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Seeing New Beginnings in Life's Long Journey

By Rev. Donald Rose

The first word in the Bible is "b'reshith," which means "in the beginning." Its application extends to all the instances of beginnings in human life. In the last chapter of the Bible Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." And He there calls Himself "the Bright and Morning Star."

A friend of mine recently dedicated a new church building. Those who laboured to build the church sought to find a name that would be acceptable to them all. When someone suggested calling it "The Morning Star Chapel," there was instant approval. The imagery had just the right inspirational quality. A star in a dark sky is inspiring, but this is true in a special way of a star in a sky that is gradually becoming brighter! The bright and morning star may be a symbol for each of us as we look to the possibilities of a new year.

Another friend is fond of invoking a Latin phrase: "carpe diem." Dictionaries associate this phrase with the idea of holding one's focus on the present moment. We grasp this day of our lives, heeding the words of the Psalm: "This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Grasp the day; seize the moment.

I personally have often turned at the time of a new beginning to a saying in a theological book of Emanuel Swedenborg. Here is what it says: "Every smallest moment of man's life involves a series of consequences extending to eternity, each moment being as a new beginning to those which follow; and so with all and each of the moments of his life, both of his understanding and of his will." This is paragraph 3854 of "Heavenly Secrets." That is the version with which I have been familiar for many years. A new translation from the Latin does not speak of a "man" but of "a person." The original Latin has no gender implication. So here is a new version to which I am to become accustomed. "Every smallest fraction of a moment of a person's life entails a chain of consequences extending into eternity. Indeed, every one is like a new beginning to those that follow, and so every single moment of the life of both his understanding and of his will is a new beginning."

I invite you to consider how precious are the moments and the days that lie immediately before you. The moments have consequences, not just for you but for the people whose lives you touch. Even if you have had regrettable moments in the past, the moment at hand is there as an opportunity. Seize those moments, not just as your own, but as moments made by God.

The Psalm says to rejoice in the day. Does this mean merely to eat drink and be merry? Merriment has its place, but think of another kind of rejoicing in the day or the moment

made for us by the Lord. Reach out in that moment in the name of God and feel the joy that He intends for you, making a difference for good in this world.

A Choice Between Opposites

by Rev. David W. Ayers

"...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 23:15).

Our lives are filled with choices. We choose who we will be friends with, what we will do for a living, and what kind of breakfast cereal we will have tomorrow morning. And even if our choices in these kinds of things are limited, we still have the ability to choose how we will approach life. We can all choose whether we will live each day with the goal of improving ourselves and fine-tuning our abilities, or whether we will sit back, wait for life to give us things, and succumb to pessimistic fatalism. Our freedom to choose is our most precious human gift, one which the Lord protects for us above all else.

Yet, there is one area in our lives where we may sometimes wish that we did not have to choose - we all have times when we want to know about the things of religion without having to live the things of religion. We want to believe in a loving, comforting God, but we don't want to give up false thinking - like harbouring thoughts of self-importance that lead us to believe that we are simply more intelligent and attuned to what is important than other people; and evil actions - treating other people as inferior to ourselves by devaluing their insights and contributions - things that the Lord clearly tells us are wrong. We want to attend church and join in the comfort that such spiritual community can bring, but we still want to be able to go our own way when it comes to our personal inner lives. Essentially, it comes down to the fact that spiritually we want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to be able to serve the Lord, but we also long to serve ourselves.

The Lord tells us this is like trying to serve God and mammon - and we cannot serve two masters, for one will seek to have dominion over the other. Unfortunately, left to ourselves, we all choose the mammon of self-service. Unless we come to recognize that serving ourselves and serving the Lord are polar opposites, we will remain under the spell of our own dominion. And unless we see what heaven offers in terms of a new life and strive to attain that wonderful state, we will gravitate to hell.

Each one of our lessons provides an important insight on the opposite nature of serving self and the Lord, and between heaven and hell. By examining these passages we can learn how our choices between these opposites are essential for our spiritual health and progress.

The lesson from Joshua plainly states the fundamental choice between opposites that each of us must make. *"And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell."* (Joshua 24:15). Who will we serve? We can choose to serve ourselves and the world by living to satisfy merely bodily and selfish desires; or we can choose to serve the Lord by learning to put aside the loves of self and the world by shunning them, and taking on the life of heaven. The "god" we serve is where we place our allegiance, focus and concern. For whatever we love more than anything else is like our god. We bow down to it, think about it, and find ways to serve it.

Every time we encounter situations that require us to make a choice of which gods to serve, we are like the Israelites standing on the bank of the Jordan River. The ground we stand on is our natural state; across the River is the Promised Land that Joshua spoke of, which symbolises the life of heaven. At these times we can experience a jumble of thoughts and feelings: we can stay where we are on the apparent safety of familiar ground, or we can move into the unknown; we can trust our own experiences and intelligence, which provide rational support for staying where we are, or we can trust that the Lord knows better than we do. Indeed, these times require difficult and important choices.

If we choose to leave behind our selfish and worldly lives, it is like we are crossing the Jordan River, and entering the new land which the Lord has promised to us. But if we choose not to follow the Lord, we remain on the other side of the river, and serve the gods that reign there. These gods of the Amorites and the Egyptians are evils that originate in falsities (see AC 1857) - the lies that lead us to believe that serving the Lord and other people is foolish and irrelevant.

This choice is very difficult because as human beings we gravitate to evils and falsities of every kind - delights we feel from greed, controlling others and satisfying every craving we feel, and the lies which encourage us to feel and feed these delights. These delights come to us through our heredity and our freely made choices. Like gravity, they bind us to earthly and selfish concerns, and draw us ever deeper into hell. Only the Lord has the power to keep us from hell and bring us to heaven. We can only escape from our hellish condition, cross the River and enter heaven if we realise two things: 1) that our lives stand in stark contrast to the Lord's heavenly design; and 2) that left to our own preferences, we would rather take the safe path and stay where we are.

Our recognition of this contrast begins only if we turn to the Lord's Word, which provides us with pictures and descriptions of evil and falsity, and shows the nature of the human condition. The truths of the Word give us the means and the power to identify, recognise and change the thoughts and actions that keep the Lord at bay in our lives. The Word enables us to see the great contrast between heaven and hell, between a life devoted to the Lord and a life devoted to selfishness. Through the Word we see that the purpose of our lives is to choose between these opposite goals, and that this choice will have eternal consequences.

For the Israelites, the choice they made to obey or disobey Jehovah's command had immediate, tangible and opposite consequences. We read in our lesson from Deuteronomy,

"Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God..."

If the Sons of Israel obeyed the Lord their God, they would prosper during their earthly lives: they would inherit the Promised Land of Canaan, have enough to eat and drink, have many children, and be free from their enemies. However, if the Israelites disobeyed Jehovah and worshipped other gods, they would incur His curse.

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you." (Deuteronomy 28: 1-2, 15). Failure to follow the Lord meant that Israel would endure famine, disease and defeat by their enemies.

The Lord's commands to the Israelites apply to us on a deeper, spiritual level - one that will effect us forever. For our choice between obeying the Lord or ourselves leads either to heaven or to hell. If we would obey the Lord, we have to submit ourselves to Him totally. As we read in our lesson from the Arcana,

"The Lord desires any person's total submission so that He can make him blissful and happy. That is, He does not want him to be partly his own man and partly the Lord's, for then there are two masters whom a person cannot serve simultaneously..." (AC 6138:2).

When we submit ourselves totally to the Lord, He will change us into people who will live on after death as angels in His heavenly kingdom. But if we grant only partial or half-hearted submission to the Lord or turn our backs on Him completely, we have chosen to serve the gods of self and the world - the gods of the Amorites and the Egyptians. And after death, we will live as devils in the kingdom of hell.

There is no greater choice than that between heaven and hell. The great difference is shown when we look at the kind of people who live in each place. In heaven angels care more about serving the Lord and helping others than attending to their own needs and desires. And because everyone in heaven does the same, all are provided for. Angels have learned to put themselves last, and in doing this they become first. As the Lord said, *"So the last will be first, and the first last"* (Matthew 20:16). In this state the Lord confers the blessings of heavenly happiness, joy and peace which come through eternal communion with Him. This is the inner meaning of the blessing promised by the Lord to the Sons of Israel if they obeyed Him and forsook all other gods.

Sadly, people who choose to live in hell have just the opposite character. In hell everyone cares more for themselves than anyone else - and they will do anything to get their needs met, even if it means using deceit and cruelty. Since every devil is of this character, life in hell is made up of continual disputing, frustration and punishment - a life of total, eternal misery, a state described by the Lord as "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (Matthew 22:13, 24:51). This is the inner meaning of the curse the Lord promised to the Sons of Israel if they forsook Him and worshipped other gods.

The fates of the poor beggar Lazarus and the rich man in our story from Luke perfectly depicts the eternal consequences of a choice between the opposites of heaven and hell. The great gulf between their life choices was played out in the other world, as the rich man looked up from his fiery torments to see Lazarus resting in Abraham's bosom, and implored him for help. Instead of assistance, Abraham could only inform him that the relief and refuge of heaven were now beyond him.

Abraham's words underscore the reality of the complete contrast between the life of heaven and hell. As Emanuel Swedenborg later discovered, heaven and hell are so opposite because the kind of life that angels have chosen for themselves makes them utterly incapable and unwilling of surrounding themselves with the filthy and profane loves of hell. Conversely, devils are unable to even approach heaven, for they are repelled to their very core by goodness and truth which is so repugnant to their own sphere of falsity and evil; and if forced to remain near even the gates of heaven, they suffocate and expire.

From these teachings, two things become clear. 1) The greatest contrast in all of creation is that between the goodness and truth of heaven, and the evil and falseness of hell; and 2) We are required to choose between heaven and hell during our lives on earth. We read of this choice in [The True Christian Religion](#).

Every person, as long as he lives in the world, treads a path mid-way between heaven and hell; and he is in equilibrium, that is, he has free will to look up to God or down to hell. If he looks up to God, he acknowledges that all wisdom comes from God, and his spirit is really present among the angels in heaven. The person who looks down, as everyone does whose evil puts him under the power of falsities, is in his spirit really among the devils in hell (TCR 69:3).

After our physical death, we simply live among those in the spiritual world with whom we had associated while still in the world.

The choice between heaven and hell - between following the Lord or ourselves - is the reason we are born into the natural world. The purpose of our living in the material world is to prepare for eternity in the spiritual world. Our ultimate choice of heaven or hell is made up of thousands of smaller choices between what is true or false, good or evil - the kind of choices we make every minute of every day. We have myriad opportunities every day to choose heavenly things over the things of hell: we can choose to shun thoughts and

feelings for lust and adultery, or we can encourage and enjoy them; we can build our daily lives around the pursuit of wealth and success because of the personal power it brings us, or we can try to make use of these things to help and serve other people; we can look for what is wrong in everyone around us and condemn them for it, or we can look for what is good and positive and try to bring those things out. Our choice of heaven or hell is made up from a lifetime of these kinds of choices.

Because we choose our eternal home over a lifetime, we do not become heavenly all at once. Rather, spiritual rebirth - regeneration - is a life-long process. It is only gradually that we become aware of the parts of us that are evil and false and learn to shun those things. As we practice shunning evil and falsity we can then do what is good and see what is true. Throughout this process we will face the choice between opposites, between the Lord's way and our way, and between our conflicting desires to cooperate with the Lord or obey our natural inclinations. All along we will have times of conflict, frustration - and sometimes failure. We will all stumble and make mistakes. It may even feel that the powers of hell will hold us forever; for the more we try to submit to the Lord's will, the more the hells will fight against our efforts to change.

During those times when we face the difficult choices between heaven and hell in our lives, we should remember that the Lord can subdue and conquer every hellish thought, feeling and act that could ever trouble us. From the power of His glorified Humanity, the Lord Jesus Christ has all power in heaven and on earth. As He told His disciples, *"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). If we trust in the Lord and follow Him all the days of our lives, He will help us to choose heaven over hell; the Lord will reconcile all the conflicts between good and evil in our lives; the Lord will unify our hearts and minds, recreating us in His image and likeness into angels who will live in His heavenly kingdom forever.

(References: Deuteronomy 28:1-20; Joshua 24:14-17; Luke 16:19-26; AC 6138)

The Lord Never Rests

By Rev. Derek Elphick

(This article was reprinted from the Pastor's Message in the "Boynton Beach Bulletin," May 2002)

The human heart is said to beat thirty-five million times a year without pausing for repairs! Under normal circumstances the heart will continue at this pace for seventy odd years, never needing an "overhaul," never needing to "slow down" or "take a break," and all the while achieve the same peak level of performance. The only exception to this rule is physical death caused by extreme old age (when the heart has served its earthly

purpose) or by some type of damage to the heart. Other than that, the heart doesn't ever need to pause or rest in order to continue performing its task.

In a similar way, the Lord and His angels never pause, never "rest" in their effort to lead us toward heaven. The Lord's attention to every, single detail of our life "never stops" (AC 6211). His mercy is constant with every person in this world and is "never withdrawn from anyone" (HH 522). In the book of Exodus we're reminded of the fact that a pillar of cloud led the Israelites by day and a pillar of fire led them by night, and that this is a symbol of the Lord's unceasing presence with us (see AC 8102; TCR 774). And the angels of heaven are said to be constantly "monitoring" our thoughts and intentions in the hope that they might "bend" them in the direction of heaven (see AC 5854).

This unceasing effort to promote all that is good, true and just begins to have an affect on us, the recipient. We're told that as the Lord's love begins to rule more fully in us "an unceasing desire to know truth" begins to take root (AC 5937). From having an erratic, irregular "pulse" toward the things of religion, we find within ourselves a more consistent, reliable "pulse." We begin to see how little we know and how much there is to learn. And this spiritual awakening, this growing sensitivity to spiritual realities, not only increases our heart rate, our spiritual pulse - we also notice that we don't need to "slow down" so much. We notice that we don't need to take a break and "pause" from the life of practicing religion, from doing genuinely kind and thoughtful things for others.

In heaven, there is never one state "just like another" (AC 10,200). The changes of state which the angels experience are of "unceasing variety" (HH 155). This is because the Lord's energy (love and wisdom) is a creative energy (see DLW 340). It cannot but "create" new things the whole time (see AE 1226:2); and in the case of the angels this Divine energy is transformed into an unceasing desire to perform useful services to each other and to the community at large (see CL 185).

Like the constant, methodical beat of the heart, the Lord and His angels are working with us every second of the day to promote what is honest, just and true. Let us join this cause and not pause in our effort to do likewise, for, "...those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint..." (Isaiah 40: 31).

"For of himself a man constantly falls, but by the Lord he is constantly raised up, and is led to good." New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine 163

Unlocking The Internal Sense

by Rev. David W. Ayers

We know that the Sacred Scriptures contain a continuous internal sense that deals with the Lord's glorification and human regeneration. But those lessons are hidden within the literal stories of Scripture - sometimes very well hidden indeed! How can we unlock the eternal secrets that the Lord provides for us in His Word?

Clearly, we need knowledge of correspondences - the ancient science that explains how spiritual and natural reality works together. However, even if we know, for example, that when the Word mentions a rock or water it probably refers to truth (or falsity) or that hellfire is really the lust from some evil love, it can still be very difficult to work out what the Lord is conveying in the spiritual sense.

In addition to knowledge of correspondence, we also need some guidelines to help us approach a given story in the Word. The following suggestions are tremendously helpful. They come from the work *Science of Exposition* by W.F. Pendleton and *Academy of the New Church Theological School* course notes on Homiletics by W. Cairns Henderson.

Using these principles and a good dictionary of correspondences, pick a story from the Word. With prayerful humility, ask the Lord to help you understand His Word on a deeper level, so that you can see how to improve your life. Then have a go!

If this still seems like a daunting challenge, give me a call, and we can work out together what the Lord is trying to tell us.

- 1) The general sense of any chapter of the Word contains in itself the general doctrine of the internal sense.
- 2) The first thing said reigns universally in what follows.
- 3) The end (intention or purpose) appears in the close of the series or in the last thing said.
- 4) The subject of a chapter, paragraph or verse passes over to the next and appears in the first word or first thing said.
- 5) A knowledge of the following chapter will aid in understanding any given chapter or portion of the Word.
- 6) The name of the Lord, the name of the person, and the name of the place are of leading significance in any chapter of the Word.
- 7) The name of the leading person in any book or chapter represents a universal of that series, but is subordinate to that which is represented by the name of the Lord.
- 8) The person speaking or acting represents the leading and at the same time the active principle of the series.

9) The place where an event occurs represents the Divine of the Lord in the natural or in the church with men.

10) The time when an event occurs, or any mention of time, affords an important indication of the spiritual sense of any passage in the Word.

11) A number used in any passage of the Word presents an essential modification of the leading idea of the spiritual sense.

12) The Word is twofold - celestial and spiritual - from its inmost even to its ultimate.

13) There is a trinity in God, a trinity in the Word, and a trinity in all created things.

14) The covenant appears in all things of the Word.

15) Affection is the prime essential of the Word both in its natural and in its spiritual senses.

16) The internal sense may be discovered by means of a comparison of words and passages.

17) The opposite is always present, either expressed or understood.