

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

# OUR DAILY BREAD



*Perception*

# Prayers

Dispel, O Lord, O Father of Lights,  
all clouds of doubt and the darkness about  
our earthly course;

that in your light we may see light,  
and come both to know you as we are  
known,

and to love as we are loved,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- from

Occasional Prayers Reconsidered

~

God our Father, in all the mysteries of this  
life,

help us to know in whom we have believed,  
and in that knowledge may we find the love  
that beats at the heart of creation;

through Christ our Lord.

- A. S. Peake (1865-1929)

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Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter, Editors  
43 Hobart Square, Whitman, MA 02382  
ourdailybreadmag@gmail.com • (781) 447-4901  
www.oddb-online.com

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Dear Readers,

Throughout our lives, we grow and change in ways we could have never expected, in part because we could never have imagined the twists and turns coming our way. Our frameworks for navigating the world change and our paradigms shift when things we did not even conceive of, whether painful or wondrous or both, enter our understanding. These moments are essential for our spiritual growth.

William Blake said, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." Spiritual transformations occur when the soul opens up and the heart sees the truth and goodness in what the Lord has disclosed. Perception and perspective are integral to our growth into the fullness of our humanity; without pressing their boundaries, we are mere shadows. This issue of *ODB* focuses on moments that lead to new understanding or insight, and thus to deeper faith and more potent love. We hope you will find it as enlightening to read as we found it to create.

Many blessings,  
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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## Contributors to This Issue



*The Rev. Dr. George F. Dole is Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at the Swedenborgian House of Studies. He is also the pastor of the New Church of Bath, Maine. He is a well-known translator and scholar of the Swedenborgian Church.*



*The Rev. Chris Skinner is a New Church minister in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.*



*The Rev. Julian Duckworth is the president of the New Church in Australia. He is also the minister of the Roseville New Church in Sydney.*



*The Rev. Sarah Buteux is an ordained Swedenborgian minister serving the First Congregational Church of Hadley, MA (UCC).*



*The Rev. Kathy Speas is a hospice chaplain near San Francisco, CA. She also preaches at area churches and serves on the board of directors for the Swedenborgian House of Studies.*



*The Rev. Eric Hoffman is the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.*



*Mr. William Lee is a member of the Bridgewater New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater, MA. He also is a director of the Massachusetts New Church Union.*



*The Rev. Kevin Baxter is the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem in Massachusetts and is co-editor of Our Daily Bread. He also serves as the Swedenborgian chaplain to the Harvard Chaplains.*

## 2 Kings 6:1-17

Now the company of prophets said to Elisha, "As you see, the place where we live under your charge is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, and let us collect logs there, one for each of us, and build a place there for us to live." He answered, "Do so." Then one of them said, "Please come with your servants." And he answered, "I will." So he went with them. When they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees. But as one was felling a log, his ax head fell into the water; he cried out, "Alas, master! It was borrowed." Then the man of God said, "Where did it fall?" When he showed him the place, he cut off a stick, and threw it in there, and made the iron float. He said, "Pick it up." So he reached out his hand and took it.

Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there." The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert. The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?" Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber."

He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him." He was told, "He is in Dothan." So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city. When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." Then Elisha prayed: "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

## Luke 11:29-36

When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of

Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays."

## Secrets of Heaven 9103:3

In an earthly state, we see things in the light of this world, a light we could call "earthlight." We acquire this light by means of the observable things we take in through our sight and hearing and therefore by means of observable things in this world. So inside ourselves, we see these things almost as though we were seeing them with our eyes. What we take in through these senses affects us primarily in terms of pleasure and delight. Eventually, as little children, we distinguish between different delights and in this way learn discernment, which gradually becomes more discriminating. When some light from heaven flows into this, we begin to see things spiritually and for the first time to see what is useful and what is not. On this basis we begin to see what is true, because we see what is useful to us as true and what is useless as not true. This clarity of perception grows as heaven's light flows in until finally we can tell the difference not only between what is true and what is not true but can identify the truths within the truths, more and more clearly as the communication between the inner and the outer self improves. This is because heaven's light flows into the outer self through the inner self.

## Message

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*  
(Psalm 119:105)

One of the watchwords of evangelical Christianity in the nineties was the question "What would Jesus do?" It was commonly known by its acronym, "WWJD." It is a very good question. Its roots, of course, go all the way back to the Gospels themselves.

When Jesus called the disciples to follow him, he was not talking simply about following in his physical footsteps. "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

It is of critical importance, though, to recognize that he did not say we were to take up *his* cross. We cannot lay down *his* life. I must take up *my* cross. You must take up *your* cross. We cannot just mechanically imitate what Jesus did. He acted in response to his circumstances, and we are to act in response to our own. This means that we cannot answer the question "What would Jesus *do*?" until we have found an answer to the question "What would Jesus *see*?"

This is a searching question, because while physically we "see" everything within our range of vision, we attend to only a fraction of that. Some people, I gather, are very clothes-conscious, and can tell you in considerable detail what different people were wearing on some particular occasion. Others scarcely notice. From a strictly physical, materialist point of view, all are seeing pretty much the same thing. The signals that scoot along their optic nerves to their brains are carrying pretty much the same information. Something, something non-material, seems to be filtering that information and allowing only part of it to reach our waking consciousness.

Our theology tells us that the filter is our loves. They determine what actively interests us. To the extent that our main interests are physical, our attention will be drawn to physical attractiveness or unattractiveness. It often happens, though, that sooner or later this physically unattractive person turns out to be truly thoughtful, and we begin to see the facial expressions of this thoughtfulness rather than the facial terrain on which those expressions are displayed. We can "see" this person giving us her or his full attention, responding to what we are saying or doing. These signals were there before, but we did not see them because we were preoccupied with the terrain.

The basic principle is right there in the Sermon on the Mount. "The lamp of the body is the eye, so if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. If your eye is bad, though, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matthew 6:22-23). Jesus saw with extraordinary clarity, a clarity that must have increased as, step by step, he overcame the failings of our human condition. He was, according to John's gospel, "the true light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:9). It is a light that shines

in our darkness, and our darkness cannot master it (John 1:5).

There is a striking statement in *Secrets of Heaven* (§6917) that is well worth close attention. "The same facts are false for evil people, because they are applied to evil ends, that are true for good people because they are applied to good ends." Take just a moment to adjust this notion to our experiences of ourselves so that the "evil people" include ourselves at our worst and the "good people" include ourselves at our best, and we can put it to the test. When someone has offended us and we are caught up in resentment, all we can see is the negative side of "the facts" about that individual. Suppose we realize that behind the words that offended us lay pain and a plea for help, and those same "facts" take on a very different color.

This calls us to rethink what we mean by the word "truth." It seems to be telling us that truth is not simply something that we can learn and know. It is first and foremost a way of seeing. The church teaches us about our relationship with the Lord. The most urgent question is not how accurate this information is, but how it affects the way we see ourselves and each other. "If you know these things," Jesus said to his disciples, "you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17).

Functionally, nothing is true unless it enables us to see what is good, which includes distinguishing it from what is not good. That is "truth" not as what we see but as the light that enables us to see. An essential feature of the beauty of this space in which we are gathered is that it is full of light. If the eye of the church is clear, the whole body of the church is full of light.

The Lord came into the world as "the true light," the light in which he saw everyone and that enables everyone to see clearly. The gospels keep telling us what he saw. He saw that his disciples were the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). He saw the spirit of God descending like a dove (Matthew 3:16). He saw Jerusalem and wept over it (Luke 19:41). He saw potential disciples and called them (Mark 1:16, 19). He saw the faith of the people who let the paralyzed man down through the roof (Luke 5:20).

If we take seriously the thought that truth is something we are to do, this generates another list. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is full of truths that we are to do. He told us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43). He told us to be forgiving (Matthew 6:15). He told us not to lay up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19). He told us not to judge (Matthew 7:1). He told us to seek first the kingdom of God and his

righteousness (Matthew 5:33). If we want an honest answer to the question "Are we a Christian country?" we have a handy checklist to go by.

This brings us to the brink of our third reading with its contrast between "earthlight" and spiritual light. Current research is making it quite clear that while we give conscious attention to only a fraction of what we are seeing and hearing, we are taking it all in. This means that our subconscious mind is vastly better informed than our conscious mind. If we look at ourselves in the light of our theology, this comes as no surprise. Life is constantly flowing into us from the Lord, and that life is a union of love and wisdom. As it flows down through the discrete levels of our inner being, it runs into problems. In the words of *Secrets of Heaven* (§7270), ". . . the Divine-True that emanates directly from the Divine-Good flows in by stages, and in its course, or at each new stage, it becomes more general and therefore coarser and hazier and it becomes slower and therefore more sluggish and colder." The more earthbound our thinking is, the coarser and hazier it is.

Our third reading goes into a little more detail on this subject. "When some light from heaven flows into this [earthlit thinking], we begin to see things spiritually and for the first time to see what is useful and what is not. On this basis we begin to see what is true, because we see what is useful to us as true and what is useless as not true. This clarity of perception grows as heaven's light flows in until finally we can tell the difference not only between what is true and what is not true but can identify the truths within the truths, more and more clearly as the communication between the inner and the outer self improves."

Jesus, we may be very sure, saw everything and everyone in heaven's light. This means that he would see when what they were doing and saying was groping in the darkness of earthlight. "Do not judge by appearances," he said (John 7:24). "You judge according to the flesh. I do not judge anyone" (John 8:15). Time after time, we find him knowing what was going on in the hearts and minds of both those who supported him and those who resisted him; and in every case, he saw a potential angel. He saw everyone as in process, everyone as following some way. When he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), he was not giving Thomas three separate facts. The truth that he taught was the way that he followed and the life that he led. It was the truth that he called his disciples not simply to believe but to do. When he sent them forth as apostles, he charged them to teach

this way, truth, and life, to teach all nations to observe everything he had commanded them (Matthew 28:20).

The words of our closing hymn, "Lead, Kindly Light," were written by the nineteenth-century British clergyman John Henry Newman, evidently late in his life. They give us a kind of autobiography of one devoted Christian's long journey out of darkness into light. In some church traditions, members are expected at one time or another to "give witness," to tell the stories of their own rebirth, and that, clearly, was Newman's intent. He had come to see this world as dark, "the encircling gloom," and prayed to be led by the Lord's light. He looks back on his life and sees that he was not "ever thus." He had wanted to lead himself, to choose his own path, and he was easily misled by superficial appearances that now seem merely "garish," gaudy, all show and no substance. Pride, he says, had ruled his will. In this we can see his need to think well of himself; and we need to be mindful at this point that during those dark years he was a faithful, respected, and beloved pastor.

Through all this, he now can see, he was being led toward the light. "So long Thy power hath blessed me, sure it still will lead me on"; and though he cannot see very far ahead, he can trust the love and wisdom of that power. "I do not ask to see that distant scene; One step enough for me."

"Keep thou my feet." Keep them on the way, step by step by step. This, I would suggest, is how a life looks when it is seen in heaven's kindly light. It is the light that the Lord brought into the darkness of this world, the light that the darkness could neither comprehend nor control, could not "master" in either sense of that word. It does help to be honest about how things look to us. If we accept responsibility for this, then the way is open for the truly enlightening question, "What would Jesus see?" Amen.

## **Meditation**

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It is God's will that we receive three things from him as gifts as we seek [him]. The first is that we seek willingly and diligently, without sloth. . . . The second is that we wait for him steadfastly, out of love for him. . . . The third is that we have great trust in him, out of complete and true faith, for it is his will that we know that he will appear, suddenly and blessedly, to all his lovers. For he works in secret, and he will be perceived, and his appearance will be very sudden. And he wants to be trusted, for he is very accessible, familiar, and courteous, blessed may he be.

- Julian of Norwich (1342-ca. 1423)

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## Monday, September 5

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

*Matthew 6:19-21*

First: Honors and wealth are blessings and they are curses. Common experience testifies that both the pious and the impious, or both the just and the unjust, that is, both the good and the wicked, possess dignities and wealth; and yet no one can deny that the impious and the unjust, that is, the wicked, go to hell, while the pious and the just, that is, the good, go to heaven.

*Divine Providence n. 217*

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## Tuesday, September 6

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! *Matthew 6:22-23*

In heaven and also in hell there are both rich and poor, and both great and small. From this it is clear that dignities and riches were blessings in the world with those now in heaven, while they were curses with those now in hell. *Ibid.*

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## Wednesday, September 7

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. *Matthew 6:24*

To set the heart on them is to love oneself in them; and not to set the heart on them is to love uses and not self in them. *Ibid.*

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## Thursday, September 8

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? *Matthew 6:25-26*

To this it must be added that some are led astray by dignities and wealth but some are not. They lead astray when they excite the loves of a man's proprium, which is the love of self; and it has also been stated that this is an infernal love, which is called the devil; but they do not lead astray when they do not excite this love. *Ibid.*

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## Friday, September 9

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

*Matthew 6:27-30*

The good regard the honor and profit of the office as principal causes or motives, and personal honours and gain as instrumental causes; but the wicked regard personal honours and gain as principal causes, and the honour and profit of the office as instrumental causes.

*Ibid.*

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## Saturday, September 10

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. *Matthew 6:31-33*

A person who is in high office in the spiritual world is in magnificence and glory, like that of kings on earth; yet such do not regard the dignity itself as anything, but the uses in the administration and discharge of which they are engaged. *Ibid.*

# SE P 11 DOING IS BELIEVING

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

## Isaiah 9:1-5

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But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

## John 21:2-17

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Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went

aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

## Message

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Some congregations only use one reading each Sunday. In fact, they only will use a sentence or two from the Bible as "the reading." This is due, I believe, to a modern preaching maxim that tells the preacher that focusing on one or two sentences, on a really simple concept, is the only way to get the message across.

I have to admit, this approach bothers me. And yet one can make a good argument for its success. It's like the motivational speakers who focus on a variety of simple acronyms to drive a particular point home. I'm not sure whether or not those acronyms really can transform a company, but they give people a common thing to say and paste across their walls. In my other life as a community organizational participant, the district organizational officer called a meeting of all the local heads, so I went. The district head spoke about how happy he was to have been appointed and about how he understands his job to be supporting us and so on. Toward the end of his talk, he talked about how we are all a team, and how "team" stands for "Together Everybody Achieves More."

The motivational/business speaker alarm bells went off. I knew that he had attended a leadership conference—and this was not the first time I had heard this motto, because I remembered when my mother had come back from a conference bearing a tote bag with the TEAM logo on it.

I was instantly put off! But over the past month, I have watched the group produce more communication and input than we had over the last two years, and at the bottom of each of our leader's emails the slogan "TEAM: *Together Everybody Achieves More*" is written. It has given me pause. Are these seemingly trite acronyms really that powerful?

I have spent much time thinking about it. What are the most effective ways to lead? When I ask myself this question, I look to Scripture for insight. In the last two weeks, we have been looking at the call of the disciples; this week we read Matthew's version of the call of the first four disciples, the same disciples we heard about in John's version last week. This week's version of the story is more familiar: the disciples were called, dropped their nets immediately, and followed Jesus.

I don't remember Jesus using leadership acronyms to motivate people. What would have happened if Jesus had used the TEAM acronym as part of the Sermon on the Mount—or, for that matter, in any of the parables teaching the twelve?

Only after a few weeks and a phone call or two were both my suspicions confirmed. The powerful TEAM acronym had little to no true effect in itself. That acronym, like the printed words on the page of a Bible, is dead.

Whew! I was afraid someone would throw tomatoes.

Words are containers. They hold something. They hold a meaning and also give rise to a meaning. That TEAM acronym is a container. People in this community organizational group are communicating more and working harder, but it's not because of the acronym. Rather, it's because the district officer really meant the words he said. He is constantly working behind the scenes with people, asking people to do things, calling them and checking up on their progress. Teams achieve more because being accountable to other people drives us to work with more focus. Our district leader uses the TEAM acronym, but he is also monitoring us to see that the motto is enacted.

Just like that cute little motto, the Bible is a container. Only to the degree that we understand that it is a holy book given to us by God are we able truly to understand the power that lies within it.

In communication theory, people are taught that a filter stands between an author and his work, as well

as between the work and its reader. This filter consists of a worldview and an understanding of language itself, which is why educated translation is such a difficult task. To translate well, one must understand the work's culture of origin, the culture of the reader, and the language itself.

When I read a piece of fiction, it can offer sage advice, be a timeless tale or a morality tale, and so forth. I can learn good moral lessons from other forms of media, too. They can all contain meaning, but there is a difference between that and Scripture.

We can learn good moral truths from external sources, but God tries to reach us from the inside as well. When we look to Scripture as a container for the Lord's words, we understand it in such a way that the truths that survive in the outside world—truths that God has put in place—can reform us at the same time that God is attempting to transform us from the inside. A good moral book can only do the former.

We, like words, are containers too! And we can only mean what it is that is in our core. In the organization I mentioned above, previous district leaders have used the same type of acronyms and platitudes as the current leader, but to little effect. The difference? The person who is currently presiding in the office means what he says.

Martin Luther King, Jr. faced many accusations during his career and even after his death, among them that he had used other people's speeches as the basis for his own and that he hadn't said anything all that new—and yet he was able to lead the civil rights movement to new heights.

Some have asked what Martin Luther King, Jr. Day should be. Does an extra shopping day or a vacation day really celebrate his legacy? For some time now, MLK Day has been a day on which people are called to service. President Obama is using this day to perform community service; so are students on college campuses across the nation. This movement came about because acknowledging Martin Luther King Day became a container . . . and people were beginning to fear what it did or did not contain.

Sunday, too, is a container.

I don't know about you, but I have known a good number of fishermen. They all sit on their boats and talk a lot. I like to think of those first disciples as folks who were complaining about the Roman hierarchy,

*Only to the degree that we understand that the Bible is a holy book given to us by God are we able truly to understand the power that lies within it.*

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# Daily Meditations

**Monday, September 12**

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looking for the light in the darkness, and going about their day—until one day, when they heard the call to follow the Lord.

In this tradition, we understand fish as truths. The fishermen were thus gathering truths, which is a noble pursuit, but it was not in itself enough. (We could compare what they were doing to modern-day folk who attend leadership conferences, in the process learning cute acronyms and catchy leadership slogans.) They were gathering truths in their boat, piling up more and more and more. But to what end? They were already dissatisfied with politics and religious bodies—what changed?

Our reading from Isaiah today is a prophecy that this verse in Matthew fulfills. It talks of a light coming and the Lord breaking the yokes burdening the Israelites.

What things were keeping these two men in their boats when they were questing for something else? What gave them the fill of the truths they were removing from the water to seek a new understanding?

It was the call of the Lord. It was a message to them to start being.

We labor under the yoke of doubt and fear. Trusting in the Lord relieves that burden so that we can free ourselves from our restraints, whatever they may be. Dr. King had all the reasons in the world not to act for the causes he believed just, but he did. Knowing something is different from believing it. Believing in something means that we are motivated to action!

Sunday is a container. We are here because we believe—but how, this week, do we put that belief into action? How do we take one thing—our favorite aspect of our church, our faith, or the Bible—and put it into action? How are we called from our boats to follow the Lord?

I'm sure each of us has a different answer, but there is an answer there for each of us, because the Lord is present to us all. If we can overcome our fears, if we can overcome doubt, the yoke will be broken and the Lord will be there to carry us. To do so, however, we must not think, but believe. Amen.

## **Meditation**

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One cannot wait for conditions to be easy in order to act. . . . When God becomes a child, he knows there is no better way to express himself than through the weakness of a child. That is love telling us that it comes unarmed.

- Archbishop Christophe Munzihirwa

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord."

*Matthew 9:27-28*

The first of all is to acknowledge that the Lord is the Savior of the world, for without this acknowledgment no one can receive anything of truth and good from heaven. *Arcana Coelestia n. 10083*

**Tuesday, September 13**

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Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you." And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

*Matthew 9:29-30*

Moreover, by all "the blind" whom the Lord healed those were meant who are in ignorance, and who receive Him and are illustrated by Him through the Word; and in general all the Lord's miracles signify such things as are of heaven and the church, thus spiritual things; from this it is that His miracles were Divine, for it is Divine to act from firsts and to present these in ultimates. *Apocalypse Explained n. 239:21*

**Wednesday, September 14**

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After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees said, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons."

*Matthew 9:32-34*

For in hell those are called "demons" who are in the lust of falsifying truths, and this is done chiefly by reasonings; therefore "demons and demoniacs" signify in an abstract sense lusts and falsities, as can be seen from the passages in the Word where they are mentioned. *Apocalypse Explained n. 1001*

## Thursday, September 15

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“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. *Matthew 10:26-31*

All worship of God must needs begin with holy fear, within which is the thought that God will reward the good and punish the evil. The simple and little children must believe this, because they do not yet apprehend what permission is. *Arcana Coelestia n. 6071.5*

## Friday, September 16

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“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.”

*Matthew 10:32-33*

Frequent mention is made of the Father who is in the heavens, and there is then meant the Divine in heaven, thus the Good from which is heaven. Regarded in Itself the Divine is above the heavens; but the Divine in the heavens is the Good that is in the Truth that proceeds from the Divine. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8328*

## Saturday, September 17

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“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” *Matthew 10:40-42*

Those who love to do truth for the sake of truth, love the Lord, because truth is from the Lord, and the Lord causes it to become good through their willing and doing it, so that it becomes of the life with the man; for truth does not become of the life until it enters the will. *Arcana Coelestia n. 10683.4*

# KNOWLEDGE VERSUS LOVE

# 18 SEP

Rev. Sarah Buteux

## 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

## Message

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True story: there were once some missionaries in the Philippines who set up a croquet game in their front yard. Several of their Agta Negrito neighbors became interested and wanted to join the fun. The missionaries explained the game and started them each out with a mallet and a ball. As the game progressed, opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking that person’s ball out of the court. A missionary explained the procedure, but his advice only puzzled his Negrito friend.

“Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court?” he asked.

"So you will be the one to win!" a missionary said.

The short-statured man, clad only in a loincloth, shook his head in bewilderment. His "civilized" neighbor was suggesting something absurdly uncivil. Competition is generally ruled out in a hunting gathering society, where people survive not by competing with one another but by working together.

The game continued, but nobody followed the missionaries' advice. When a player successfully got through all the wickets, the game was not over for him. He went back and gave aid and advice to his fellows. As the final player moved toward the last wicket, the affair was still very much a team effort. And finally, when the last wicket was played, the "team" shouted happily, "We won!" "We won!" (*Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 123).

I think the apostle Paul would have appreciated this story. Today we read from his first letter to the Corinthians, one of the earliest Christian communities. In fact, back when this letter was written, I don't think the term "Christian" had even come into use. Paul had his work cut out for him with this group. They believed that Jesus was God incarnate and that he had lived and died that they might be saved, but beyond this, there was a lot of groundwork that needed to be laid before the people of Corinth would understand how best to live as a Christ-like community. In this first letter, Paul covers a number of practical situations: everything from what to do about a man who is living with his stepmother to how best to arrange one's hair when prophesying in church.

But in our passage Paul is trying to bring an end to the confusion around what they ought to do with food that had been sacrificed to idols. Back in first-century Corinth, religions abounded, and a traditional rite of most faiths involved the sacrifice of animals and other foods to the various gods and goddesses. But food sacrificed to idols was still food that could be eaten. Rules varied, and most likely the person who offered the sacrifice at a temple would not partake of the food, but after the rite, the officials of the temple might eat it—for in most traditions, including the Israelite one, the food offered to God was the food the priests lived on—but that food could also be sold in the general market to raise money to support the temple itself.

Apparently there were people in this young community who believed that food sacrificed to an idol was defiled and should not be touched. But Paul argues in this passage that idols cannot defile food

because idols represent gods that do not exist. There is only one God in Paul's mind, and that is the Lord. Therefore this food that is being sacrificed to idols is really food being sacrificed to nothing.

So Paul thinks the food can be eaten just like any other food. Nothing magical has taken place, no change has occurred; it is still just food. But, Paul stresses that just because he is enlightened enough to understand this, that doesn't mean everyone else is; and if a brother or sister in Christ were to see him eat such food and still in some way believed in the power or reality of these other gods, their conscience would become defiled. They would be confused. They would feel conflict that could become damaging to their faith. And Paul says that it is simply not worth the risk. He says, "Look, when it comes down to it, food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. But," he says, "take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak."

Which is to say: just because you know the truth, that doesn't mean you can act with impunity. Paul stresses to his friends in Corinth that they need to be very careful. His criterion for personal behavior is its effect on others. Determining how we should act in a given situation is not just a matter of knowing what is right or true or customary. We must always take into account how our actions will affect the life and growth of other people.

In the story I read about the missionaries and their croquet game, we see something of this rule in action. The missionaries knew the correct rules of croquet, but thankfully they did not impose them on their indigenous neighbors. They told them once, but then stepped back and observed their new friends acting in accordance with their understanding. The missionaries didn't take the mallets away and insist that they "play right or not at all." To do so would have been offensive; it would have subverted the cultural values of the Agta Negritos, and even though the missionaries might have properly understood the rules of croquet, the question would have hung in the air, "Right at what cost?" Our knowledge of food will not bring us any closer to God, nor will our knowledge of the rules of croquet. But how we use our knowledge in such situations, whether it is with an eye to being right or an eye to being considerate, will.

It is hard to think of really good modern examples that directly correspond to this dilemma, because we are talking about an act or belief that some people consider anathema but others regard as completely

benign. We will see what you think of my examples, some of which are more convincing than others, but my hope is that the basic principle will still be clear. And that principle is this: we need to respect each other and take others into account before we act, even if we already know we are right.

So, for example, if you were to visit a traditional Amish community, you wouldn't offer the kids in town a ride in your car. I don't believe there is anything inherently immoral about owning a car or utilizing modern technology in general, but the Amish do. They have built up and maintained a community dedicated to the worship of God, a community grounded in simplicity. They have deliberately chosen to avoid the use of electricity and other modern conveniences for theological reasons that I might not understand but should respect. To offer an Amish child a ride in my car would be disrespectful of the life that child's parents are striving to maintain, not to mention needlessly confusing for the young person.

Or we could look at the example of alcohol. Again, there is nothing inherently evil about alcohol, but for some people it can become a real problem that places their health at risk. If I am going to host a gathering at church, or even at home, I personally feel that I need to consider carefully whether having alcohol available puts others at risk. And I would certainly make sure there were other drinks available. The same principle is at work here in our church when we celebrate communion. For some people who have grown up taking wine as part of their communion celebration, grape juice just doesn't fit into their experience. In other churches, on the other hand, they refrain from using wine at all and stick solely to grape juice. Here at our church we offer white grape juice and red wine so people have an option. For me it is quite simply an issue of respect, a way that we as a church make room for one another's needs and experiences.

My favorite verse in this chapter reads, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." I couldn't have said it better myself. Knowledge is good, important, and something to strive for. I am as strong a proponent of good education as the next person, but knowledge without compassion is dangerous. Brilliant people who completely ignore the needs of those around them can be extremely harmful. Swedenborg, who himself is objectively recognized as one of the most intelligent men in the history of the world, said, "It is

no mark of intelligence to be able to prove whatever one pleases. But to be able to discern what is true as true and what is false as false—this is the mark and character of intelligence" (*True Christian Religion* 334). And he says elsewhere in his writings, "Teaching what is true without teaching what is good is like walking blind, since the good is what teaches and leads and the true is what is taught and led" (*Arcana Coelestia* 4844.4).

Knowledge will only get you so far, and knowledge can most certainly get you into trouble if you do not use it with an eye toward the welfare of others. It takes a brilliant mind to construct a nuclear weapon. It takes a loving mind to keep from using it. It takes equally skilled scientists to create biological weapons that can destroy a person and vaccines that can save a person, equally skilled politicians to draft foreign policy that will lead to peace or war. But in each of these cases, the question that ought to be asked is

*Is knowledge being used for purely selfish reasons, or is it being used with respect for the needs of others?*

this: is the knowledge being used to puff up the individual or build up all the people? Is knowledge being used for purely selfish reasons, or is it being used with respect for the needs of others?

If we bring it down to a more personal level we realize that we as individuals know a lot. We walk around every day loaded with information. But will we let our knowledge determine how we use our love, or will we let our love determine how we use our knowledge? Swedenborg says that, "As God's creation, we have been formed in such a way that we can be more closely joined with him, [but] we are joined not by knowledge alone, or intelligence alone, or even wisdom alone, but by living according to these" (*Divine Providence* 32-33). And we live by truth, knowledge, and wisdom, by filtering the information they provide through our love and willing it into being through acts of goodness.

Our lives here in twenty-first-century America may seem worlds away from first-century Corinth, but in our world today, just as in Corinth, we find ourselves working with people who have ideas and values very different from our own.

Our culture has become remarkably diverse, and there will always be people we disagree with, people we have trouble understanding, people who conduct themselves in ways that seem downright strange and unnecessary. But the fact that we don't think the same way about things as others do doesn't mean we can't find ways to conduct our own affairs in a respectful

manner. So even though I drink wine, I wouldn't drink it in front of my grandmother because, having lived all her life as a Conservative Baptist and teetotaler, she would find it offensive. I wouldn't offer a Jewish or Muslim friend bacon, nor would I push coffee on a Latter-Day Saint or meat on a vegetarian. Paul's message to his brothers and sisters in Corinth was simply this: let love and respect guide your actions and interactions, for ultimately love in the context of diversity will help us build a stronger foundation for our community than the pursuit of complete uniformity of belief.

We will never live in a world where we all agree, and that's a good thing. But it also provides us with a challenge to let love inform our knowledge before we act, to let respect for our neighbor be a factor in our decision making, and to exercise some humility and peace-making skills by letting others act in accordance with their conscience, even if we don't quite understand where they are coming from. Rather than puff ourselves up with that feeling of once again being right, let us build one another up with a love that is willing to take the ways of others into account.

## Daily Meditations

### Monday, September 19

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah.

*Jeremiah 30:2&3a*

It is plain also from reason that the regenerate man has a new will and a new understanding; for these two faculties constitute man, and it is these that are regenerated; therefore, every man's true character is determined by them. He is a bad man if his will is bad, and still worse if his understanding favors it.

*True Christian Religion n. 601*

### Tuesday, September 20

On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will break the yoke from off his neck, and I will burst his bonds, and strangers shall no more make a servant of him.

*Jeremiah 30:8*

On the other hand, he is a good man if his will is good, and still better if his understanding favors it. Religion alone renews and regenerates man, for religion occupies the highest place in the human mind, and sees beneath itself the civil matters that pertain to the world. *Ibid.*

### Wednesday, September 21

But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, says the Lord, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity.

*Jeremiah 30:10*

It needs to be known that a person as regards his understanding can rise almost into the light enjoyed by the angels of heaven. But if he does not also rise as regards his will, he is still the old person, not a new one. *True Christian Religion n. 602*

### Thursday, September 22

Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid.

For I am with you, says the Lord, to save you; I will make an end of all the nations among which I scattered you, but of you I will not make an end.

*Jeremiah 30:10b-11*

Regeneration, therefore, is primarily a matter of the will, secondarily of the understanding. For a person's understanding resembles light in the world, his will heat there. *Ibid.*

### Friday, September 23

Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is no one to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you.

*Jeremiah 30:12&13*

In respect of the lower region of the mind the understanding really is enlightened by the light of the world, but in respect of the upper region by the light of heaven. *Ibid.*

### Saturday, September 24

All your lovers have forgotten you; they care nothing for you; for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe, because your guilt is great, because your sins are so numerous. *Jeremiah 30:14*

Therefore unless the will is raised from the lower region to the upper and is there linked to the understanding, it remains in the world. *Ibid.*

# WHEN ALL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER—EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL

Mr. William Lee

## Matthew 15:1-11

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Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

## Message

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Today I want to challenge you to see things from a new point of view, to view life through a different lens. Let's take our mental blinders off and look at God's works from a different point of view. Let's take a moment, break out of our daily rituals, and look for the beauty in God's creation. Let's stop and smell the roses.

What does it mean for everything to "look like a nail?" By this image, I mean several things. First, we all have our ideas of how things work and our own experiences of how things are done. This concept is often referred to as "memory-knowledges" in translations of Swedenborg. Elliot, however, uses the term "facts" in his 1983 translation of *Arcana Coelestia*. I, coming from the computer programming world, prefer to refer to this concept as our "mental model." Whatever you call it, such a perspective is not necessarily bad. After all, it guides us through our day from situation to situation. If we had no concept of how the world worked, our day would be stressful, indeed.

Imagine what would happen if you had no experiences or expectations of your day-to-day world. You would not know that turning the steering wheel of your car would turn your front wheels, which turns your car. You would not know that the apple falling from the tree would hit you on the head. You would not know that the sun rises every morning. From the moment we wake to the moment we close our eyes at night, our mental model helps us get through life.

Where this breaks down is when we encounter something outside our experience or a situation whose *correct* solution is outside of our experience, or when we are searching for something that our experiences cannot help us find.

Have you learned a foreign language? I have learned a couple myself, and I have always agreed with my teachers when they have said that the very words available in a language shape the mental models of the speakers of that language. Let's take an example from English, a language we all (presumably, since you are reading this!) know. Many years ago, I had a suitemate from Miami. He had never seen snow before, and during our first heavy snowfall—in Ithaca, New York, heavy snow happens depressingly frequently—he said, "It's really pouring out."

What's wrong with this statement? Well, those of us from the north know that snow does not "pour," it falls. My friend from Miami was trying to fit snowfall into his experience and mental model of rainfall, whereas our northern experiences categorize snow differently from rain.

Another example is the claim that something like seventeen different Inuit words exist for "snow." Whether or not this factoid is actually true, I know that there are different types of snow. When we were first married, my lovely wife did not believe that I could tell the temperature outside by the sound of the snow. Growing up in Minnesota and having to walk a mile to school (uphill both ways!), I can tell you that if the snow sounds like Styrofoam when you walk on it, the temperature is below zero. But people from southern New England apparently cannot even imagine this concept, because it falls outside their experience.

The second meaning possible for the saying that "everything looks like a nail" is the possession of a closed mind. In such a case, we have our mental blinders on. Anything that does not fit our mental model is rejected. When our mind is closed, we

cannot see; we cannot even see what is in front of us. Swedenborg wrote that

All this shows how sensually people are thinking when they say that nature exists in its own right, how reliant they are on their physical senses and their darkness in matters of the spirit. They are thinking from the eye and are unable to think from the understanding. Thinking from the eye closes understanding, but thinking from understanding opens the eye. They are unable to entertain any thought about inherent reality and manifestation, any thought that it is eternal, uncreated, and infinite. They can entertain no thought about life except as something volatile that vanishes into thin air, no other thought about love and wisdom, and no thought whatever about the fact that they are the source of everything in nature. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 46)

So, for example, the other night I was out observing (by which I mean I was out with my telescope) and had a small—and non-smelly—encounter with skunk ambling across my back yard. He was about ten feet away. After we regarded each other for about ten seconds, he continued on his journey. Then, last Saturday, I was again out observing when in rolled the clouds. After packing my gear away, I was heading for the back door of my house when I heard a scratching sound. Another skunk. Finally, last Sunday night, I was out again. By this time, I naturally had skunks on my mind. So when I heard a rustling in the yard and saw two beady eyes, I “saw” a skunk. It turned out to be the neighborhood black cat. But the cat didn’t fit my mental model, so what I saw was a skunk.

The third meaning of the saying has to do with executing rites without regard for the underlying meaning of the rites—that is, repeating a ritual merely to repeat the ritual, making it devoid of meaning. As St. Matthew wrote:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” . . . Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”<sup>2</sup>

Which, as Swedenborg points out, is blind faith in rituals:

If religion teaches a blind faith, it blinds our discernment just the way ignorance does. It is then teaching a false theology; for just as truths open our discernment, falsities close it. They close it from above but open it downward; and discernment that is open only downward cannot see truths. All it can do is justify whatever it wants to, especially anything false. (*Divine Providence* 144)

Every day I go through the same mindless ritual: coffee, shower, drive to the train station, ride into Boston, work, ride back from Boston, drive from the train station, catch the news, have dinner. Don’t I lead a boring life? What I’m challenging myself—and you—to do is to break that ritual. Stop and look at God’s work that is all around us. When it rains, don’t blindly complain about the rain. See how the rains feed our verdant landscape; “April showers bring May flowers.” When I see a skunk, instead of seeing a potentially stinky outcome, I should see a magnificent creature, ambling along in its own majesty, perfectly created for what it does.

I hope that I have challenged you to take a break from your everyday rituals and stop, think, and look around yourself with a new eye, an open mind; to see the Lord’s creations with a new light; to look upon our amazing universe with the wonder of a child.

Amen.

*Our mental model helps us get through life. But this breaks down when we encounter something outside our experience or a situation whose correct solution is outside of our experience.*

## Prayers

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No matter how long you might stay at the spring, you would always be beginning to see the water. For the water never stops flowing, and it is always beginning to bubble up again. It is the same with one who fixes his gaze on the infinite beauty of God. It is constantly being discovered anew, and it is always seen as something new and strange in comparison with what the mind has always understood. And as God continues to reveal himself, man continues to wonder . . .

- Gregory of Nyssa (c. 337-395)

When I found truth, there I found my God who is the truth. And there since the time I learned thee, thou abidest in my memory; and there I find thee, whensoever I call thee to remembrance, and delight in thee.

- St. Augustine (354-430)

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## Monday, September 26

Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured, and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity; those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey. *Jeremiah 30:16*

The human mind is divided into three regions. The lowest is called the natural, the middle the spiritual, the highest the celestial. Regeneration has the effect of raising a person from the lowest or natural region to the higher or spiritual one, and through this to the celestial one. *True Christian Religion n. 603*

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## Tuesday, September 27

For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal. *Jeremiah 30:17*

This then is why a person who is not regenerated is called natural, and one who is regenerated is called spiritual. It is obvious from this that the mind of a regenerated person is raised to the spiritual region, and from its higher position there it can see what is going on in the lower or natural mind. *Ibid.*

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## Wednesday, September 28

Thus says the Lord: I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the citadel set on its rightful site. *Jeremiah 30:18*

The existence of a lower and a higher region of the mind can be seen and acknowledged by anyone who pays the slightest attention to his own thoughts. For he can see what he is thinking, so he says that he thought or thinks this or that. This would be impossible if there were no interior thought, called perception, which looks down to the lower level called thought. *Ibid.*

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## Thursday, September 29

Out of them shall come thanksgiving, and the sound of merrymakers. I will make them many, and they shall not be few; I will make them honoured, and they shall not be disdained. *Jeremiah 30:19*

As for the new will, this stands above the old one in the spiritual region; and likewise the new understanding, which is with the will, and the will is with it, They are linked in that region and jointly look into the old or natural one, so arranging everything there as to be obedient. *True Christian Religion n. 604*

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## Friday, September 30

Their children shall be as of old, their congregation shall be established before me; and I will punish all who oppress them. *Jeremiah 30:20*

Can anyone fail to see that if the human mind had only one region, and what is evil and what is good, together with falsities and truths, were put together and mixed up there, there would be a conflict, as if wolves and sheep were put together into one cage, or tigers and calves, or hawks and doves? *Ibid.*

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## Saturday, October 1

Their prince shall be one of their own, their ruler shall come from their midst; I will bring him near, and he shall approach me, for who would otherwise dare to approach me? says the Lord.

And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

*Jeremiah 30:21-22*

For this reason provision has been made that what is good together with the relevant truths should be gathered into the upper region, where they can be kept safe, repelling the attacks of and subduing by chains and other means evils and the relevant falsities, finally dispersing them. *Ibid.*

# OCT 2 DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Rev. Kathy Speas

## John 5:1-9

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After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

## Message

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This Bible—this bizarre, motley collection of visions and dreams, songs and tall tales—still has some enduring power (in spite of how it’s been used so destructively over the ages) because there are many different ways we can hold it up to the light.

This story—do you remember it, have you heard it before? It’s one of the many miracle-healing stories. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell stories about Jesus basically to confirm believers’ faith and to sell people around the world on the concept of Christianity. John (the latest gospel, written in about A.D. 80 or 90) explores the mystical, cosmic, spiritual nature of Jesus, one about whom people not only asked “Who are you?” but “What are you?” Scholars agree that John’s was not a historical report, but as the Native American sage commented when asked whether he really believed the rich, complex nature-based imagery of his tribe’s creation story, “It probably didn’t really happen just that way, but as you can see, it’s true.”

I first learned about the Bible from Sunday school as a morality tale. You read the Bible stories, identified the good guys and the bad guys, and were strongly encouraged to show your good-guy self and get rid

of—or at least hide—your bad-guy self. This particular story was Jesus telling you to get off your duff and pull yourself up by your bootstraps. In some versions of this story, an angel came occasionally and stirred up the water, and whoever was first got healed, and everybody else was out of luck. God helps those who help themselves, and Jesus has no use for people who lie around feeling sorry for themselves. My mother would say, “Take up your bed and walk” to get me out of bed on a Saturday morning. Be productive! Be the first one out there! No excuses! And by implication, if people are helpless, vulnerable, suffering, why, it must be because they haven’t taken that first step, they just won’t take up their beds and walk, they’re just not winners.

I don’t know about you, but I get little spiritual growth out of someone badgering me to be a better person. I know I eat too much, I know I get impatient, I know I can be judgmental. Somebody telling me, “Just shut the refrigerator door; just calm down; why don’t you just be a little bit nicer?” is not helpful. It makes me feel even worse. And the assumptions about the vulnerable in our world and the value of being first—it stuck in my craw in Sunday school, and it sure doesn’t sound like the Word of God to me today.

There *is* another lens through which we can look at the Bible. This is not to say that the guidance the Bible gives us about how to behave in the world is wrong, or that there is no value in taking whatever steps we can to move toward healing and wholeness. But there’s more in this story.

The eighteenth-century scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg suggests that we can understand the images in the Bible in much the same way as we might interpret a dream, in much the same way that Jung understood archetypes (Jung read a lot of Swedenborg), as symbolic expressions of different facets of human spiritual experience. Images in the Bible, like those in dreams or mythology, have layer upon layer of meaning. In dream interpretation, you revisit a dream, go back into it, experience the power of the symbols and archetypes expressed by your unconscious or your spiritual self. What happens if we do that with this Bible story?

When I step back into this scene, I’m reminded of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, at the Atlanta train station, stepping over the wounded soldiers. The camera pans back. It’s wounded men as far as the eye can see, lying on the railroad tracks, moaning. I see Jesus stepping through all these people and finding this guy who had been there for thirty-eight years.

What did he look like? Who would he be in our world? The Vietnam vet on the corner, holding a bottle in a paper bag? A disabled man, alone, with no one to care for him, who can't get a health insurance because he's sick? I get this image of someone who is stuck. Not bleeding, desperate, evil-demon-possessed, not doomed, just stuck.

What are those parts of ourselves, those times in our lives, when we've been trapped, in a jam? We have a lot of symbolic images in our language for this. "In a sling." "Between a rock and a hard place." "Up the creek without a paddle." "Between the devil and the deep blue sea." When have you been there? Would there be this much rich imagery in our language if it were so easy just to get up and walk out of things?

Swedenborg has this idea that the bed, the mat, is an image of beliefs we hold, assumptions we have about how the world is, what we think about how things should be—the mental framework we rest on.

In this story, Jesus turns this fellow's assumptions about healing upside down. The man thought he had to get to the Bethesda pool. He thought somebody would have to carry him. He thought that healing only came at the random times when the water was stirred. He thought that an angel stirred the water. Where did he get these ideas?

Jesus also radically thumbed his nose at the religious establishment, who said, "God doesn't want you to carry anything on the Sabbath," and "Associating with sick, unclean people makes you unclean yourself." Jesus didn't have to be so in-your-face about it. I mean, the guy had been lying there for thirty-eight years; one more day wasn't going to matter. Jesus had some nerve! And during a festival, no less, when all the high religious muckety-mucks were likely to be watching.

So maybe this is not just an image urging us to take more initiative. Maybe it's also an image of how our assumptions, beliefs, and opinions can get us stuck. What gets us stuck? Is it always our circumstances? What happens to us? Or do we get stuck when we need to be right, when we think others should see the truth as we see it? No, we insist, *this* is how you be a good wife/husband/parent; *this* is what women are supposed to do, how men are supposed to act; *this* is what a good Christian is, a good patriot, not *that*. Here's one I tie myself up in all the time: "I will not let go of that insult, because I was right and they were wrong." Last week, Tim Boeve spoke of "solidifying,

calcifying beliefs" about love, and used the image of the stiffness in his cast-bound broken wrist as it healed to express how he became stuck in narrow beliefs about love.

I see a lot of people stuck in particular ideas about how to cope with a terminal illness, how to grieve. "I should be strong and not cry, and if I do break down, God forbid anyone should see me." "I should keep busy so I don't ever think about my loss." "If I were a good enough Christian, God would take this illness away from me." "I need to take care of others, not allow them to take care of me." And my all-time favorite, "I can do this alone, and I don't need any help."

Where do these ideas come from? We learn how to frame the world through our culture, our religious establishments, our family histories, our time and place—all the things Jesus overturned. It is the sea in which we unconsciously swim. We're not aware of it. It is the bed that supports us, the ocean of ideas in which our spirits rest.

*It sometimes takes love embodied, mercy made visible, to get us to think outside the box. . . . Mercy trumps belief.*

So Jesus comes along, doesn't even touch this guy or say, "Your faith has made you whole" or anything, and bam! he's wandering off into the sunset. It sometimes takes love embodied, mercy made visible, to get us to think outside of the box—or off of the bed, in this case.

What's gotten you unstuck? When you've been bogged down, what has come along to sweep you back into the river? When I look back, for me it's been people who believed in me when there wasn't much to go on, people who didn't give up on me, even when I'd given up on myself. Just like Jesus in this story. Jesus healed this guy who didn't even know who He was; in fact, the guy goes on to rat Jesus out for healing him on the Sabbath. It wasn't his faith or his conversion or his efforts to touch Jesus that healed him. He was healed despite himself—just like I've been sometimes.

Wow. I'm not wondering, "How can I get up and walk out of my stuck place?" I'm wondering, "How can I love like that?"

As poet Wendell Berry comments, "It is not from ourselves that we learn to be better people than we are. It is maybe when we no longer know what to do that we have come to our real work, when we no longer know which way to go that we begin our real journey." We never know when or how Love Incarnate will free us from ourselves and open up

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# Daily Meditations

new possibilities we never even considered. We never know when we ourselves might be that love light to someone else.

One of the greatest opportunities I've had to be shaken off the bed of my neat little opinions about theology and religion has been in working with other clergy and other churches in my ministry as a hospice chaplain. I've experienced the peace that passes all understanding with ministers whose ideas about heaven and hell would get me into a shouting match. It's been wonderful. It's taught me to be a better person, to share spiritual support at the end of a person's life alongside colleagues whose beliefs about Jesus are closer to Mel Gibson's than to my own. And spending time with people who are approaching death, changing into whatever it is that comes next, I move in a world where beliefs have faded but love remains strong. Our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, theologies, doctrines—they change over a lifetime and eventually diminish. For some of us, they vanish completely. What remains is love, connection, allowing ourselves to be open to receiving as well as giving. It's peace, hope, devotion. God is what endures.

So here's an image of Jesus, not telling us (because telling people to do something never works), but showing us, not how to get up and walk like the healed guy, but how to love in ways that take us beyond the bounds of the beds of our comfortable mental spaces. He shows us that mercy trumps belief, in the rock/paper/scissors way of looking at things. Here you are, given this timeless, mythological, archetypal image of how love and truth can wake us up and get us on our feet like nothing else can. Amen.

## Prayer

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O Holy Spirit,

Giver of light and life,

Impart to us thoughts higher than our own thoughts,

And prayers better than our own prayers,

And powers beyond our own powers,

That we may spend and be spent

In the ways of love and goodness,

After the perfect image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- Eric Milner-White (1884-1964)

and G. W. Briggs (1875-1959)

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## Monday, October 3

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You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The base and the shaft of the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its cups, its calyxes, and its petals shall be of one piece with it; *Exodus 25:31*

If the affection of love is withdrawn, thought is instantly extinguished; for affection is the very life or soul of thought. All the affection that is of love is of good, and all the thought from it is of truth.

*Arcana Coelestia n. 9550*

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## Tuesday, October 4

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And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; *Exodus 25:32*

The commandments of the Decalogue were the firstfruits of the Word and therefore the firstfruits of the church about to be established, and as they were in a brief summary the complex of all things of religion, whereby there is a conjunction of God with man and of man with God, they were so holy that nothing could be holier. *True Christian Religion n. 283*

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## Wednesday, October 5

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Three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on one branch, and three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. *Exodus 25:33*

We can get some idea that love is our life from the warmth of the sun in our world. We know this warmth acts like the life shared by all earth's plants because when it increases in the spring, plants of all kinds sprout from the soil. They dress themselves in their leafy finery and then in their blossoms and eventually in fruit. *Divine Love and Wisdom n. 3*

**Thursday, October 6**

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On the lampstand itself there shall be four cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with its calyxes and petals. There shall be a calyx of one piece with it under the first pair of branches, a calyx of one piece with it under the next pair of branches, and a calyx of one piece with it under the last pair of branches—so for the six branches that go out of the lampstand.

*Exodus 25:34-35*

Good deeds done from God, and from self, may be compared with gold. Gold which is gold from its inmost and is called pure gold, is good gold; gold alloyed with silver is also gold, but it is good according to the alloy; while gold alloyed with copper is less good.

*Doctrine of Life n. 10*

**Friday, October 7**

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Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it one hammered piece of pure gold. You shall make the seven lamps for it; and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. *Exodus 25:36-37*

That regeneration is impossible without the truths by which faith is formed, may be illustrated by the following comparisons. It is as impossible as a human mind without understanding; for the understanding is formed by means of truths, and therefore teaches what ought to be believed and what ought to be done, what regeneration is, and how it is effected. Regeneration without truths is as impossible as the vivification of animals or the growth of trees without light from the sun; for if the sun did not give light at the same time that it gives heat, it would become “like sackcloth of hair”, and thus mere darkness would be upon the earth. *True Christian Religion n. 620*

**Saturday, October 8**

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Its snuffers and trays shall be of pure gold. It, and all these utensils, shall be made from a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

*Exodus 25:38-39*

While the internal or spiritual man is in the body, it thinks in the natural, and sets forth or utters its thoughts in the corporeal; and it also wills in the natural, and does what it wills in the corporeal; and therefore the evacuators and cleansers are there.

*Arcana Coelestia n. 9573*

## BURIED TREASURE

Rev. Julian Duckworth

9 OCT

**Matthew 13:31-35, 44-52**

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He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

**Heaven and Hell 401**

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When we love the Lord and love our neighbor we are not going to feel much of an open delight about them while we live in this world. What we will have instead is a general kind of blessing that can hardly be described because it is there deep down in our being and covered over by physical things and dulled by the cares of such a life. However, after we die everything changes. That obscure delight and that almost imperceptible blessing of loving the Lord and loving our neighbor come right out into the open in every way, and what was hidden and unrecognized becomes our whole sensation, as it were, because it was the delight of our spirit and we are now in our spirit.

## Message

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*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)*

There are times when I can get very dismal about this life that you and I are in at the moment. These backs of ours, which used to let us run like the wind and take two stairs at a time, now ache if we're in one position for too long. Our minds, which used to catch every thought like a butterfly, can't work out why we went into the kitchen for something—what on earth was it? Our dear friends are dwindling one by one, like a fire going out, and you have to get up on Thursdays but you're not sure what for. You know what I mean. Dismal stuff! Somebody once described the situation as being like a wet Sunday afternoon in Manchester.

However, I must not depress you. After all, as they say, "It's all about attitude." Always look on the bright side of life. There is always someone worse off than yourself, of course. This is true, but somehow, even though we snatch eagerly at that idea as a tonic, it doesn't help. It only makes things worse, because if that's the case, someone else is coping it more than I am, and that's just too awful to contemplate.

Something is obviously missing in this morbid view of things. What on earth is it? I can't find it physically and I can't find it by telling myself to pull my socks up. And yet, there's something there, I know. I know because I can occasionally feel it's there, but I couldn't tell you what it is to save my life. I can just about describe what it is like—it's like a breeze that almost isn't there, but it is; it's like something stirring deep down or even a kind of yearning. It comes and goes so quickly!

Oh, here's what it is. If you watch one of those really good BBC dramas on television, like *Vanity Fair* or *Cranford*, and the young man falls in love with the bullying mayor's pretty daughter and they manage to have two minutes alone to blush and falter, that's it. That's absolutely it! You could cry, it's so beautiful. You feel your whole life has been worth it just to witness those two lovers in those two minutes because what they are is what life is and can be. And then the credits roll and you'll just have to wait a whole miserable but wonderful week for the next part.

And here's what it is again. Someone is telling you about this and that, and right in the middle of a sentence they come out with an absolute gem of a thought. Perhaps they say, "You know, some things

are best left undisturbed . . .," and they move on to more stuff, but you don't move on with them. This "undisturbed" image hits you like a bullet, and it seems to connect with a lot of where you are in yourself. Maybe you are disturbing a lot at the moment and it would be better to leave well enough alone, and someone mentioned it and it all got clear.

OK. You have your own versions of this phenomenon, of course, but it is like finding treasure. That is actually the big biblical word for it—treasure. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden"—notice that, hidden!—"in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy"—notice that, too!—"for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

What I would urge you to observe immediately are the huge dynamics in that one little verse. Let's just spell them out to be absolutely sure. "The kingdom of heaven," Jesus calls it. The kingdom of heaven is a grasp of life, of existence, in which everything is right, full, perfect, and as it should be because it is exactly that. There are no discrepancies, no ifs and buts, no dampeners. And this kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. That's just magnificent. On the surface, life looks like a pretty dull, plain, ordinary ploughed field, and there you are, walking over it with your wellingtons on because it's been raining and it's muddy and you're clumping around on a wet Sunday afternoon not far outside of Manchester and all the while, unknown to you, there is treasure hidden in this ghastly field.

Let's keep going, though. Just as you are wishing you weren't there because it's raining again, you dislodge this clod and you notice a bit of white underneath. A corner . . . an edge . . . what is this? Down you go in the teeming rain, which suddenly doesn't matter very much, and you unearth this small white box, which strangely doesn't have one speck of mud on it. You open it up and gaze in astonishment at what's inside. Now, I'm not going to tell you what's inside; that's for you to see for yourself. I'm just going to let the credits roll on the image and suggest that while what you see is utterly fabulous and of untold wealth, it is not gold, nor silver, nor diamonds. It's something else. I will leave you gazing at it.

Episode Two. The Acquisition. There you are, gazing into the box. What will you do? You know very well that if this were a stash of hundred-dollar bills, we wouldn't see you for dust. Finders keepers! But it isn't. And you have found it, seen it, desired it, this treasure, but it isn't yours. It is just there, in someone else's field, of course. In its own way it is obviously

there for anyone who comes across it, because we all tramp across the muddy paddocks of life.

So, decision made, you act. You put it back where you found it, and quickly replace the clod. No one else knows it, but you know that this ordinary field is still ordinary yet now plus treasure. This field is unbelievably different from what it seemed to be when you first set a squelchy foot on it. It will never be the same again, as far as you are concerned.

I'm sure you are following all this BBC drama, but it's probably important just to take stock for a moment before we reach the climax. Jesus told seven parables of the kingdom in this same chapter, and after two of them—two of the bigger ones, the Sower and the Wheat and Tares—he explained what everything meant to his disciples, who may have been left guessing. He said, "The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, and the tares are the sons of the wicked one" (Matthew 13:38). You are certainly not left guessing with that approach!

So, while Jesus didn't do that for the parable about the treasure hidden in a field, let's have a go. The field is the world, or, if you like, it's what the world or life often looks like to us. You need your wellingtons. The treasure hidden in the field is the sense, the discovery, that there is a meaning and purpose to this life, but you didn't know about it until you came across it.

Oh, I left something out. The man is you, of course, but more specifically it's the deeper part of you that has always thought that there is more to life than meets the eye, which is why you are traipsing across the field in the first place rather than going round it so as not to get muddy.

Now here's the really important bit. The decision to rebury the treasure back where you found it and not take it away with you is the critical point: the treasure belongs in the field and must stay right there. Nobody dropped it or left it. It has always been there in the field. Once you didn't know that, but now you do know that. This field has its own buried treasure.

That explanation makes the rest of the parable really easy. Full of joy, the man goes off and sells all that he has and buys that field. The only thing that matters is getting that field, even though that field is such a muddy squelchy mess. His friends probably think he's crazy. But we know better. He sells his wellingtons and his weekly train pass to Manchester, but he also sells so much more—his gloom and pessimism, his diary of woes and life's unanswerable questions—and he puts all the things he has acquired over the years that he thought would do the trick and

make him content—his signed cricket bat, his entire Frank Sinatra CD collection—he puts them all on eBay and just gets rid of everything.

And would you believe it? He has just the exact amount of money needed to buy that field. No more, no less. That's actually all he has. He buys the field and pays up, and so now all he has is this field, but his joy is unspeakable. He owns the field. Or perhaps we should say he has "owned" the field in which he knows the treasure lies, unseen but for sure.

We don't have to die before this can happen to us. We just have to sell all that we have so as to own that field. Amen.

## Prayers

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O God, emptied of all but love,  
Humbled, vulnerable, self-giving, selfless,  
Give us such courage that we may risk ourselves;  
Give us such strength that self may be weakened;  
Give us such confidence that self may be given;  
Give us such love that self may be found;  
Give us such joy that we may be lost  
In wonder, love, and praise.

- Mark Wakelin

Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, who has given us not only eyes to see, but minds to understand, the marvels of your works; to search out your secrets, and to discover your hidden treasures: quicken our conscience, we pray, as you enlighten our understanding; and grant that in heart as in mind we become daily more perfect; even as our Father in heaven is perfect; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- from Daily Prayer, 1941

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 light;  
as the deer yearns for clear spring water  
so my soul yearns for your truth.

- adapted from St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, October 10

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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; *Psalm 1:1*

Everyone is capable of knowing that when we leave our outer or natural person we enter our inner or spiritual one; so we can also know that heavenly pleasure is an inner and spiritual pleasure and not an outer or natural one. Since it is inner and spiritual, it is purer and finer and moves our deeper levels, the levels of our soul or spirit. *Heaven and Hell n. 395*

## Tuesday, October 11

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but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. *Psalm 1:2*

We may also conclude from this that the quality of our pleasure follows from the quality of the pleasure of our spirit, and that the pleasures of our bodies, called “the pleasures of the flesh,” have nothing to do with heaven by comparison. Whatever is in our spirit when we leave the body remains with us after death, for we then live as human spirits. *Ibid.*

## Wednesday, October 12

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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*

All pleasures flow from love, because what we love we feel as pleasant. There is no other source of any pleasure. It follows, then, that the quality of the love determines the quality of the pleasure.

*Heaven and Hell n. 396*

## Thursday, October 13

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The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. *Psalm 1:4*

Pleasures of the body or of the flesh flow from love for ourselves and from love of the world, and these are also the source of our urges and their gratifications. The pleasures of the soul or spirit, though, all flow from love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, which are also the source of affections for what is good and true and of our deeper bliss. *Ibid.*

## Friday, October 14

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Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; *Psalm 1:5*

To the extent that the two loves of the world are accepted and affect us, though, our outer levels, levels of the body or the flesh, are opened; and they look away from heaven toward the world. As loves flow in and are accepted, so their pleasures flow in, pleasures of heaven into our deeper natures and pleasures of the world into our outer natures, because as already noted all pleasure comes from love. *Ibid.*

## Saturday, October 15

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for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. *Psalm 1:6*

By its very nature, heaven is full of pleasures, even to the point that if we see it as it really is, it is nothing but bliss and pleasure. This is because the divine good that emanates from the Lord’s divine love constitutes heaven both overall and in detail for everyone there; and divine love is the intent that everyone should be saved and should be most profoundly and fully happy. This is why it is all the same whether you say “heaven” or “heavenly joy.” *Heaven and Hell n. 397*

# THE DEEPER TRUTH

Rev. Eric Hoffman

## Isaiah 62:1-5

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For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

## John 2: 1-11

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On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

## Message

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Given how full of beauty this world that surrounds us is, it is a wonder that anyone could forget that God is present in our lives in the most loving way. On the other hand, it's not so hard to believe, with all of the injustices and stress and tragedies we have to contend with. I think everyone gets overwhelmed from time to time, and angry and depressed over things that happen. God's glory is not always obvious to us. Sometimes it takes quite a bit of reflection to recognize God's providence in the events of our lives.

I believe life is meant to be this way—filled with things to make us stop and think, accented with challenges that push us to our limits and encourage us to find new ways of thinking and coping. Consider what life would be like if the answer to every problem was simply handed to us on a silver platter—if the key to every puzzle were given without our ever having to expend any effort at all. Actually, there's a part of me that doesn't think that sounds all that terrible, but providing easy answers to the difficult questions would not be an act of love on God's part because it would interfere with our spiritual freedom to choose our own way in life, and exercising that choice is what teaches us better than anything. Freedom of choice is what powers our development as spiritual entities. Getting there may not always seem like half the fun, but it is the point of our existence. I think this is especially true of the Word.

Before I explain that any further, I'd like to lay a little Swedenborg on you for the sake of clarification. The tome that we find sitting on our altar is a Bible, otherwise known as "Scripture." It is composed of paper upon which is printed, in ink, words, which were written and compiled by human beings over the course of several centuries.

"The Word" is something deeper. The Word is nothing less than divine truth expressed in love, and it has been in existence for eternity. The Bible is our clearest expression of the Word, and for that reason deserves our respect, but it is important to remember that a Bible is the Word in the same way that a picture of a cube is a cube. We've all seen two-dimensional representations of a cube that we can refer to as a cube, but which nonetheless fall one dimension short of being an actual cube. In much the same way, the Bible is a lower or more concrete expression of a higher reality and a deeper truth. Swedenborg maintained that even though the Bible has been rewritten and reorganized many times throughout history, the Word has remained present in it so that

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we can discern and receive it. However, hearing the deeper truths is not always easy.

For example, let's take a look at how Swedenborg uncovered deeper meaning in the story of the wedding feast at Cana. This is how Anita Dole sums up the story in her *Bible Study Notes*:

*The scene was in Galilee, symbol of the plane of outward conduct, and the place was Cana. Cana means "reedy." Reeds are the symbol of the simplest and most elementary truths. There was a marriage in Cana of Galilee, and the Lord, His disciples, and Mary were invited. Marriage always pictures the union of good and truth—a time when our desire and our understanding agree as to what we are to do. So this scene pictures a person who wants to do right in his outward life and has learned and obeyed at least the simple precepts of the Word, and who recognizes the Lord and wants His presence. The disciples here picture the means by which the Lord reaches out into the various fields of thought and desire in us, and Mary pictures the church. These were all present at the wedding. And there were six waterpots and plenty of water to fill them all to the brim. The waterpots, like all containers in the Word, picture general doctrines we have in our minds, and six pictures the orderly steps in the development of a good life—we may here go back in our minds to the six days of creation. The water is the truths with which these doctrines may be filled if we apply ourselves to studying them as the Lord commands us to do. The Lord's words to Mary, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" are not a rebuke or a refusal. A more literal translation of the Greek is "Woman, what [belongs] to me and to thee?" The Lord was merely pointing out that the power he exercised did not come from the heredity He assumed through Mary.*

*The Lord gave two commands: "Fill the waterpots with water," and "Draw out now." We are not to be satisfied with merely knowing our doctrines in a general way; we are to learn all the truth we can possibly "hold." And then we are to use this truth in our lives and to do our best to give it to others. And it is in this drawing out that the "water" is turned into the best "wine"—spiritual truth which will delight our souls more than anything we have tasted before. (vol. 6, pp. 23-24)*

Does this make sense to anyone? Does it reveal something to you that you hadn't seen before? If it does, that's fantastic! Go out and use this new insight in the context of your own life. If it doesn't or if you disagree with what you've heard, that's fine, too. Read the story again and reflect on what it communicates to you. The whole idea is to look deeper than the literal sense of the words on the page and be inspired by the deeper truths. Knowing the Bible stories is great, but the Bible doesn't become the Word until we receive and apply the deeper truths, whatever they may be.

And remember, those inspirations may not come easily, but don't let that discourage you from trying, because some of them might. It is within every person's ability to receive the Word, not only from the Bible, but also from all the beauty of the earth around us, for the Word is written throughout creation just waiting to be recognized and appreciated. If we can just get past the chaos and the hardships and reclaim our natural enthusiasm in the face of life's challenges, we will be rewarded—we will become enlightened. The Lord has seen to that. Amen.

### **Prayer**

Your Word, O God, is eternal, and it fills this world with beauty. As we gather in this place, we pray that you will always lift us to your heart and inspire us with your spirit, as you have inspired the psalmists and the prophets. In weakness they were made strong, in sorrow they found solace, in health they were not dismayed. We pray that you will give us similar insights and understanding, even and especially in the dark night of our soul.

Open our eyes so that we may read your newer Word, and let our hearts be present and involved in the issues and events of our time, so that we may learn from them what we need to know. Speak to your people, O Lord, a living Word, so that its music shall touch with hope and joy each secret sorrow of the earth and we may be enlightened by your ever present glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

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# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, October 17

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The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'" *John 1:29-30*

As innocence is the primary thing in the Lord's kingdom, and is the celestial itself there, and as the sacrifices and burnt-offerings represented the spiritual and celestial things of the Lord's kingdom, therefore the very essential of the Lord's kingdom is innocence.

*Arcana Coelestia n. 3994.7*

## Tuesday, October 18

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"I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

*John 1:31-32*

Doves often appear in heaven; and whenever they appear the angels know that they are correspondences of the affections and the consequent thoughts concerning regeneration and purification of some who are near by; therefore as soon as these are approached and are spoken to about some other subject than was in their thoughts when that appearance took place the doves instantly vanish. *True Christian Religion n. 144*

## Wednesday, October 19

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"I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." *John 1:33-34*

Washings were instituted in the ancient churches, and afterwards baptisms in their place, which nevertheless are only representative and significative rites, in order that heaven might be conjoined with the human race, and in particular with the man of the church; for heaven is conjoined to man when man is in ultimates, that is, in such things as are in the world in regard to his natural man, while he is in such things as are in heaven in regard to his spiritual man; in no other way is conjunction possible.

*Apocalypse Explained n. 475.22*

## Thursday, October 20

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Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" *John 3:5-7*

All reason shows that man must be regenerated, for he is born into evils of every kind derived from his parents; and these evils have their seat in his natural man, which of itself is diametrically opposed to the spiritual man. *True Christian Religion n. 574*

## Friday, October 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?" *John 3:11-12*

Nevertheless man is born for heaven; although he does not enter heaven unless he becomes spiritual, and he can become spiritual only by means of regeneration. From this it follows of necessity that the natural man with its lusts must be subdued, subjugated, and inverted, and that otherwise man cannot approach a single step toward heaven, but sinks deeper and deeper into hell. *Ibid.*

## Saturday, October 22

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"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 3:20-21*

Who cannot see this, if he believes that he has been born into evils of every kind and acknowledges the existence and contrariety of good and evil, and believes in a life after death, a hell and a heaven, and that evil is what constitutes hell and good is what constitutes heaven? *Ibid.*

# OCT 23 THE BLIND MAN HEALED

Rev. Chris Skinner

## John 9

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As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of

age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains

## Message

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Have you noticed that in many areas of life, so-called "learned men," scientists, accountants, engineers, and executives of all kinds can so easily become locked into the so-called conventional wisdom that they cannot see beyond it? The common phrase is "they cannot see outside the squares."

Major discoveries in science and new organizational paths are often found by either think tanks or someone outside the situation making an observation and either following up on the research or building a case for change. The new plan is then implemented either by the one suggesting it or someone in authority who is prepared to run with it.

This passage from the Word is, in one sense, about looking or living outside the squares. In this case, the

squares are the natural world and phenomena and the material way of thinking. If we stay at this level, we are blind to all that the Lord may be trying to lead us toward.

In the Word there are a number of miracles in which the Lord heals the blind. The image features prominently because in various ways the transition from darkness to light is the story—or should be the story—of our life’s journey, the journey of the spirit from the darkness of selfishness to the light of love to the Lord and the neighbor.

Our passage faces the age-old question: Does physical disease from birth reflect the fact that we are therefore evil or sinners from birth? That assumption is rejected, as we will see later. It is true that we have evil tendencies, but with the Lord’s help we can overcome these. In order to do that, however, we need to see the light.

The fact that the man was born blind is in the Word to let us know that it is telling us about our spiritual rather than our physical state. Everyone who comes into the world is in darkness as to his spirit. Each baby, as we know, is innocent and starts out with the potential to be an angel, but this state is achievable only through a process of development—through making choices, receiving guidance, and learning the truth. It is what we make of our life that counts, as well as how much we allow the Lord to influence it and are mindful of His presence to lead and guide us as we make our decisions.

If we will look at the biblical text—I use this word in the context of seeing beyond the mere words—we can recognize that this whole miracle is about the Lord wanting to be part of our life in every moment if we let Him. Often we are too stubborn or too insensitive to His call, or perhaps born into circumstances such as those of the blind man, who, spiritually speaking, was not instructed in the truth.

The Lord is always ready and knows our inner thoughts, and just as He passed by the blind man he was still aware of his receptivity. It is no coincidence that he came out of the synagogue on the Sabbath and performed this miracle almost immediately afterward. He was challenging the ritual worship and strict interpretation of the law of Moses. The representative worship of the religion of that time was to be turned upside down so that the true light of love to the Lord could be fulfilled. Verse 5 echoes the

theme that dominates the gospel of John—“as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” From this very cosmic, global, and all-encompassing verse we move immediately to the miracle.

The means by which the Lord heals the man—the use of clay and saliva (or spittle), and then the Pool of Siloam—shows how the Lord works with us at the level we can understand. The use of spittle was known as a healing agent in pagan thought and would have been recognized as such by witnesses to this miracle and early readers of this passage. The pool of Siloam was part of the water supply of Jerusalem and was used for baptism.

These symbolismisms would therefore have been powerful for those watching and reading. Using the clay, spitting on the ground, and placing the clay on the eyes all provide us with an image of how the Lord comes down to our level of understanding and our life. This man was receptive but had little instruction or understanding, and therefore the Lord needed to bring the performance of this miracle to the sensual level to reach the man. It was the Lord’s spittle that was used. In other words, it was the truths of his Word that were used to heal the man. The Lord was cleansing and purifying the man from false ideas and healing him at the same time.

In our own lives, the Lord works at the level we are at. We can find him in our day-to-day activities. His presence in our life does not have to take the form of a momentous occasion or happening. Unless we look, we are very rarely aware of His being with us.

The following example says a lot to me.

A man was standing on a pier when suddenly a storm came. The storm began to get worse each minute, and the waters began to rise.

A man came by in a yacht and said, “Jump into my yacht and save yourself.”

The man on the pier replied, “I have faith that God will save me.”

The storm got worse, and another man came past in a helicopter. He received the same response: “The Lord will save me.”

Then a plane came by and received the same response from the man.

The man, now in danger of drowning because of the rising waters, shouted to the Lord to save him.

*The Lord’s presence  
in our life does not  
have to take the form  
of a momentous  
occasion or  
happening.*

The Lord answered, "I sent you a yacht, a helicopter, and a plane—what else can I do?"

We are often so busy leading our lives that we fail to see where the Lord's hand is guiding or helping us.

It is interesting that after the miracle some of the formerly blind man's friends said that it was him, while others said it was "only a likeness" of him. Some could see the change that had transformed his life as a result of the enlightenment he had received. Just so can our appearance be changed by the inner presence of the Lord.

The remainder of the miracle is a classic picture of how a negative attitude from a purely intellectual, rational perspective will influence our view of life or situations. It will use every means at its disposal to discredit, ridicule, or pour cold water on a fresh idea or new method of doing things, because in this state the mind is closed to influx and wants to preserve the status quo. It cannot see beyond the criticizer's own thinking. People in this state want, metaphorically speaking, to preserve the laws of gravity rather than defy them.

Can we not see the reactionary Pharisee in this situation? "There's no reason to change; stick to the rules that have always applied." The Pharisees were not interested in the healing or in the change in the man's life. They only wanted to find reasons to disbelieve and put pressure on the man and his family.

We can see quite clearly how the Pharisees denied that Jesus was the Messiah because their power and their selfishness blinded them to the truth. Reason was ahead of enlightenment. There are none so blind as those who do not want to see. And we should not forget that if we go to the literal sense of the Word with the eye of rationality alone, we too will be blind to the power and love contained within its pages, to its power as a light to lighten the world.

In contrast to the Pharisees, the man healed of his blindness pictures for us the way we can be enlightened by the Lord if we are free from the baggage and encumbrances that would prevent this from happening. The Bible's progression in the sense of the letter is a wonderful demonstration of how the power of the Lord's presence in our lives can be evident when our understanding is joined with our will and not shut off by self-love and reasoning from selfish motives.

The blind man could not be certain about who Jesus was, and the Pharisees were trying to put words into

his mouth. He first answered, "The only thing I know is that then I was blind and now I see," and later, "He is a prophet."

In many respects, this acknowledgement of the Lord's presence in our life is difficult to put into words. We know, but we cannot necessarily explain, when we perceive the presence of the Lord. In the same way that the blind man, without knowing who Jesus was, could then say he was a prophet, there is within us a gradual spiritual illumination regarding who the Lord is.

Finally, when he was approached by Jesus and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" he said, "Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him?" When Jesus said, "You are talking to Him," the man said, "Lord, I believe."

We see in this progression a dawning enlightenment. The man was receptive; the Lord recognized this and opened his physical and spiritual eyes. The man was able to move from faith in the understanding opened by the Lord to love in the heart, which was the potential embedded in the man's life that the Lord had seen as he passed the man outside the synagogue. This perception of the truth was transformed into a personal relationship with the Lord that climaxed in the man's eyes truly being opened to a visible God.

Just as the scientist, engineer, or executive can see possibilities and new ways forward if he or she is open to new thinking, so we, like the blind man, will receive enlightenment from the Lord if we move from a faith based on reason and intellect to spiritual faith in which we see with the eyes of the spirit. We will see new possibilities in relationships, we will see the presence of the Lord in small as well as big things, and we will be alive to the Lord's leading.

"I am the light of the world," said Jesus. May the Divine Humanity of the Lord be present in our lives as the living Lord Jesus so that where we were blind, now we might see.

## Prayer

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Lord, let me not make you my pillow,  
or prayer my eiderdown.

May you be my alarm clock

and prayer the water that splashes me awake.

- adapted from Dom Helder Camara and Frank Topping

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# Daily Meditations

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## Monday, October 24

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? *Psalm 27:1*

As the light of heaven is Divine truth, that light is also Divine wisdom and intelligence; therefore to be raised up into the light of heaven means the same as to be raised up into intelligence and wisdom and enlightened. For this reason the angels have light in just the same degree as they have intelligence and wisdom. *Heaven and Hell n. 131*

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## Tuesday, October 25

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—  
my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall. *Psalm 27:2*

Vastation and consummation differ from each other, as do the shade of evening and the thick darkness of night; for vastation is a receding from the Church, but consummation a complete separation from it. Vastation, therefore, is as when any one descends from heaven but not as far as to hell, and tarries in the middle, standing near both; but consummation exists when any one, standing thus, turns his face and breast to hell, and his back and the hinder part of his head to.

*Coronis n. 57*

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## Wednesday, October 26

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. *Psalm 27:3*

And wonderful to tell, while those in hell appear to one another as men, in the light of heaven they appear as monsters, with a horrid face and body, the exact form of their own evil. In respect to his spirit man appears, when seen by angels, in a like way; if good as a man, beautiful in accord with his good; if evil as a monster, ugly in accord with his evil. From this it is clear that in the light of heaven all things are made manifest, and for the reason that the light of heaven is Divine truth.

*Heaven and Hell n. 131*

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## Thursday, October 27

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple. *Psalm 27:4*

Heaven is conjunction with the Lord. Heaven is not heaven owing to the angels, but owing to the Lord, for the love and wisdom which angels possess and which make heaven heaven come not from them but from the Lord. Indeed, love and wisdom are the Lord in them.

*Divine Providence n. 28*

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## Friday, October 28

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. *Psalm 27:5*

Moreover, because love and wisdom are the Lord's and are the Lord in heaven, and love and wisdom form the angels' life, it is apparent also that their life is the Lord's, indeed is the Lord. The angels themselves confess that they have their life from the Lord. It can be seen from this that heaven is conjunction with the Lord. *Ibid.*

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## Saturday, October 29

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all  
around me,  
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the Lord. *Psalm 27:6*

I once heard from heaven the sweetest music. There were wives there together with girls, who were singing a song. Its sweetness was like the affection of some love, pouring forth in a harmonious stream. Songs in heaven are nothing but affections in audible form, that is, affections expressed in modulated sounds, for just as thoughts are expressed by speaking, so are affections by singing. Angels can grasp the subject of the affection by the regularity and fluency of the modulation. *Conjugal Love n. 55*

# OCT 30 OUR CHOICE?

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

## Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

## Revelation 20:7-15

When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their

works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

## Divine Providence 191-2

Our own prudence is nothing. It only seems to be something, as it should. I have stated that if people believe on the basis of appearances that human prudence accounts for everything, the only way to convince them is with reasonings based on deeper investigation, reasonings that must be drawn from the realm of causes. So to make these reasonings drawn from the realm of causes clear to the discerning mind, I intend to present them in their proper sequence, which will be as follows.

1. All our thoughts arise from impulses of our life's love, and there are no thoughts whatever that arise from any other source.
2. Only the Lord knows the impulses of our life's love.
3. The Lord guides the impulses of our life's love by his divine providence, and with them guides the thoughts that give rise to our prudence.
4. By his divine providence, the Lord gathers the impulses of the whole human race into a single form, which is a human form.
5. Heaven and hell, which come from the human race, are in this kind of form.
6. People who acknowledge only physical nature and human prudence constitute hell, while people who acknowledge God and divine providence constitute heaven.
7. None of this could happen if it did not seem to us that we think autonomously and manage our lives autonomously.

## Message

*And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. (Revelation 20:12)*

This is the seventh in the intermittent series of efforts to put the basic teachings of our church into sound bites. The previous six have been "There is no wrath of God," "The Lord is good to all," "The Lord

our God is one," "We worship the risen Lord," "No, love is not blind," and "There is inner meaning in the Word." This morning, we will be looking at one of the most divisive issues in the history of Christian doctrine, one on which our own theology takes a very definite and paradoxical position, which we might summarize by saying "It really seems to be up to us."

In the Christian church, this issue is framed as a tension between law and grace. Advocates of the law say that we are saved by obeying the commandments. Advocates of grace say that we are saved by the mercy of the Lord. Advocates of the law say that theories of grace lead to human irresponsibility, and advocates of grace say that theories of the law lead to self-righteousness. Both parties can quote Scripture in abundance because Scripture says both things. Paul in his letter to the Romans says, "Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift . . . For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Romans 2:23-4, 28), while it says in the Epistle of James, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

This is not an exclusively religious or theological concern. About the time I was in college, a rather unorthodox scholar named Pitrim A. Sorokin set himself the task of investigating the possibility of altruism. Is it possible for anyone to do anything that is truly unselfish? Obviously, we can do things for other people at real cost to ourselves, but to what extent are we doing it to appease our own consciences, so that we can feel good about ourselves?

Sorokin's work never gained much currency, and I was then and am now familiar with it only from a few third-hand descriptions of it. My recollection is that he did conclude that altruism was possible, but I have no knowledge of the basis of that conclusion.

There can be no doubt whatever about the insistence of our own theology that we ourselves must make the choice between heaven and hell. "Everyone is predestined to heaven" (*Divine Providence* 329), in the very real sense that we are all designed and created for heaven, but not everyone fulfills that destiny. This means that we are capable of becoming unselfish, because "being in heaven" is essentially having heavenly attitudes. It is caring about each other. Each one of us knows from personal experience and from the observation of others that we do have ideals and that we do all too often fail to live up to them. We seem quite sure that we are capable of being better than we are. That is, we seem to know ourselves to be

responsible; in fact, our whole societal fabric is based on this kind of assumption. Our courts of law hold us responsible for our words and our actions, and the only way we can try to claim any real exemption from that responsibility is to plead insanity.

Our first Scripture reading gives one of the most vivid images of this sense of responsibility. "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The theme carries over into the first chapter of the next book of the Bible, Joshua, with its injunctions to "be strong and courageous" in the first chapter (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9) and the covenant ceremony at its close, where Joshua says to the assembled people, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

The other side of the picture, the side that focuses on grace, also has ample biblical support. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus' words about how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven, the disciples' question as to who, then, can be saved, and the answer that what is impossible for us is possible for God (Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27, Luke 18:27). We are told in John that "no one can receive anything unless it is given from heaven" (John 3:27). Or we might simply turn to the Lord's words at the close of Matthew's gospel, "All power is given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). That does not leave much for us.

There is certainly a tension between these two views, between "law" on the one hand and "grace" on the other. The most common way it is expressed in our theology is in one very simple little phrase, "as if of ourselves"—my search program tells me that it occurs 472 times in the works that Swedenborg himself published. We are supposed to do what is good and refrain from what is evil "as if of ourselves," and yet are to acknowledge that this is "from the Lord."

It is put very bluntly the first time the phrase occurs: "There is no way that we can do what is good and turn to the Lord on our own. This must be done by angels; and the angels themselves cannot do it, only the Lord. Still, we can do it as if of ourselves" (*Secrets of Heaven* 233). Then in *Divine Love and Wisdom* (§425), we find the nub of the problem expressed:

"Since our whole sense is that we are thinking truth on our own and doing what is good on our own,

though, it is quite clear that we ought to think what is true as if on our own and do what is good as if on our own. That is, if we do not believe this then we either do not think what is true or do what is good and therefore have no religion, or we think what is true and do what is good on our own and thereby claim as our own what is actually Divine.”

Our third lesson puts the same tension together in a slightly different way. “Our own prudence is nothing. It only seems to be something, as it should” (*Divine Providence* 191). The passage goes on, as we have heard, to state quite unequivocally that we really do not know where our thoughts and feelings are coming from. The Lord does know, and is overseeing all the inner processes that are beyond both our perception and our comprehension.

Where does this leave us? Perhaps the simplest way of expressing it would be to say that it calls us to do the best we can from day to day and to stop pretending that we really know what is going on. We are finite creatures, and no matter how much we learn, our understanding will never get any closer to infinity. Or to put it another way, we never, in this life or the next, perceive things as they really, really are. In doctrinal terms, we never get beyond “appearances” (see especially *Secrets of Heaven* 3207.3).

This means that in spiritual matters, we can never “tell it like it is.” We can only tell it the way we see it, and to claim that we are telling it like it is is to claim for ourselves what is Divine. If we stop there, though, we can use it as a license for irresponsibility, to forget about thinking what is true and doing what is good, leaving us with no religion at all. It is marvelously freeing to realize that we can do our very best to think what is true and do what is good and leave everything else up to the Lord.

Another way of saying much the same thing is to say that we can learn not to take ourselves with such ultimate seriousness. There was a sports columnist some years ago who advised the manager of the Red Sox to take a particular player out into the open, show him the sun, and explain very clearly and carefully to the ballplayer that he actually was not the center of the solar system. Physically, of course, we do perceive the world as stretching out around us on all sides, so we do perceive ourselves as the center of the universe. We need to get over that illusion.

For me, Helen Keller answered the question as concisely and precisely as anyone when she wrote, “There is joy in self-forgetfulness.” This offers an answer to Sorokin’s dilemma. It says that we are

capable of altruism because we are capable of enjoying what we do without thinking about our enjoyment. Further, because we have some sensitivity to each other’s feelings, we can find pleasure in the pleasure of others.

Certainly one trap that must be avoided at all costs is the idea that doing good is not really good if we find pleasure in it. That would condemn us to an eternity of masochism. In a way, the very possibility of altruism rests in the fact that the higher and purer the good, the deeper and greater the joy. When we do things “of ourselves”—that is, when we are thinking about ourselves in what we do—we open the door to anxiety, envy, resentment, and ultimately despair. When we relax and do what we should because it is there to do and it is good to do it, when we focus on the doing and not on ourselves, we take a step from slavery into freedom.

We do live “as if,” and that is O.K. Our prudence does seem to matter, and it should. But the angel on our shoulder is constantly whispering, “There is joy in self-forgetfulness. Don’t take yourself so seriously.” We would do well to listen. Amen.

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## Daily Meditations

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### Monday, October 31

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Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek. *Psalm 27:7-8*

We are born with evils of every kind from our parents. These evils reside in our earthly self, which left to itself is directly opposed to our spiritual self. Nevertheless, we are born for heaven.

*True Christian Religion n. 574*

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### Tuesday, November 1

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Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! *Psalm 27:9*

We cannot come into heaven, then, unless we become spiritual, and that happens through regeneration alone. *Ibid.*

# Daily Meditations

## Wednesday, November 2

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. *Psalms 27:11*

The divine power and activity meant by the holy spirit are, generally speaking, reformation and regeneration, which lead to renewal, quickening, sanctification, and justification; and these lead to purification from evils and the forgiveness of sins, and ultimately to salvation. *True Christian Religion n. 142*

## Thursday, November 3

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. *Psalms 27:12*

The Lord gives the ability to understand and appreciate things abstractly to everyone, evil and good alike, but such understanding still does not enable us to lead ourselves away from evil.

*Divine Providence n. 297*

## Friday, November 4

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. *Psalms 27:13*

As for the formation of faith, this takes place by a person approaching the Lord, learning truths from the Word, and living by them. First: faith is formed by a person approaching the Lord, because faith which is real faith, that is, the faith which saves, is from the Lord and directed to the Lord. *True Christian Religion n. 347*

## Saturday, November 5

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! *Psalms 27:14*

The more we follow the divine design in the way we live, the more we receive power against evil and falsity from God's omnipotence, receive wisdom about goodness and truth from God's omniscience, and are in God because of God's omnipresence. The more we follow the divine design in the way we live, the more power we receive from God's omnipotence to fight against forms of evil and falsity, because no one can resist evils or the falsities that go with them except God alone. *True Christian Religion n. 68*

# Our Daily Bread

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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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**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.

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

# OUR DAILY BREAD

