been to others, all our weaknesses and faults and unkindnesses.

But Paul says something important in his description of our transformation, of what will come from this dramatic disclosure of our real selves. “All of us,” he says, “with unveiled faces...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another.” And so this disclosure is painful at first, but it makes us new beings. In the blazing light of divine splendor, we see the (often ugly) truth about ourselves—and and find a place to begin the work of change.

Paul takes care to point out that this transformation does not mean casting off our old self and putting on a new character. There is no “putting on” here, at all. When we have a chance at this apocalyptic look in the mirror, we do not, says Norris, “suddenly change in essence, magically becoming new people, with all our old faults left behind...The detestable parts of ourselves do not vanish so much as become transformed. We can’t run from who we are, with our short tempers, our vanity, our sharp tongues, our talents for self-aggrandizement, self-delusion, or despair. But we can convert”—we can literally “turn around”—“so that we are forced to face ourselves as we really are. We can pray that God will take our faults and use them for the good.”

Norris tells the story of a woman in Montana whose own personal apocalypse transformed her in precisely this way. This woman was the member of a small-town Methodist church. She was also a terrible drunk, and caught in the grips of a drug addiction that stripped her of her dignity in the most intimate of personal relationships. She sought love everywhere, and found it nowhere.<sup>3</sup>

The woman decided, one day, to sober up. She joined Alcoholics Anonymous and began attending church regularly. “With her reputation,” says Norris, “it took considerable courage for her to show up in the tiny church...Not everyone greeted her with enthusiasm. But some did... and she kept coming back. Even before she became a church member, she caused some buzz in the congregation because she actually volunteered for things. She signed up for every Bible study the church offered, and volunteered to work at every church project...It was as if she had tasted salvation and couldn’t get enough of it, or of the new relationships to which these activities had led her. Salvation took such a hold in her that, as the pastor put it, he began to wonder if Christians don’t

3 Norris, 296-297.

underrate promiscuity. Because this woman was still a promiscuous person, still loving without much discrimination. The difference was that she was no longer self-destructive but a bearer of new life to others.”<sup>4</sup>

It was indeed with this woman as Paul said. She looked in the mirror with an unveiled face, with the vision of apocalypse, and she saw God’s glory reflected there. And so, her own apocalypse, her own unveiling, transformed her, “into the same image, from one degree of glory into another.” The woman’s essence remained unchanged. She existed in the same image, but it was an image transformed.

“You must be ready,” says Jesus. “for the Son of Man comes at an unexpected hour.”

And we can be ready. We can polish the spiritual silver and bring out our best emotional china and think about who we are, and who we want to be, and who, as bearers of the Spirit of God, we desire to be to other people. We can be ready for God’s coming and hold our breath until we are blue in the face. But, as Jesus also tells us, “about that day and hour no one knows, except the Father.”

And so, even though none of us knows what, exactly, the coming days will bring; even though we cannot be sure just what upheaval we may be calling down upon ourselves; even though we cannot imagine the blazing splendor of God’s glory; we can, in good faith and with great hope, say, “Come, Emmanuel.” For Emmanuel, God-With-Us, is already here.

The unexpected hour has come, and it is up to us to behold his glory, to see God in our own faces in the glass.

### **Special Note from Editor Kevin Baxter**

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The author of this sermon, Leah G. Goodwin (one of the editors of *Our Daily Bread*), is being ordained as a minister of the Gospel by the American Baptist Church, on this day, April 7, 2013. She has a Master of Divinity from Harvard University and, during her time at the school, also served as the Director of Parish Ministry for the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem (Swedenborg Chapel) in Massachusetts.

4 Norris, 297.

# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, April 8

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Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

*Isaiah 58:1-2*

The form of heaven is like the form of the human mind, the perfection of which increases according to the increase of truth and good, from whence are its intelligence and wisdom. *Last Judgment n.12*

## Tuesday, April 9

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“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? *Isaiah 58:3-5*

The form of the human mind, which is in heavenly wisdom and intelligence, is like the form of heaven, because the mind is the least image of that form; hence it is, that on all sides there is a communication of the thoughts and affections of good and truth in such men, and in angels, with surrounding societies of heaven; and an extension according to the increase of wisdom, and thus according to the plurality of the knowledges of truth implanted in the intellect and according to the abundance of the affections of good implanted in the will; and therefore in the mind, for the mind consists of the intellect and the will. *Ibid.*

## Wednesday, April 10

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Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? *Isaiah 58:6-7*

The human and angelic mind is such that it may be infilled to eternity, and as it is infilled, so it is perfect.

*Ibid.*

## Thursday, April 11

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Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. *Isaiah 58:8-10*

When man is led by the Lord, he is then introduced into genuine truths, which are implanted in his intellect; and into genuine goods, which are implanted in his will; for the Lord then disposes all things of such a mind into the form of heaven, until at length it is a heaven in the least form. *Ibid.*

## Friday, April 12

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The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. *Isaiah 58:11-12*

There never exists in any one man (in whom yet there are innumerable parts which constitute his body, and innumerable affections which constitute his mind) any one thing quite alike, or identical with any one thing in another man; hence it is that everyone leads a life distinct from the life of another. *Last Judgment n.13*

## Saturday, April 13

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If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. *Isaiah 58:13-14*

The angelic heaven is the end for which all things in the universe were created, for it is the end on account of which the human race exists, and the human race is the end regarded in the creation of the visible heaven, and the earths included in it. *Ibid.*

# A LIGHT TO MY PATH

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

## Psalm 119:1-16

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Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the Lord.  
Happy are those who keep his decrees,  
who seek him with their whole heart,  
who also do no wrong,  
but walk in his ways.  
You have commanded your precepts  
to be kept diligently.  
O that my ways may be steadfast  
in keeping your statutes!  
Then I shall not be put to shame,  
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.  
I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous ordinances.  
I will observe your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me.

How can young people keep their way pure?  
By guarding it according to your word.  
With my whole heart I seek you;  
do not let me stray from your commandments.  
I treasure your word in my heart,  
so that I may not sin against you.  
Blessed are you, O Lord;  
teach me your statutes.  
With my lips I declare  
all the ordinances of your mouth.  
I delight in the way of your decrees  
as much as in all riches.  
I will meditate on your precepts,  
and fix my eyes on your ways.  
I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

## John 3:11-21

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“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but

those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

# 14 APR

## Secrets of Heaven 20

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*And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.* The first step is taken when we begin to realize that “good” and “true” are transcendent.

When we focus exclusively on externals, we do not even know what is good and what is true. Anything that has to do with our self-love and worldly ambition, we consider good; and anything that supports these loves, we consider true. As a result, we do not know that these “good” things are evil and that these “true” things are false.

When we are conceived anew, though, we first begin to be aware that our “good” is not good; and as we advance further into the light, it dawns on us that the Lord is real and that he is the good and the true itself. We need to know, too, that the Lord is the good itself, or life, and the true itself, or light, and consequently that nothing good or true exists that does not come from him. This we find also in John: “In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was present with God, and the Word was God. Everything was made by him, and nothing that was made was made without him. In him was life, and the life was the light of humankind; but the light appears in the darkness. He was the true light that shines on every person coming into the world” (John 1:3-5, 9).

## Sermon

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*Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

Psalm 119:105

A scholarly pastor named Eugene Peterson found that when he encouraged parishioners to read the Psalms as personal prayers, it didn’t work as well as he’d hoped—the dated language got in the way. So he set out to paraphrase the Psalms in contemporary idioms, not as smooth, polished literary compositions but as “the utterances of men and women passionate for God in moments of anger and praise and lament.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: Psalms* (Colorado Springs: NAVPress, 1994), p. 3.

Many of the Psalms are, and in those cases his versions can be truly striking.

The one hundred nineteenth psalm, though, is far from a spontaneous emotional outburst. It consists of twenty-two sections of eight verses each. Every verse of the first section begins with *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; every verse of the second section with *beth*, the second letter; and so on through to the last letter, *tau*. Further, every one of the one hundred seventy-six verses contains one word from a very focused little list. To illustrate, in the first sixteen verses we find the following, in this order: law, decrees, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments, ordinances, statutes, word, commandments, word, statutes, ordinances, decrees, precepts, and statutes. The first verse might serve as a title: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the Law of the Lord," where the word translated "Law" is the Hebrew word *Torah*. The psalm might best be read as a meditation, virtually a mantra, on the Torah. By rhetorical standards, it is surely one of the most tightly constructed, disciplined compositions in the Bible.

Imagine yourself sitting down this evening and trying to make a start at such a project. Your assignment for tonight is to write eight sentences, of roughly equal length, in praise of living according to the law. Each sentence will begin with the letter A, and each will contain one of the words from that list. Tomorrow evening you will do the same for the letter B, so by next Sunday you will have finished G and will hand in the first fifty-six sentences—and you'll still have three and a half weeks to go.

It sounds terribly artificial, doesn't it? The most passionate feeling involved might well be rebelliousness. Yet if we adjusted the assignment by adding the requirement that every sentence had to express some particular way in which the law had actually affected your own personal life, it could be immensely rewarding. It could result in a discipline of self-examination that kept you probing deeper and deeper. You might find yourself starting a notebook with a separate page for each letter as some particular word was evoked by some specific experience, but constantly being called back to the letter of the day.

For some reason, this idea calls to mind the mathematical phenomenon of "attractors," an "attractor" being a pattern toward which random events tend to gravitate. Probably the simplest and most familiar example would be the pendulum. If its motion is disturbed, it will tend to settle back into an appropriate regularity. We might think of "the law"

as an attractor, a pattern that is constantly trying to make sense out of the confusion of our lives, showing us where this unexpected turn of events fits—or doesn't.

That is not far from the point of our third reading. When we judge superficially, by external appearances, we call events good when they gratify us and bad when they do not. We call ideas true when they are telling us what we want to hear and false when they are contradicting us. We wind up being good on our good days and bad on our bad days, so to speak. We are fundamentally inconsistent. When we realize that "good" and "bad" and "true" and "false" are ultimately not up to us at all, that they are transcendent values, this calls for a major revision not only of our thoughts but also of our thinking itself. It is like being in a boat and discovering that we do not need to be simply pushed whichever way the wind happens to be blowing, but can choose a destination and use the wind to carry us toward it. Our thinking shifts to a whole new level.

We could take our text as an example: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." On a relatively external level, this would seem to be telling us that the Lord's Word, the law, tells us what we should and should not do. If it were that simple, then all we would have to do when faced with a difficult decision would be to look it up in the Bible. In fact, though, that is not what the psalm is telling us. It is not saying that the word is a GPS that will give us step-by-step directions. It says that the word is *light*, of all things. It is telling us that the word, the law, will help us find our way better.

Luke tells of a time when a lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied with two questions. "What is written in the law?" was the first. "How do you read it?" was the second (Luke 10:25-26), and it is just as important as the first.

History tells us all too clearly that different people have read the law in very different ways. If we read the law in the light of self-love and worldly ambition, we will consider true whatever we find that justifies our desires. This can take some obvious forms, but it can also be more devious. There is a way of identifying with our church or our country that leads us to take its welfare personally, to feel personally diminished when it suffers and personally enlarged when it succeeds. We can be like those individuals who simply "stay within their own dogma and work to confirm it from the Word" rather than searching the Scriptures "to be taught about what is true" (*Secrets of Heaven* 4368:2). We can read by the light of our own



agendas, and convince ourselves that we are doing it for the church, for the country, for “the cause,” that we are being faithful.

But if the Word itself is the light, how can we read it in its own light? We could hardly do better than turn to that extraordinary prologue to the Gospel of John. “In the beginning,” it says, “was the word.” This immediately calls to mind the beginning passage of the Word we know as the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” John further echoes this statement by saying that “all things were made by him, and without him nothing came into being that did come into being.”

It then tells us that “In him was life, and the life was the light of humankind,” and we hear the echo of the Creator’s first words, “Let there be light,” seconded by the voice of the psalmist, “Your word is a light.”

This is all quite lovely, to be sure, but it needs to be brought down to earth if it is to be of any use to us. The light needs to be brought down to earth, and it is, immediately. Enter John the Baptist—about as earthy as they come—with his calling to bear witness to that light. The light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. So when the prologue tells us that “the word was made flesh,” it is saying that the light was made flesh, given human form. If we want to read the word in its own light, we should read it with an awareness that what it is trying to tell us is embodied in the person of Jesus, in his life and teaching.

Let us then look at some very fundamental characteristics of the Scriptures that John is talking about, the word that was being made flesh, the Law and the Prophets. The central theme throughout is the relationship between God and humankind. In this relationship, God is constantly trying to lead us toward our true destiny. We are at once drawn toward this destiny and rebellious when the path does not go where we want it to. Time after time, we warp what God is trying to tell us, so that it seems to be saying what we want to hear. Still, God never gives up on us—*never*, not for an instant.

In a way, that is all we need to know. We need to know that we are designed and created for blessing. We need to know that we are not there yet, and that the path can be devious and difficult. We need to acknowledge that we tend to want to do things our way, to think that we know best. We need to face the fact that we can do some quite awful things, and convince ourselves that we had a perfect right to do so. Above all, we need to know that God never gives up on us—*never*, not for an instant, not even if we do

some of the appalling things we read about in the Bible.

When you get right down to it, then, what the Word is trying to tell us is far, far better for us than what we keep trying to hear. We want it to tell us that we are on the right path. It wants to show us the path that we need to follow. Jesus put it in the simplest of terms: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you,” and he added, “for this is the Law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). This is, then, the word that he was making flesh. This is the light that shows us the path. This, as Jesus went on to say, is the narrow gate that leads to life.

The term “midlife crisis” seems to have been first coined in 1965, and to have been an instant hit. *Psychology Today* offers this thumbnail sketch: “Everything seems to happen at midlife. There’s the empty nest, menopause, affairs, and that red convertible, to name a few. And midlife is more of an issue in some cultures than others, with western societies holding onto sweet youth.” At midlife in particular we may realize that things are not turning out the way we wanted them to, and this is especially traumatic when we have been so determined to follow our own path that we have not been noticing what is happening to us. The simple fact that we are gaining ground in maturity and competence nurtures the belief that we are on our way to some kind of happy ending. That “ending” is far enough away that we can paint it with whatever colors we want.

Eventually, though, the ending comes close enough for us to catch a glimpse of it, and it has enough stubborn reality to resist our efforts to deceive ourselves. For a time, we see things in a light that seems harsh and unforgiving, but that is simply the harsh and unforgiving quality, the actual darkness, of our own self-deception. It is a taste of the judgment that Jesus described to Nicodemus: “. . . that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed; but those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:19-21).

How do we respond to that light, to the Word made flesh, to the quality of life so powerfully embodied in Jesus? May that word be truly a light to our path. Amen.

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## Monday, April 15

Then the Lord said to me: Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah. Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry forever. *Jeremiah 3:11-12*

The distinctions of neighbor, which the man of the church ought altogether to know, are according to the good which is with everyone; and because all good proceeds from the Lord, therefore the Lord is the neighbor in the highest sense and in a supereminent degree, and the origin is from him.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine n.86*

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## Tuesday, April 16

Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favors among strangers under every green tree, and have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord. Return, O faithless children, says the Lord, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. *Jeremiah 3:13-14*

So far as anyone has the Lord with himself, so far he is the neighbor; and because no one receives the Lord, that is, good from him, in the same manner as another, therefore no one is the neighbor in the same manner as another. For all who are in the heavens, and all the good who are on the earths, differ in good; no two ever received a good that is altogether one and the same; it must be various, that each may subsist by itself. *Ibid.*

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## Wednesday, April 17

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall no longer say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. *Jeremiah 3:15-16*

Because good varies with everyone, it therefore follows, that the quality of good determines in what degree and in what proportion anyone is the neighbor.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines n.87*

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## Thursday, April 18

At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will. In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your ancestors for a heritage. *Jeremiah 3:17-18*

Love is what causes anyone to be the neighbor, and that everyone is the neighbor according to the quality of his love, appears manifestly from those who are in the love of self.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines n.89*

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## Friday, April 19

If you return, O Israel, says the Lord, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, "As the Lord lives!" in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast. *Jeremiah 4:1-2*

Charity extends itself much more widely than to the poor and indigent; for charity consists in doing what is right in every work, and our duty in every office.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines n.101*

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## Saturday, April 20

For thus says the Lord to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn with no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

*Jeremiah 4:3-4*

If a judge does justice for the sake of justice, he exercises charity; if he punishes the guilty and absolves the innocent, he exercises charity, for thus he consults the welfare of his fellow citizens and of his country. The priest who teaches the truth, and leads to good, for the sake of truth and good, exercises charity. But he who does such things for the sake of self and the world, does not exercise. *Ibid.*

# MAKING UP YOUR MIND

Rev. Julian Duckworth

We know why: Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter. But interestingly, this verse appears way, way back, much earlier—as if Jesus, while he was talking to the disciples and walking one Wednesday afternoon through some village in Galilee, suddenly stops in his tracks, understands the huge importance of something that has never hit him before, sees exactly where everything is going to lead, and right there and then makes up his mind and “sets his face,” as it says, steadfastly, to go up to Jerusalem.

# 21

APR

## Luke 9:51-62

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When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

## Arcana Coelestia 5135

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When someone becomes an adult and starts thinking for himself and no longer just as he was told or taught, he brings to mind what he has in his mind, looks it over, and either endorses it, doubts it, or rejects it. If he endorses it, it's an indication he is led by good; if he rejects it, it's an indication that he's not being led by good, and if he doubts, it's an indication he hasn't yet made up his mind. Such things would be: that there is a God, that God created everything, that God rewards good people and punishes bad people, that there is a life after death, that there is heaven and there is hell, that these last for ever, and that people need to obey the Ten Commandments.

## Sermon

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Right in the middle of other things comes a verse about Jesus that speaks volumes and takes us into things going on behind the scenes. It says, “When the time came, Jesus steadfastly set his face to go up to Jerusalem.”

If you could stand inside Jesus' mind, you might see one or all of (let's say) three things: a picture forming of angry people who are clearly furious at Jesus himself; a sense of absolute loneliness, or something he can't quite put his finger on; and behind both of those, a wordless realization that what is happening and going to work itself inevitably through is of such huge importance that nobody can begin, or ever will be able, to know just what that is. All this lasts about eight seconds, and then it's gone—and Jesus is back with the next person and their questions.

But eight seconds is absolutely long enough to see, feel, and decide things and, there and then, make your mind up. We get moments like this—perhaps not quite as big, of course, but we can see purposes and outcomes and likelihoods, even though we can't see the future (and that's a mercy!). And it's at eight-second moments like this that we probably do most of our deciding—not the weighing of things, the sifting of our possible options, but the knowing. “Is that how it's all going, then? Is this what I want? Or isn't it?” We could say that we make up our mind, but actually, our mind seems to be almost made up for us.

That's an amazing thought. It sounds as though we're destined in some way—and part of us really doesn't like that kind of idea, because we value our free will and decision-making ability so much. “Nobody's going to tell me what to do or how everything is going to work out!”

That's absolutely fine—absolutely right—on one level, the level where you are thinking, selecting, comparing, filing and so on, because that is you and yours, and you have every right to all that. But at the deepest level—which we hardly ever come into direct contact with—there is this seeing and knowing, something like Jesus had that Wednesday afternoon. And the only word you can really use for it is “destiny,” which we really don't like to hear because, as I said, it seems to go against everything we've ever believed in.

But it isn't fatalism. Fatalism means you can't do anything about something. The train is running downhill and everything is out of control, with impending fatalities. The only thing you can do is jump or stay on board, and you'll be killed either way! Destiny is not like that at all, or else life would be unbearable.

Destiny is about there being a set purpose for our existence and a set purpose for everything. The feeling of destiny doesn't take away one molecule of our free will, and yet it is there for sure. I actually think it is the way we glimpse the workings of divine providence in a tangible way—and, for me, it cuts through all those awful Yes-But-What-Ifs that our reasoning throws up when we mere mortals try to get our arrogant heads around how God is managing the whole of everything.

That moment Jesus had that Wednesday afternoon was not an exercise in logical deduction. He just knew, but of course he was God. We sense that there is a meaning and purpose to everything, and at times we get that sense of an underlying destiny very strongly. Rather than running away from it or telling ourselves that there's nothing of the kind, we would do better to embrace it, and then a few seconds later decide for ourselves what we are going to do for the rest of the day because of it. It's a bit like a push and a nudge; when push comes to shove, it's over to us. Embrace destiny and providence, and make your mind up.

If I had to write horoscopes, they would always go like this: Sagittarius—"You will meet some ups and downs, but everything is in fact working out the way that it is meant to." Leo—"Ditto." Capricorn—"Ditto." Horoscopes are fatalistic. Providence is destiny. People who write horoscopes might protest that they are simply pointing out likelihoods and that it's good to be armed in advance. But I have a sneaking suspicion that horoscopes leave people not only thinking it's all set out in the stars but also musing, "I don't have to do anything about it myself," which is a lovely thought.

But destiny and providence are not like that at all. They're invitations. "Come to me, all of you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Those are amazing words! They are all about destiny of the providence kind. Most of us hear them and say to ourselves, "Oh, I know those words. I remember that wonderful sermon on them by so-and-so, what was it, twenty-nine years ago. Those words are just lovely; I could hear them over and over." But we are actually meant to *do* something with them—own them, embrace them, try them out, and let them make a difference to us, not just soliloquize. We are meant to make up our minds to come unto God—or, if you prefer, to come unto God and make up our minds.

Jesus set his face steadfastly to go up to Jerusalem. This word "steadfast" smacks of tin soldiers and Nelson's sailors at Trafalgar, but it is a great word about making up your mind and knowing where you are going. The word for "steadfast" that is used in the gospel is *sterizo*; notice just how close that is to our word "sterile," meaning absolutely germ-free. The germs—as far as we are concerned at the moment—are things like nagging doubts and bacterial egos.

*Horoscopes are fatalistic. Providence is destiny. Destiny and providence are invitations.*

"Sterile," of course, can have other, not-so-good meanings, such as "barren," "empty," even "impotent." And bacteria are not only beneficial (think of yogurt!) but essential. One of the things about making up our minds—a good thing to do—is that it can make us fairly hard and fast—sterile—and closed to other points of view. Then we fall into dogmatism, into believing that our point of view is the one true view.

So please note that moment for Jesus as he set his face steadfastly—note it, warm to it, and identify with it. You and I can't decide right now that we will make up our minds once and for all at this very moment. (Well, we can, but it's unrealistic to do so.) Setting one's face steadfastly is far more about letting an impulse or your intuition help you make your mind up. It's destiny, the providential push and nudge. It will come for sure, when it is right, and you will know it; but the point is for you to go with it that little bit more every time it comes, and make it steadfast and "sterilized" in the best sense of the word.

And don't forget: when you *do* make your mind up, you can then just get on with your life, and all that it is and can be. Amen.

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## Monday, April 22

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the river and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.' *Joshua 24:1-3*

We know absolutely nothing about the inner state of our minds; yet there are infinite things there, none of which comes to our awareness. *Divine Providence n.1*

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## Tuesday, April 23

"I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.' Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." *Joshua 24:13-15*

The inner working of our thought or our inner self is our actual spirit, and there are infinite elements there, innumerable elements, just as there are in our physical bodies. *Divine Providence. Ibid.*

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## Wednesday, April 24

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." *Joshua 24:16-18*

Since our senses tell us nothing about the way our minds or souls are at work, both together and separately, in all the elements of our bodies, we do not know how the Lord is at work in all the elements of our minds or souls, that is, in all the elements of our spirits. *Ibid.*

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## Thursday, April 25

But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" *Joshua 24:19-21*

The Lord cannot cleanse us from any compulsion to evil in our spirits or inner selves as long as we keep the outer self closed. *Ibid.*

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## Friday, April 26

Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. *Joshua 24:22-25*

Each of the evils that we use to keep our outer selves closed seems to be a single item, but there are infinite elements within it. When we dismiss it as a single item, then the Lord dismisses the infinite elements that it contains. *Ibid.*

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## Saturday, April 27

Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God." So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances. *Joshua 24:26-28*

This is what it means to say that the Lord then cleanses us from the compulsions to evil in our inner nature and from the evil practices themselves in our outer nature. *Ibid.*



**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23**

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A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,  
and favor is better than silver or gold.  
The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.  
Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,  
and the rod of anger will fail.  
Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.  
Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;  
for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

**Mark 7:24-30**

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From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

**Sermon**

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*Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built up against it. – Rumi*

Do you all know what hipsters are? Have you all heard that term? Hipsters are sensitive, progressive, culturally aware individuals with a disdain for mainstream consumer culture; a fondness for tight-fitting jeans, thick-rimmed glasses, and the music of Bon Iver; and apparently—at least according to a recent ad campaign—the sort of people who deserve to die.

How about crazy cat ladies? You all know what crazy cat ladies are, right? They are women who drive around in cars with bumper stickers that say things

like "One cat away from being a crazy cat lady." They also, typically, have a lot of cats. And they too, at least according to this ad campaign, deserve to die.

Now, before you get too upset, please know that hipsters and cat ladies are not alone. The tattooed, the genetically privileged, and crazy old aunts are on this hit list as well. In fact, in cities across America—on billboards, bus-station walls, and old phone booths (you all remember phone booths, right?)—posters portraying these types of people have sprung up with nothing more than those awful words: "Hipsters Deserve to Die," "Cat Ladies Deserve to Die," and so on.

It's the sort of gimmick that could drive you to anger, drive you to indignation, or drive you to distraction, but what the creators of this campaign are really hoping is that it will drive you to Google, where you'll find the website [www.NoOneDeservesToDie.org](http://www.NoOneDeservesToDie.org). It's a site put up by none other than the American Lung Cancer Association. They've done this because they want to raise awareness around the fact that over 160,000 lives are lost every year to lung cancer.

"They didn't ask for it," the site says, "but many people seem to think they deserved it."

And I think you all know why. I mean, breast cancer, bone cancer, cancer of the liver or pancreas—they could strike anyone, right? But lung cancer . . . we all know what sorts of people get lung cancer.

At least we think we do.

Only it turns out that, as is so often the case, the truth is a little more complicated. The truth is that not everyone who gets lung cancer smoked.

But even if many of these people who have lung cancer did smoke—think about this for a moment—does that really, at the end of the day, mean that they deserve to die? It may make it more likely, sure. It may increase the odds. But does the fact that they smoked make it somehow more fitting, make it somehow all right?

The American Lung Association doesn't think so, and I'm pretty sure that if anyone with even an ounce of compassion really thinks about it, he or she probably doesn't think so either. After all, smokers, like cat ladies and hipsters, are people too.

I have great respect for whoever created this campaign, as disturbing as it is, because it reveals a truth about us that is all too easy to overlook: the truth that there is something in us—in all of us—that can't help but search for answers in the face of tragedy, an

inclination within us to impose some logic on the unruly nature of fate, a drive in the human psyche to make some sense of the senselessness that so often accompanies suffering . . . because there is some part in all of us that believes that if we can just figure out *why* something as awful as lung cancer happened to that person, then maybe, just maybe, we can figure out some way to keep something as awful as lung cancer from happening to ourselves.

In a beautiful essay she wrote for Salon.com, Mary Elizabeth Williams—herself a cancer survivor—puts it this way: “[T]here’s a deep-rooted human impulse to look for reasons why bad things happen.” That way, they can only happen to other people—people who are, in their own reckless ways, somehow *asking for it*. It’s a defensive coping mechanism, and an incredibly effective way of shutting down compassion and empathy and outright help. Because, you know, what did you expect, wearing that hoodie or letting that guy in your room,” being born in a country like Haiti, living on the coast of Japan, or smoking three packs a day?<sup>1</sup>

It’s not pretty, this impulse to judge and explain away, to rank and relegate, to recognize and then distance ourselves from those who suffer; but it exists in all of us. In fact, the impulse runs so deep that, I believe, even Jesus himself struggled with it.

To be fair, when we catch up with him today in our scripture reading, he is not at his best. He is exhausted, absolutely exhausted. He has been working incredibly hard to open the eyes of his own people, to help them understand that they need to stop judging one another. He is sick and tired of the way the rich look down on the poor, the way the healthy despise the crippled, the way the righteous dismiss those they perceive as sinners.

He’s just gone off on a bunch of Pharisees for asking why his disciples don’t wash their hands properly before they eat, dismissed them as hypocrites, and told them that they are way too hung up on technicalities. He’s been trying to get them to understand that it is not our ability to keep ourselves pure but our desire to treat others well that sets us apart as holy—which makes sense to me, but not even his disciples seem to understand what he is trying to say.

In short, things just aren’t going well. Jesus has had it, he knows it, and he takes off. He leaves his own people behind and heads up to the region of Tyre, a predominantly Gentile territory, where nobody knows him and no self-respecting scribe or Pharisee is going to follow him.

He finds a house up there, lets himself into a room, and for a moment everything is quiet. Then, all of a sudden, into the room comes this person—and it’s not even a man, it’s a woman (which could cause problems); and of course she’s not a Jewish woman (this being Tyre), she’s a Syrophenician—i.e., a Gentile (which will definitely cause problems); and the only reason a Gentile woman from Syrophenicia would follow Jesus into a house in the first place would be if she had a problem. So, well, this is going to be a problem.

And Jesus, honestly, at this point in his day, his week, his life, doesn’t want to deal with it. He’s got too much on his plate already, trying to help his own people and as far as he is concerned, he has nothing left over for the likes of her.

But she comes in anyway. She bows down at his feet, begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter, and Jesus, our Jesus—our unfailingly kind, all-loving, endlessly compassionate Jesus—is breathtakingly cruel.

He looks at this woman, this mother suffering the second most devastating agony a parent can suffer, the agony of not being able to help your sick child, and he says no.

*“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*

Yeah. In case you missed it, Jesus called this woman, all her people, and her sick little girl dogs. It is a racial slur, no two ways about it, a moment in Jesus’ ministry that has dismayed his followers ever since.

I mean, talk about compassion fatigue. Jesus is so wrapped up in his desire to save his own people that he doesn’t even have the wherewithal left over to see that this woman and her daughter are people too.

They are Gentiles, after all—Syrophenicians, for God’s sake. What do they have to do with him? “Of course the child’s got a demon! They probably all have demons. What do you expect, living in Tyre, worshipping idols, carrying on the way your kind

*It’s not pretty, this impulse to judge and explain away, to rank and relegate, to recognize and then distance ourselves from those who suffer; but it exists in all of us.*

1 [http://www.salon.com/2012/06/29/who\\_deserves\\_to\\_die/](http://www.salon.com/2012/06/29/who_deserves_to_die/)

carries on? Now go on," his words imply. "Get out of here. Scram. *Leave me alone!*"

But she doesn't. Thanks be to God, she doesn't. Rather than storm out or slink away, this woman looks up at Jesus and says, "Sir,"—he has just denigrated her completely, but she chooses to respond with both dignity and respect—"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And with those words, something miraculous happens. It is a moment as profound as any in scripture, so profound that not only is this woman's daughter healed, but so is Jesus: healed of his racism and his narrow perspective, healed of his "anxiety and self-involvement."<sup>2</sup>

Her ability to repurpose his insult disables the trip wire on Jesus' inner defense mechanism, that mechanism in all of us that causes us to shut down in the face of another's suffering, rationalize their pain away, relegate them to some other category that has nothing to do with people like us, and scurry home lest we catch what they have.

Thanks to her words, all at once Jesus' ears are opened to her pleas, his heart is opened to her cause, his eyes are opened, and for the first time Jesus sees her, truly sees her—not as a Gentile, as someone other, as someone who deserves her plight, or even as someone else's problem, but as a woman, a mother, a fellow human being who needs him as much as he needs her. He sees her as someone deserving of his compassion, in spite of the fact that all these two very different people have ever been taught to offer one another is scorn.

Jesus heals this woman's daughter, but the true miracle of this story, if you ask me, is that Jesus himself is healed—healed by this woman. In his fear and fatigue and anger, he was in danger of becoming that which he most despised in others, the sort of person who would judge and dismiss another based on *what* they are rather than *who* they are.

But the beauty of this story is that the Canaanite woman doesn't let him stay there. With her gentle humility and steadfast determination, she calls him back from that dark place and reminds him who he truly is. Her words open his heart back up to the expansiveness of his true ministry and our highest humanity.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Carl Gregg for this insight and his reflection at <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/>

For she reminds him that love—not just a mother's love but divine love, that same love that brought us into being and dwells within us even now—is a love that knows no limits, a love that knows no bounds.

I think it is no coincidence that the very next miracle Jesus performed involved opening the ears of a deaf man and releasing his tongue, for she had opened his heart and released him to love not just his own people, but all people, whether they deserved it or not. I think that is what gave him the strength to go home again, and the courage to keep loving and forgiving and including all those who came his way, from that day on, no matter what.

My prayer is that that same love would be ours, because, you see, life doesn't play fair. Be it good or bad, you know as well as I do that people don't always get what they deserve. That's just not how it works.

But that doesn't change the fact that what they all need is love, our love and God's love: a love that is "larger and more compassionate and more inclusive"<sup>3</sup> than any we could ever hope to understand or imagine—and yet that shouldn't stop us from trying.

So may we be opened to that love. May we be opened to receive it, that we might become as open to giving it as Jesus became that day in Tyre,

thanks to a woman's courage, thanks to a mother's love.

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### Prayer

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O Lord, although we know it isn't better, it is so often easier to look away from the needs and wants and hurts of those who are suffering than it is to enter into the fray and do what we can to help. Grant us the courage, the strength, and the grace, we pray, to go anyhow. May your love and your light flow through us, that we might be healed even as we strive to do what we can to heal those around us. Open our hearts, that we might be open to all. All this we pray in your name, Lord Jesus, our guide, our stay, our savior. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Carl Gregg again!

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## Monday, April 29

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. *Mark 7:31-32*

Faith is formed by our turning to the Lord, because faith that is real, that is, faith that brings salvation, is faith from the Lord and faith in the Lord. As for faith being a faith in the Lord, which show that we have to believe in the Son. Given that faith is faith from the Lord and faith in the Lord, you could say that the Lord is faith itself, for its life and essence exist in the Lord and come from him. *True Christian Religion n.347*

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## Tuesday, April 30

He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." *Mark 7:33-34*

Faith is formed by our learning truths from the Word, because faith in its essence is truth. All the elements that constitute faith are truths. Faith, then, is nothing but an array of truths shining in our mind. Truths teach not only that we need to have beliefs but also in whom to believe and what to believe. *Ibid.*

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## Wednesday, May 1

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." *Mark 7:35-37*

Truths need to be taken from the Word, because all the truths that make a contribution to our salvation are there. These truths are genuinely effective because they have been given by the Lord and have been engraved on the entire angelic heaven. As a result, when we learn truths from the Word, without our knowing it we come into contact and association with angels. *Ibid.*

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## Thursday, May 2

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance." His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." *Mark 8:1-5*

Faith without truths is like a seed without a kernel. If you grind it, you get nothing but chaff. Faith made of truths is like a seed from the harvest. If you grind it, you get flour. To put it briefly, truths are essential components of faith. If faith does not contain truths, it is merely like the sound of idle whistling. When faith contains truths, it is like the sound of the call to our salvation. *Ibid.*

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## Friday, May 3

Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha. *Mark 8:6-10*

Faith is formed by our living by those truths, because a spiritual life is a life that follows truths. Truths are not actually alive before they exist in actions. *Ibid.*

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## Saturday, May 4

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side. *Mark 8:11-13*

People who learn truths and do them are like people who sow and plow the seeds under. With the benefit of rain, the seeds then grow into a harvest and become useful for nutrition. *Ibid.*



# *Our Daily Bread* is a ministry of the General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem

## Our Beliefs in Brief:

- God is pure love, pure wisdom, and pure creative power.
- God became human in Jesus Christ and dwells with us.
- The Bible is God's Word, and has many levels of meaning.
- God loves and saves people of all religions.

# Our Daily Bread Subscription Form

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**The Swedenborgian Church** bases its teachings on the Bible as illuminated by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian. Swedenborg envisioned a new Christianity coming into being that was revitalized by the Spirit of the Lord.

We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God, who made himself known to us through his life as the divine human Jesus of Nazareth, and whom we continue to know through his Holy Spirit, which operates through and around us.

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.

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