



On Earth

as it is

In Heaven

Reflections on Jesus' Parables of the Kingdom
and Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*

Lee Woofenden

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IN HEAVEN

REFLECTIONS ON JESUS'
PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM
AND EMANUEL SWEDENBORG'S
HEAVEN AND HELL

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Introduction

On Earth as it is In Heaven

READINGS

Genesis 28:10–13

A ladder from earth to heaven

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he came to a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream in which he saw a ladder set up on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And there above it stood the Lord.

Matthew 6:7–13

The Lord's Prayer

When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Therefore pray in this way:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not bring

us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil. For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.”

Arcana Coelestia #1285.3

On earth as it is in heaven

In the first Ancient Church, there were many forms of inner and outer worship. . . . Still, they all had “one language” and “their words were one.” In other words they all shared one doctrine in general and in detail. Doctrine is one when all people have mutual love, or kindness. Mutual love or kindness causes things, though varied, to be one, since it makes one out of many different things.

If all the people, no matter how many there are—even ten thousand times ten thousand—are governed by kindness and mutual love, they have only one goal in view: the common good, the Lord’s kingdom, and the Lord Himself.

Differences in matters of doctrine and in forms of worship are like the differences among the physical senses and among the inner organs of the human body, which all contribute to the perfection of the whole. The Lord flows in and works by way of kindness, though in different ways according to the character of each individual. In so doing he arranges every single person into proper order, on earth as in heaven. In this way the Lord’s will is done, as he himself teaches, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

REFLECTION

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

Heaven and Hell has always been Emanuel Swedenborg's most popular book—and for good reason. Yet here we all are, living on earth, *not* in heaven. What good is talking about heaven if it doesn't make a difference for our lives here on earth?

Jesus responds with: "On earth as it is in heaven." Millions of Christians say these words from the Lord's Prayer every week, and some say them every day. You can think of this book, *On Earth as it is In Heaven*, as a commentary on that one line from the Lord's Prayer. What does it mean for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? What is God's will, anyway? And how do we do it here on earth? Another way of asking this question is: How do we make earth more like heaven?

Of course, Swedenborg wasn't the first person to realize that heaven was a popular topic. Many centuries earlier, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven over and over again. But instead of writing voluminously as Swedenborg did, he condensed his teachings about heaven into short, pithy parables. Each of them provides a memorable image that we can unpack to learn something about heaven, and about how we can make things here on earth more like heaven.

In these reflections we will unpack the Lord's parables of the kingdom of heaven, as found in the Gospel of Matthew, one at a time, using other Bible passages as well as Swedenborg's book *Heaven and Hell* to shed light

on each one. Along the way, I hope we will discover some hidden treasures that will help us make life better both for ourselves and for the people around us. As we do this, we build a heaven within and around ourselves right here on earth.

Though the relationship between heaven and earth has not always been clear to human beings on earth, that relationship has always been there. The very first words in the Bible are, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). To get the visual picture, this should probably have been translated “the *sky* and the earth”; yet humankind has since time immemorial taken the sky as a symbol and a reminder of heaven.

Ever since the beginning, the earth has also started out “formless and empty,” and in need of light shining into it from God and heaven, to bring order and harmony into the chaos of material reality. The lights in the expanse of the sky are needed to separate day from night, to mark seasons and days and years, and to govern all things below.

In the Garden of Eden story, God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. Humanity soon fell away from that primeval closeness to God. Yet from time to time, there were still glimpses of that ancient relationship between heaven and earth. Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, got such a glimpse during a time of great personal struggle, and it gave him the strength to continue on his journey toward becoming the father of a great nation. At the time of his famous dream of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, Jacob was fleeing

his home and family in fear for his life, after tricking his father and cheating his brother Esau out of the blessing that was due to the elder brother.

Just when Jacob's life seemed to have reached its low point, God gave him, in his dreams, a wonderful vision of angels ascending from earth to heaven, and descending from heaven to earth, with the Lord himself standing above it. Jacob knew then and there that his life here on earth had a higher meaning than anything he had conceived of before. God had put him on earth for a greater purpose—and his job was to follow God's will for his life by continually working toward that greater purpose. Heaven had been opened to him, and his life would never be the same again.

In the New Testament also, the Lord reminds us over and over again that we are not living for this earth only; that our life has meaning only when we are seeking the kingdom of heaven in our life here on earth. And he reminds us in the prayer used by so many Christians that we are to seek out God's will as it is done in heaven, and carry it out on earth.

That is why each one of us was placed here: to be an angel-being, first ascending to heaven in our spirits to discover the true and deeper realities of eternal life, and then descending back to earth to put those higher lessons into practice in our everyday lives. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

What will our world look like when God's will is done here on earth, as it is in heaven? Swedenborg gives us a glimpse of it in *Arcana Coelestia* #1285. Heaven on earth does not mean that everyone thinks and acts the

same. Far from it! In fact, in heavenly society there is a great variety of beliefs, a great variety of worship styles, and a great variety of personalities. Heaven on earth does not mean a boring sameness!

What it does mean is that people of different beliefs, different churches, different worship styles, different personalities do not clash with one another, but instead work together in a harmonious whole. The differences do not divide; instead, they add to the perfection of the whole.

Please join me in these reflections as we search out and discover many more pearls of wisdom about the kingdom of heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is Near!

READINGS

Deuteronomy 30:11–14

My word is very near to you

Now what I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will go up to heaven for us to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may do it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may do it?” For the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may do it.

Matthew 3:1–3

The kingdom of heaven is near

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

Matthew 4:12–17

The kingdom of heaven is near

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in

Capernaum, which was by the seacoast in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said by the prophet Isaiah:

Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light; on those who sat in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!”

Matthew 10:1, 5–8

The kingdom of heaven is near

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority over evil spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and sickness. . . . Jesus sent these twelve out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”

Heaven and Hell #302

Our close connection with heaven

I have talked with angels about the union of heaven with the human race, and have told them that people in the church do say that everything good is from the Lord and that there are angels with us, but that very few people actually believe that angels are so close to us, much less that they are in our thoughts and feelings. . . .

Yet in fact the union is so vital that we could not think the least thought apart from the spirits who are with us. Our spiritual life depends on this. . . . And if this connection were severed, we would instantly drop down dead.

If we believed the way things really are, that everything good comes from God, and everything evil from hell, then we would not take credit for the good within us, nor take blame for the evil. Whenever we thought or did anything good, we would focus on the Lord; and any evil that flowed in we would throw back into the hell it came from. But since we do not believe in any inflow from heaven or from hell, and therefore believe that everything we think and intend is in us and from us, we make the evil our own, and defile the good with a feeling that we deserve it.

REFLECTION

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matthew 4:17)

Most of the people living on this earth probably do not spend a lot of time thinking about heaven. In fact, I would venture to say that even for religious people, heaven is not a primary subject of everyday thought. Most of the time, we are too busy focusing on getting along in *this* world to have much time left over for contemplating the *other* world.

Of course, there are certain times when we spend more time thinking about the afterlife, such as when we have lost someone close to us. And if it is someone in

our own household and our own immediate family that we have lost, our thoughts may linger in heaven much more. After all, when a piece of our heart is in heaven, our mind will naturally follow our feelings of love and closeness to the one who is no longer with us.

Yet for most of us, heaven is something far off, over the horizon. In our younger years death is usually far from our minds. It is something that happens to *old* people. As far as we're concerned, our own death is so far away that it's not even worth thinking about. Even in the middle years of our lives, we are usually so busy with work, family, and community responsibilities that our minds are very firmly anchored in this world.

Our elder years, as we move closer to death, would naturally be a time to think about what comes next. But especially in this culture, many people avoid thinking about death as long as possible. For many of us, I'm afraid, it is only when death is staring us right in the face that we start thinking seriously about what might come next.

The fact is, none of us knows what the day of our death will be. We probably have in our mind some estimate of how long we're going to live; and as we go about our daily lives, we presume we'll have about that much time left to accomplish what we want to accomplish here. As long as we are young, it seems very likely that we will be able to do a lot of great things with our lives, and we may go out into the world with great idealism.

It is often only when we have left the halfway mark of our lives behind that we realize there simply won't be enough time to follow all our dreams—and that we are no longer quite as healthy and adventurous as we used

to be, anyway. We may then make some wild attempts to grasp something of heaven for ourselves right here. A new sports car. A new face. A new career. A new husband or wife. Time is running out, we realize, and if we are going to experience any of our dreams, we'd better get going before it's too late!

Sooner or later, though, as another decade or two goes by, we reluctantly realize that most of our life is behind us. Yet we may still be able to do some wonderful things here on earth. Even if we are not physically as strong as we once were, our retirement years can give us some of the precious time to ourselves that we never had enough of before. In that time, we can choose to follow some of the interests and dreams that before would have been impossible. We can also have the pleasure of watching the younger generations coming along, without so much pressure of responsibility keeping us from savoring each moment we spend with those whose bodies are as young as their minds, and who are still full of wonder at the miracles happening all around us.

For many in the older generation, all of this is enough to keep the mind, most of the time, off of the inevitable approach of death and our entrance into whatever comes next. But for all of us, the time will come when, quite literally, "the kingdom of heaven is near." However long or short our life on earth may turn out to be, from the moment of our birth there is one fact that cannot be avoided: each one of us *will die*.

When we do die, if all the prophets, mystics, and other travelers into the spiritual realm are right, our lives will continue uninterrupted in a world that is both

above and *within* this earthly world. And whatever our outward accomplishments may have been in this world, in that world only our *inner character* will count. If we have devoted our lives here on earth to gaining possessions, pleasure, and power, without developing the inner qualities of understanding, kindness, and love for our fellow human beings, that inner emptiness will follow us into the other world. We will find out too late that we have “gained the whole world, and lost our own soul” (Matthew 16:26).

The course we set for ourselves here on earth continues into the other life. Once we leave our physical body and the material world behind, our direction becomes set, and we can no longer change course. To quote “The Teacher,” King Solomon: “Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie” (Ecclesiastes 11:3).

Now we begin to see the force of the words spoken by John the Baptist, by the Lord himself, and by his disciples when they went out to preach the good news: “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” The word “repent” may be a little old-fashioned, but it simply means to change our attitudes, change our direction, change our ways. It means to turn away from the direction in which we have been going so far, and start out in a different direction. It means to aim our lives toward the things of God and spirit instead of toward the things of this world.

When we realize that our entrance into the kingdom of heaven (or into the *other* place) is getting closer and closer, these words gain more and more weight for us.

As we grow older and wiser, we begin to realize that the things of this world can never satisfy us. We begin to think that perhaps we should turn away from temporary, material things and toward the eternal, spiritual things of love, wisdom, understanding, and compassion for the people who share our world with us. We begin to realize that the kingdom of heaven is near, and it is time to turn our lives toward preparing ourselves not just for life in this world, but for eternal life in the spiritual world. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!*

Yet there is another sense in which the kingdom of heaven is far closer to us than the day of our death. The Lord tells us in our reading from Deuteronomy:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will go up to heaven for us to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may do it?" For the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may do it.

In terms of time, we tend to think of heaven as something for a future time, and not as a present reality. In terms of space, we tend to think of heaven as something far above us, and not as something right here *within* us. And yet, the Lord tells us that his word, which comes down through heaven, is not at some great distance in heaven where it is inaccessible to us. No, it is very close to us. It is in our hearts, in our minds, right in our own mouths, where we can feel it and know it and express it to one another. And like the Lord's words, the kingdom

of heaven is not some distant, abstract dream. In Luke 17:20–21 we read:

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For the kingdom of God is within you.”

We think of heaven as a place where we go after we die. But do we think of it as something that is with us *right now*? Swedenborg tells us that even while we are living here on earth, we are inwardly inhabiting the spiritual world. He says that we have both good spirits and evil spirits with us all the time, influencing our feelings and desires, and through them our thoughts. In fact, if we did not have this connection to the spiritual world, our minds would go completely blank, and we would not feel a thing in our hearts. Further, if we lost our connection to the spiritual world, we could not even continue to live; we would instantly drop down dead. This is what Jesus was referring to when he said to Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11).

Whether we want to believe it or not, all of our power, all of our thoughts, all of our desires come from the spiritual world every instant. Our very life, our very bodies, are continually held in existence from the spiritual world. So it is not only when we approach our death that the kingdom of heaven is near. The kingdom of heaven is *always* near, in our heart and in our mouth, calling to us, bending our will—but never *breaking* our will and forcing us—toward God and heaven. We are continually in the hands of both good spirits and bad,

continually in a balance between heaven and hell, so that we can freely choose which path we will take—and in which direction we want the tree of our life to fall whenever we do, in the course of time, cross the threshold of death and enter fully into the spiritual world.

We are not merely creatures of this world. *Right now* we are living in the spiritual world as well. And if we can keep this in mind as we go about our daily lives, it will help us to stay focused on the things that really matter. It will help us to focus each day and each moment, not only on the things of this world, but on the higher, more beautiful, enlightening, and loving things that lead to eternal life.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!

Wheat? Or Weeds?

READINGS

Hosea 10:1–4

Disputations like poisonous weeds

Israel was a luxuriant vine; he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars; as his land prospered, he adorned his sacred pillars.

Their heart is divided, and now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will demolish their altars and destroy their sacred pillars. Then they will say, “We have no king because we did not fear the Lord. And what could a king do for us?” They speak words, taking empty oaths to make a covenant; therefore disputations spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field.

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

The parable of the wheat and the weeds

He put before them another parable, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’

He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go out and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers: Collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" . . .

When he had sent the crowds away, Jesus went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field."

He answered and said to them, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are collected and burned in the fire, so will it be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all evildoers, and will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Heaven and Hell #491, 502

Our second stage after death

We go through three stages after death before we come into either heaven or hell. The first stage is living in our outer self, the second is living in our inner self, and the

third is getting ready. We go through these stages in the World of Spirits. . . .

After the first stage is over—the stage of living in our outer self—we are brought as a spirit into a stage where we are in our inner self. This is a stage of our inner motivation, and the thought that comes from it. In the world, we were in this state of mind when we were by ourselves in freedom, without anything bridling our thoughts. Just as in the world, we lapse into this state without realizing it when the thinking closest to our words—which is the thought from which we speak—withdraws toward our inner thinking, and we linger there. When we are in this state of mind, we are in our real self and in our real life. Our real life, our real self, is thinking freely from our own feelings.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. (Matthew 13:24–25)

So far we have been warming up to our subject of heaven on earth. In the introduction we considered the words from the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." From these words it is clear that we are not meant to wait until we die before tasting anything of heaven; rather, we are here on earth to see that God's will is done here just as it is in heaven. In other words, our task here involves bringing something of heaven to this earth.

Then in the last chapter we explored the words that John the Baptist, and Jesus and his disciples, used when they preached to the people: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” Heaven is not some far-off place that we may experience sometime. It is right here within us and among us. And it is within and among us whenever we leave our own ways behind, and follow the Lord’s ways instead.

With these thoughts as background, we now take up the first of the Lord’s parables of the kingdom of heaven. These parables will provide the themes for the rest of the book. The parables of the kingdom of heaven form a sequence that takes up most of Matthew chapter thirteen, and then reappears from chapters eighteen to twenty-five of the same Gospel. And it is interesting that where Matthew speaks of “the kingdom of heaven,” the other Gospels speak of “the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are one and the same, because it is God’s presence—the presence of God’s love and wisdom within and around us—that makes heaven.

Now let’s dig into the parable of the wheat and the weeds—or “the wheat and the tares,” as you may be more used to hearing.

One of the things I love about this parable is that it points out so clearly that we do not have to be perfect to be in the kingdom of heaven. In fact, this parable makes it clear that we do not even have to be in *heaven* to be in the kingdom of heaven!

Here is why the parable says this: In the parable, the kingdom of heaven is first compared to someone who

sowed good seed in his field. Now, this does sound like heaven. The field is the world of our lives, and the good seed is the Lord's truth that causes us to be children, or citizens, of his kingdom.

However, the parable then goes on to say, "But while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away." Why is this surprising? Because Jesus is still talking about the kingdom of heaven! The kingdom of heaven is not only like having good seed sown in the field of our lives, but also like having bad seed sown in our lives by an enemy—which Jesus identifies as "the devil," a personification of hell. So while we are in heaven in our spirits, we have not only good seed sown in us, but also bad seed.

Of course, I am not advocating that we get comfortable and friendly with our evils and vices. After all, eventually they are going to have to be rooted out. But this parable should help us to relax a bit, and not be so hard on ourselves if we are not perfect. In every single one of us, the Lord has sown good seed. The Lord has given us good qualities, good character traits, good potentials and skills that fit us for heaven if, like wheat sown in the field, we allow them to grow in our lives.

But the Lord also knows—and we ourselves are often painfully aware—that in each one of us there are also bad seeds sown. These are our tendencies toward being selfish, uncaring, greedy, and focused on physical things; and the weeds are all the character flaws, bad habits, and outright offenses that flow from these bad seeds. Every single one of us has weeds growing up with our wheat.

Yet as long as the good seed is growing in us as well, we are still in the kingdom of heaven.

Even while we are mixed up between good and evil, we are still in the earth version of the kingdom of heaven. And our teachings tell us that on earth, heaven is *the church*—which is the community of people who believe in and follow God.

Every single one of us who is part of the universal church, or the Lord's kingdom on earth, has both good seed and bad growing in us at the same time. So we might as well accept that we are not going to be perfect. It was not we, but an enemy who sowed that bad seed in our lives. And the sooner we get out of our personal guilt trip and realize that we are, in fact, under attack by outside forces, the sooner we will be able to loosen the grip of that evil on our lives.

Who sowed the bad seed? “An enemy.” It was “the devil,” meaning hell, that sowed in us the seeds of our bad tendencies and character flaws. This happened while we were spiritually asleep, and didn't realize what was happening. And those seeds *will* grow up in us, whether we like it or not. We will just have to get used to not being perfect.

The next surprising thing about this parable is that we are *not* commanded to immediately root out the evil in ourselves the moment we notice it is there. We have generally been advised that whenever we see anything wrong, we should “nip it in the bud.” For heaven's sake, *get rid of it* before it takes over! But I would suggest that this does not apply to *all* the flaws that we notice as they are sprouting up in our minds and hearts—ones that are

not coming from buds, but from seeds. The buds we are to nip are the poisonous flower buds of fully grown weeds in our character that are about to blossom out into actions and words that are damaging and destructive to the people around us—and to ourselves.

Now why, when we see a wrong thought or feeling sprouting up in ourselves, should we not instantly rip it up out of the field of our minds? Wouldn't that be a safer course?

The Lord, in the parable, says, "No; for in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." What could this mean? Isn't it obvious that when we weed our garden, it is best to get the weeds when they are small? Aren't they much more difficult to uproot when they are full-grown?

In many cases, this is true. And if we have obviously evil, vile thoughts and feelings cropping up within us like broad-leafed weeds that will quickly shade and choke out the good plants, it probably is a good idea to pull them up right away, before they can take over.

But in the case of wheat and these particular weeds, that would not be a wise course of action for two reasons. First, unlike most garden plants, wheat is a grass, and it grows packed closely together. With the root systems similarly packed together, and even intertwined, pulling up the weeds would inevitably uproot the wheat as well.

Second, the particular weed that Bible scholars believe Jesus was referring to is the darnel plant, which looks very much like wheat, especially in the early stages

of growth. Unlike nutritious wheat, its seeds are poisonous. But as it is growing, it is hard to tell dandelion from wheat. So in our attempts to root it out, we would be likely to pull out a lot of wheat plants thinking they were dandelion, and leave behind a lot of dandelion plants thinking they are wheat. In other words, in the early stages, it is hard to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds, and we would likely pull out many of the wrong plants.

What does this mean in our lives? It is true that some parts of our mind and lives are like a vegetable or flower garden, in which the good plants and the weeds are obvious, and we can root out the bad right away. For example, if we are in business, and we are thinking that perhaps just this month we should cook the books a bit to make things look a little better than they really are, that's an obvious violation of the Ten Commandments, and we can just pull that weed right out.

But what about when things aren't so clear cut? Perhaps an example outside of ourselves may help to make the problem stand out. Let's say once again that we are in business, but this time we are a manager in charge of hiring and firing. We have just hired a new crop of workers. Some of them look very promising; others look like they may not cut it, or may even be dishonest.

In this situation, one course of action we might take would be to immediately give the pink slip to those we suspect are going to be a problem. But in so doing, we run the danger of letting go people that might turn out to be very good workers. Perhaps some of the ones we see problems with are simply new to the work force, or

new to this particular line of work. They may be struggling to get oriented, and be a bit inept and inefficient at first. These people do not need to be fired; they need to be helped along. And if we do help them along, they may become fine additions to our work force.

On the other hand, some of the ones who look great at first may, in fact, be quite competent—but also untrustworthy and apt to cheat the business. We might leave them in place because of the good show that they make, only to find out later that they have a tendency to help themselves to money or merchandise when they see an opportunity.

Of course, there may be some obvious bad apples that we need to get rid of right away. But for the most part, it is better to give our new crop of employees some time, and see how they turn out. In the language of the parable, we “let both of them grow together until the harvest.” Only when we have seen them “grow to maturity” in their job can we clearly distinguish between the wheat and the weeds among our various employees.

The same is true of many of our everyday thoughts and feelings. A multitude of thoughts and feelings crop up within us every day—and it isn’t always easy to tell which ones are good and which are bad.

For example, we may have a bad feeling about a particular person, and be ready to shut that person out. And our feeling may be right! On the other hand, it may be based on prejudices that we need to overcome, or on a bad experience we had with someone else who looked a bit like that person. In this case, it is best to let our feelings “mature” a bit, and see if our initial reaction is

well-founded—or if, in fact, this is a case in which we need to change our attitudes and broaden our minds.

The message here is not that we should be careless and unconcerned about dealing with our wrong thoughts and feelings. It is, rather, that when thoughts and feelings are growing up within us that are new and untried, it might be best to see where they lead us before making a decision about whether they are good or bad. New ideas that at first seem crazy may, in fact, be leading us in a whole new and better direction. And new feelings that at first seem beautiful and appealing may, in fact, be leading us in a bad direction. As those thoughts and feelings mature, their true nature will become clear to us. Then we will be able to “harvest” them together, keeping the good, and rejecting the bad.

We can do some of this right here on earth. The more we allow our thoughts and feelings to grow to maturity, and then “collect the weeds and bind them into bundles to be burned,” while “gathering the wheat into the Lord’s barn,” the better off we will be even while we are still living in the physical world.

For each of us, though, there is also a “final harvest” after we leave the physical world for the spiritual world. There, in a place called the “World of Spirits,” all our thoughts and feelings come to full maturity. There, whatever we have truly believed and been motivated by within ourselves will come out into the light. We will no longer be able to think one thing and do another. The true nature of each one of our thoughts and feelings will become obvious in the brilliant, clear light that comes from heaven. Whatever outward show we may have

made here on earth, our real inner nature will come out, and we will speak and act outwardly exactly as we have thought and felt inwardly.

This can be a scary teaching. Most of us have well-hidden thoughts and feelings that we would be embarrassed or scared to have known by all the people around us. But as Jesus tells us, what we have said in the darkness of our own hearts will be heard in the daylight, and what we have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms of our minds will be proclaimed from the rooftops (Luke 12:3). This should give us an incentive to gradually let those inner thoughts grow up into the light, where we can clearly distinguish the good from the bad, and then reject the bad, while taking the good to heart.

The teachings about our final harvest in the spiritual world can also be comforting. What if we do want to be good, but are still a bit mixed up? What if we have a good heart, but find ourselves drawn into thoughts, feelings, and ways of living that we do not feel good about? While we are here on earth, because of our outward circumstances and our ingrained habits, we may not be able to live the life we truly want and believe in.

All is not lost! When the fields of our lives come to their harvest in the World of Spirits, these things will all be sorted out—no matter how hopelessly tangled a mess they may be in now. If we are good at heart, the Lord's angels are very skillful at seeing our true nature, our true feelings, and helping us to “gather into bundles” everything evil and false that does not agree with the person we really are, so that those poisonous parts of ourselves

can be sent down to hell where they belong, and not trouble us anymore.

“Do you want us to go out and gather them?”

“No; for in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers: Collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Littlest to Biggest

READINGS

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Gardens of righteousness and praise

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a mantle of praise instead of a spirit of weakness. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his glory. . . .

For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will recognize that they are a people the Lord has blessed.

I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride

adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is planted to grow, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.

Matthew 13:31–32

The parable of the mustard seed

He told them another parable, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds; yet when it has grown it is the largest of the plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and roost in its branches.”

Heaven and Hell #475–77

Our life stays with us after death

We present our whole self in our works and deeds. Our motives and thoughts, or the love and faith that form our inner self, are not complete until they are embodied in the deeds and works that form our outer self. These latter are, in fact, the outermost forms in which love and faith find definition; and without such definition they are like undifferentiated things that do not yet have any real presence—things that are therefore not yet in us.

To think and intend without acting when we are able is like a flame sealed in a jar and snuffed out, or like seed sown in the sand that does not grow, but dies along with its power to reproduce. Thinking, intending, and doing, though, is like a flame that sheds its light and warmth all around, or like seed sown in the soil, which grows into a tree or a flower and becomes something. . . .

We may gather from this what the life is that stays with us after death. It is actually our love and our resulting faith, not only in theory but in action as well. So it is our deeds or works, because these contain within themselves our whole love and faith.

There is a dominant love that remains with each of us after death, and never changes to eternity. We have many loves, but they all go back to our dominant love and form a single whole with it.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds; yet when it has grown it is the largest of the plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and roost in its branches. (Matthew 13:31–32)

I grew up in a family of ten, with seven brothers and sisters and, of course, our parents. One of the practical ramifications of this was that with ten people sitting around the dinner table, it made a big difference—to us kids, anyway—who got served first and who got served last. In fact, by the time the last person was served, if the first person was a fast eater, he or she might already be coming back for seconds.

Because of this, we had several schemes for determining the order in which we would be served. The most common were “biggest to littlest” (oldest to youngest) and “littlest to biggest” (youngest to oldest). Of course, for those who were in the middle, neither one of these was all that great; so sometimes there would be lobbying

for “middlest to outsidest.” But for me, being number six, I usually figured that “littlest to biggest” was the quickest route to getting my supper—so that was the one I’d generally root for. This explains how I got such a funny title out of the parable of the mustard seed!

Like all children who reach full adulthood, each one of us little Woofendens grew up to be big Woofendens; and now there are a whole bunch more little Woofendens running around—some of whom aren’t little anymore themselves. And so the cycle of life goes on. The human seeds planted by my parents—and their parents and grandparents before them—keep on growing and producing more human seeds. Add all of the families of the world together, and we can see why this earth and its human population is called “the seedbed of heaven.” But I’m getting ahead of myself!

The parable of the mustard seed is a parable of the littlest becoming the biggest. Though mustard seeds were not literally the smallest seeds that the people of ancient Palestine were aware of, they were one of the smallest of the seeds that people commonly planted for their use—and the mustard seed had become proverbial for its smallness. The variety of mustard Jesus was probably referring to (black mustard), when planted in the garden, will usually grow only about three or four feet high. However, when it has enough water, sunlight, and soil, it can and does grow to be ten or even fifteen feet high—which approaches the size of many of the common trees that grow in that part of the world. And unlike trees, the mustard plant, which is an annual, does

this in a single season. In other words, given the right conditions, it is a phenomenally fast-growing plant.

All of this—not to mention the hot and pungent flavor of the seeds themselves—made the mustard seed an ideal image for Jesus to use in showing how the initial seeds of spiritual love and understanding that are sown in us grow up into lives of “righteousness and praise,” to use Isaiah’s words.

If we look at the world around us, spiritual truth and love do, indeed, seem like “the smallest of all seeds.” What are most people engaged in most of the time? From the look of it, most people are engaged most of the time in making money and pursuing enjoyment, pleasure, or power. We have built up vast economic and governmental systems that are geared almost entirely to providing for our material well-being and asserting our economic and political power as far as it will extend. In the face of that huge machine, what hope do truth, spirit, and love for God and the neighbor have? They seem almost to be swallowed up in the human hubbub—tiny, insignificant seeds that almost disappear because their presence and influence is so slight in our ordinary worldly consciousness.

Yet those tiny, insignificant looking seeds have a quality about them that causes us to “plant them in the field” of our minds. When the pursuits and pleasures of this world begin to lose their savor, we are attracted to the heat and pungency of spiritual ideas that challenge everything our materialistic mind takes for granted, and promise a very different life than the one that has already begun to grow old and stale for us. We plant

those seeds of spiritual possibility in our minds and hearts, and wait to see what will come of them.

It is important to notice that this parable of the mustard seed appears early in the Lord's series of parables on the kingdom of heaven. Even when the mustard plant has grown, it does not represent our full, mature state of spiritual development, but rather the time when spiritual life first begins to spring up and grow in us. These first few parables deal with seeds and plants growing. Later the parables move on to themes of treasure and wealth. And the latest in the series deal with human beings—first workers in the vineyard, and then people attending weddings. And we will see as we move along in our series on the parables of the kingdom of heaven that this progression moves us through the stages of our spiritual growth to full spiritual maturity, in which we participate in “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:19).

In the parable of the mustard seed, we are dealing with the earlier stages of our spiritual growth. This brings us to another, more personal reason why the mustard seed is called “the smallest of the seeds.” When we first begin our spiritual journey, we are fresh from our previous lives, in which our main focus was our own comfort and possessions, and those of our family. At that point, our habit is still to think of ourselves first, and others after we've gotten enough for ourselves.

Because of this, when those first seeds of new spiritual truth and life are sown in us, we tend to be focused on what we are going to *get* out of this new, spiritual life, and how things are going to be better *for us*. We also

tend to think that our new spiritual understanding makes us *pretty darned good*—certainly much better than all those selfish, materialistic, unenlightened people milling around out there. In other words, there is still a lot of ego and a desire for our own advantage in the beginnings of our spiritual life. We are still a long way from being angels of love and light. And the goodness and truth in us are still very small.

But it's a start. And having *some* spiritual life—even if it's a rather smug and self-satisfied spiritual life—is better than having no spiritual life at all. We have to start somewhere; and we start from where we were in our lives. So even though we may recognize, in our clearer moments, that we are still misguided, selfish so-and-so's, we should still go ahead and plant those spiritual seeds in our minds and hearts, and let them grow.

Perhaps an example might help to see this more clearly. Consider a young (or not so young) married couple who are having a rough time in their marriage. They seem to argue and fight more than they support and love one another. Things are looking bad, and divorce crosses their minds more and more often. Each one of them is thinking, "Why should I stay in this marriage? I'm not getting the love and support I'm supposed to get out of marriage. I just get a lot of grief. What good is that?" So the relationship grows more and more strained and cold.

This is a situation seriously in need of some spiritual input. Let's consider that for this couple, the "mustard seed" they plant in their field is the idea from the church that marriage is meant to be a spiritual and eternal

union. Of course, this couple could just say to themselves, “I picked the wrong person; maybe I’ll try someone else.” But they do still have some affection for each other, and they did, after all, love one another enough to get married. So they decide they need to work on this marriage and overcome their difficulties.

Much of the incentive for doing this is expressed in the thought I just mentioned: “I’m supposed to get love and support out of marriage.” In other words, marriage is supposed to make *me* feel good! I suspect that for most couples who have not progressed very far emotionally and spiritually in their marriage, the thought of what *I’m* going to get out of the marriage is the major driving force pressing them forward to see if they can get their relationship fixed: “If I have a better relationship, I’ll have a more enjoyable life.”

That is the mustard seed. Getting a more enjoyable life for ourselves is not a very noble or spiritual motive. In fact, by itself, it’s a fairly selfish motive. True marriage love is not about getting pleasure for ourselves, but about giving love and happiness to our partner.

Still, we have to start somewhere. And likely as not, in this example of marriage it will be the spiritually tiny, but hot and pungent (in our hearts) mustard seed of wanting a better, more enjoyable, and more affectionate relationship for ourselves that gets us moving. In fact, with this goal in mind, we may vigorously pursue ways to improve our relationship with our partner. That mustard seed grows fast and big as it causes us to work on our relationship! In the process, we make things better not only for ourselves, but also for our partner, for our

children (if we have them), and for the rest of our family and friends.

More importantly, as we work on our relationship from what may be less than noble and altruistic motives, we begin to learn that relationships are not about getting pleasure for ourselves, but about giving love and happiness to our spouse and our children. And then we can begin moving on to the next stages, not only of our relationship, but of our spiritual life.

This, I hope, gives a clearer picture of how those early mustard seeds of not yet mature spiritual life first spring up and become an active force in our lives.

What does all of this have to do with heaven?

Of course, every time we grow in new ways in our understanding, our emotions, and our spirits, we are entering more fully into the kingdom of heaven even while we are here on earth. So in that general sense, this parable is all about our place in the kingdom of heaven.

But our reading from *Heaven and Hell*, and the whole chapter in which it appears, give more urgency to the question of just *what* seeds we will plant in our fields. Swedenborg writes, “There is a dominant love that remains with each one of us after death, and never changes to eternity.” In the last chapter we spoke of a “final harvest” that comes when our life here on earth has ended, and we enter the spiritual world. There, our true inner nature will come out—however well we may have hidden it from sight here on earth—and we will become exactly what we are like in our heart of hearts, and in our inner mind.

The process of sorting out that I mentioned in the last chapter involves discovering what our “dominant love” is. It involves opening up our heart of hearts, and bringing our whole life—from our innermost thoughts and feelings right out to our words and actions—into harmony with whatever it is that we love most of all.

Do we love ourselves most of all, and consider other people to be no better than servants to our will? Then we will become devils of hell, continually struggling for dominance over other people who are equally intent on dominating and subjugating us. Do we love money, possessions, and physical pleasure most of all? Then we will become satans of hell, always grasping for others’ goods and possessions, and stealing them when we can—and suffering a similar fate at their hands.

Or do we love the Lord and our fellow human beings most of all? If so, we will become angels of heaven, at a higher or lower level depending on the depth and strength of our love. We will spend eternity in the joy of love and service, in community with people who get just as much pleasure out of loving and serving us as we do out of serving them.

As we consider the parable of the mustard seed, we do well to consider just what kinds of seeds we are planting in our lives here on earth. Whatever seeds we sow in the fields of our minds and hearts, those are the seeds that will grow up into the largest of garden plants, and finally become trees firmly rooted in our lives. Let us resolve to plant good seeds of love, kindness, and understanding, so that we may become angels of love and light.

Trials and Fermentations

READINGS

Psalm 78:1–8

I will open my mouth in parables

Give ear, O my people, to my law;
 Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
 I will utter dark sayings from of old,
What we have heard and known,
 And our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
 We will show the coming generation
The praises of the Lord, and his might,
 And the wonders he has done.

He established a decree in Jacob,
 And appointed a law in Israel,
Which he commanded our ancestors
 To teach to their children,
So that the next generation might know them,
 The children yet unborn,
And rise up and tell them to their children,
 So that they might put their trust in God,
And not forget the works of God,
 But keep his commandments;

And they will not be like their ancestors,
 A stubborn and rebellious generation,
 A generation that did not set its heart at right,
 Whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Matthew 13:33–35

The parable of the yeast

He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

Jesus said all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not speak to them without a parable. This was in fulfillment of what had been spoken by the prophet, saying, “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.”

Heaven and Hell #510, 511

Separating evil from good

After we die, we each go to the community where our spirit was while we were living in the world. In our spirit we are actually united to some community, either heavenly or hellish. Evil people are connected with hellish communities, and good people with heavenly ones. As spirits, we are gradually brought there, and eventually we move in. . . .

The separation of evil spirits from good ones takes place in our second stage after death.

In the first stage, everyone is together. As long as spirits are focused on external things, it is similar to circumstances in the world: evil people are together with good ones, and good people with evil ones. This changes when we have been brought into our inner nature, and are left to our own character and intentions.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. (Matthew 13:33)

In a painting, dark lines and backgrounds bring out the lighter foreground image by providing contrast. In the same way, hell brings heaven into sharper relief. If we never experienced anything but good, we probably would not appreciate it. When we have experienced evil, pain, and sorrow, the good times are so much sweeter by comparison!

So in this chapter, along with our consideration of heaven, we are going to bring in a little bit of hell also.

Though it may not seem like it, that is what the parable of the yeast is all about. We usually think of yeast as something good. After all, it is yeast that makes our bread rise, so that we don't have to eat flat, hard bread, but can have nice, soft risen loaves that both look and taste better. It is true that the *results* of yeast are good. But one of the surprising revelations of the Bible's spiritual meaning is that it is actually *evil* that brings out this goodness. Yes, in God's economy, even evil is made to serve some good purpose!

As we explore how this works, let's look at the spiritual world first. In earlier chapters we have talked about the approach of death, our passage into the other world, and the final judgment that each one of us faces there. In the last chapter I mentioned that whatever our "dominant love" is—whatever we love most of all—will come out into the open in the spiritual world, no matter how

well we may have hidden it from others here on earth. Then we will become entirely formed and driven by that dominant love, inside and out.

But this does not happen all at once. When we first come into the spiritual world, we enter a place Swedenborg calls the “World of Spirits,” which is halfway between heaven and hell, and not part of either one of them. Like earth, the World of Spirits is a mixture of good and evil because like earth, heaven and hell meet and mix there. In fact, as we first start our lives in the spiritual world, we return to what we were familiar with here on earth, and begin living exactly as we had lived before we died—and even in similar surroundings.

You see, everything in the spiritual world is determined by our state of mind. And the mere fact of dying does not change the way we think and feel. We are still exactly the same person we were here. Our thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes, skills, ineptitudes, and the type of work we are able to do are all exactly the same as they were before we died. So naturally, we go back to a life like the one we had before.

This is our first stage after death, which Swedenborg calls the “stage of our outer self.” At this point, if we weren’t paying much attention to what was happening as we died, we may think we are still here on earth, since things are so familiar to us.

Before long, though, the social masks we had learned to wear during our life on earth begin to wear away, and both we and others start to see just what we are like inside. At the same time, we also start to see just what our friends and companions are like. This is a time of

change—and it can be quite uncomfortable. In fact, it could be called a time of trials and fermentations.

While we are on earth, we keep our social masks on most of the time when we are out and about—and for some things, even at home. There are things about ourselves that we want to hide from others, and even from ourselves. It can be uncomfortable for those masks to come off in public. Yet that is just what happens in the World of Spirits. Then we are confronted with *exactly* what we are like inside, both the good and the bad. There is no concealing or minimizing it. It is the ultimate state of “what you see is what you get.”

Some people will have already done most of the work of getting rid of their evil and destructive thoughts and feelings—with the Lord’s help, of course. Their process in the World of Spirits will be short, as they slough off the remaining scraps of thoughtlessness, and move quickly to their places in heaven.

Others, though—and I suspect this means most people who leave this earth—are in a mixed state, and have much more work to do to get it all sorted out. This work is done in a way that exactly corresponds to the process of fermentation.

Yeast is a fungus. It is a very *tiny*, one-celled fungus, but it works about the same as the mold, mushrooms, and other larger fungus that we see throughout nature: it takes complex organic compounds and breaks them down into simpler ones. Specifically, yeast consumes sugar, and produces carbon dioxide gas (which is what causes the bread to rise), and alcohol—which is burned

off during the baking process, but leaves behind a distinctive flavor.

The fermentation takes place before the bread is baked. While the bread is fermenting, it is just a lump of soft, sticky dough, with many biological and chemical reactions going on within it. If this doesn't sound very appetizing, that's because it *isn't* very appetizing. It is only after the heat of the oven kills the yeast, stops the fermentation process, and burns off the alcohol, while causing the loaf to become firm, that the bread becomes edible and nutritious.

Right about now, you may be thinking that you have picked up the wrong book, and ended out with a textbook of chemistry. And you might just be right! But it is all in the cause of understanding the parable of the yeast, and its spiritual significance for our lives. What happens chemically in the process of fermentation and bread-baking is exactly what must, and will, happen in us spiritually.

The fact is, while we are here on earth our motives are mixed. The "sugar" in our dough—what we love and enjoy—is partly self-centered, and partly focused on others. For example, most of us do our jobs just as much, if not more, for our own benefit (to support ourselves) as we do for the sake of the useful services we provide for others.

Under ordinary circumstances, these mixed motives are fairly harmless. Even if we may be working just to make a living, we are still doing useful work, serving people, and generally doing it with some thoughtfulness

for others. Our employment requires this—and most of us do want to treat others right.

But as we go along, there are times when those mixed motives prevent us from progressing any further in our spiritual life. We are held back from rising to a higher level of love and service by our focus on ourselves and our material possessions and pleasures. We may even be dragged down to a lower level by our more corrupt desires. Before we can progress, we must separate the good from the bad in ourselves, and leave the bad behind.

This does not take place without a struggle.

The struggle is pictured in the process of fermentation, in which there is a “struggle” of chemical reactions as the sugars are broken down into things that aren’t nearly so sweet: carbon dioxide gas, which is a waste product that is purged from our body through our lungs, and will suffocate us if we are immersed in it; and alcohol, which is a systemic toxin in the human body. These toxic compounds must be driven off by the heat of baking before the bread becomes edible and nutritious.

We go through similar struggles as we undergo the painful process of separating our good motives from our bad ones, rejecting the bad and keeping the good. The physical process of fermentation corresponds to the spiritual process of temptation.

Let’s turn to the spiritual world for an example. In the World of Spirits, sorting out our mixed motives can take some hard and painful forms. One particular form that Swedenborg mentions is when people who are good at heart have taken up with friends and associates who

are *not* good at heart. While we are here on earth, we often form friendships and associations based on outwardly held common interests. Let's look at such a situation, and see how it might fare in the World of Spirits.

Consider a man who has been a member of the local country club all his life. Fred (as we'll call him) goes there regularly and golfs with his buddies. And of course, it is on the golf green that the *real* business decisions are made! Fred is an ordinary fellow. He makes his money in various business ventures, and his connections on the tee are critical to his financial well-being. The club is also where all his closest friends are. These friendships form the basis of his own and his family's social life around town.

Unfortunately, though Fred himself aims to be good and honest in his business, and to serve his clients and customers well and fairly, some of his associates are just putting on an outward show of honesty in order to get as much as they can for themselves. And though Fred has occasionally felt a twinge at some of the stories of sharp business dealings he has heard from his friends, he has chalked it up to "the realities of the business world."

In the course of time, Fred's generation moves on, and he and his friends find themselves in the spiritual world. They get back together there, and carry on their friendships and their dealings as they had before. Life seems very much the same, and Fred figures that his life will continue to be smooth sailing.

However, this is only a temporary situation. As his group moves out of their stage of outer life in the World of Spirits, and into their stage of inner life, the true

character of Fred's friends starts coming out. Some are fine. But others become increasingly sharp in their dealings, and move into open cheating and stealing.

Now Fred is in a very painful position. These are the people that his life has been intertwined with for many years. The bonds of friendship are strong, and Fred is nothing if not loyal to his friends. So he excuses and covers up what they are doing. He justifies their actions, arguing to himself that the people that his friends took advantage of were even worse, and they deserved it—or some such thing. Truth be told, Fred himself had sometimes bent the rules, and engaged in practices that his better self knew were not right.

As his friends begin their downward spiral toward hell, Fred spirals down with them. He simply cannot let go of his best buddies, his lifelong friends. So he moves closer to hell along with them, and among the dregs of the World of Spirits—a place sometimes called the “lower earth”—he goes through many hard experiences. He himself is attacked and cheated. Finally, even his own friends turn against him when he keeps balking at their increasingly devious and destructive schemes to engage in fraud and theft of all kinds.

Fred is now faced with the hard reality that he *must* abandon these erstwhile friends of his. He realizes that his heart is heading in a different direction than theirs. And so he takes his leave, and heads back upwards to where he belongs.

But the experience was not in vain. Through it, he has realized just how wrong some of his own motives for mere self-advancement have been, not to mention some

of the things he has done in pursuing them. His former mixed motives have been broken down. Through this hard experience, he has rejected the bad, and gone wholeheartedly with the good. He now does his work not at all for his own advantage, but out of a love for serving his fellow human beings, and serving the Lord.

This is the process of trial and fermentation that we go through here on earth as well. It is a process of breaking our loves and motives down into their component parts so that we can leave behind the bad and strengthen the good in ourselves.

We do not like going through this process! And the “dough” of our lives becomes quite sticky and acrid while it is happening. But in the end, this great ferment within us purifies our souls. In the end, our spiritual character is transformed from a rather unpromising lump of dough into the bread of life, purified from our evils, and well baked in the heat of God’s love.

Finders, Keepers

READINGS

Psalm 119:65–72

The Lord's law is more precious than gold

You have dealt well with your servant,
O Lord, according to your word.
Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
For I believe in your commandments.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep your word.
You are good and do good;
Teach me your statutes.

The arrogant have forged a lie against me,
But with my whole heart I keep your precepts.
Their hearts are callous and unfeeling,
But I delight in your law.
It is good for me that I was afflicted,
So that I might learn your statutes.
The law of your mouth is better to me
Than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

Matthew 13:44–46

The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.
When someone found it, he hid it again. Then in his joy
he went and sold all he had, and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he went and sold everything he had, and bought it.

Heaven and Hell #365

Rich and poor in heaven

Rich people go to heaven just as much as poor people do, one as easily as the other. The reason people believe it is easy for the poor and hard for the rich is that they misunderstand the Bible when it talks about the rich and the poor. In the spiritual meaning of the Bible, “the rich” means people who have a very full understanding of what is true and good—that is, people in the church, where the Bible is; “the poor” means people who lack this understanding, but long for it—or people outside the church, where they do not have the Bible.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When someone found it, he hid it again. Then in his joy he went and sold all he had, and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he went and sold everything he had, and bought it. (Matthew 13:44–46)

In the last two chapters, as we explored the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, we encountered the surprising teaching that evil can actually accomplish some good in us. More specifically, we looked at how the motives of self-preservation and gaining happiness for

ourselves can drive us forward toward a state of greater spiritual goodness, in which we are less concerned with making ourselves happy, and more concerned with giving happiness to others. But we also considered the fact that this change in us doesn't happen without struggles, trials, and temptations—pictured by the clashing of chemical reactions in the fermentation of bread as it rises under the influence of the yeast.

In this chapter, with the parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value, we move on from those times of spiritual struggle to the great joy of spiritual discovery that awaits us on the other side. And yet, these discoveries also cause us to go through great changes, giving up many things we have held dear. And that can be a challenge in itself!

As we move on from the struggles of the parable of the yeast, we find that at the start of the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, we are still laboring. Yes, I know, the verse doesn't actually *say* that. But the Greek word used for "field" is a word that means a cultivated field—in other words, a farm. And who would be out digging around in a field, who is not the owner of the field? It is fairly clear that the person who found the treasure was a hired agricultural laborer, out working the fields. And this means it was a poor person. Who but poor people would be out tilling fields they don't own?

This is the same state we are in when we have just gone through the great spiritual struggles symbolized by yeast, fermentation, and the rising and baking of the bread. We have cleared away some of the most obvious selfish desires and wrong thoughts, and have turned our

lives away from living purely for our own pleasure and gain. The satisfaction this accomplishment gives us, like bread, is nourishing to our souls.

Still, we find that when we have turned away from our old motives of pleasure and gain for ourselves, there is often a certain emptiness inside. Yes, we feel cleaner in our soul than we ever have before. But like a house that has been cleared of all its old, broken down furnishings and swept clean, the rooms and hallways are empty, and in need of new furniture and new life. We feel a poverty of having turned our lives around, but not knowing what to do next. In our old life, we knew what we wanted, and how to get it. But this business of living spiritually is all new to us. So we labor at it, like a hired hand out in the field, digging and scratching for our spiritual "living," wondering what it is really all about.

It is as if we had spent years in prison, after even more years of living a life of crime, and during our time behind bars had decided to go straight and make an honest living once we got out. This would be a decision that came through hard experience. But as good as we would feel about ourselves in our new commitment to straighten up our act, it would still leave us with a problem: We have never made an honest living before, so we have no experience to tell us how to go about it. From having seen a great deal of easy money going through our hands, we find ourselves at the bottom of the employment ladder, doing hard work for meager wages, and sorely tempted to go back to our life of crime.

This is how the beginning of our new and hard-won spiritual life can feel. It is like that laborer out in the fields, toiling away in the dirt and sweat.

Yet perhaps through frugal living we have metaphorically managed to acquire a few things for ourselves: a modest house, some furniture, kitchen utensils, and a few of the pleasures of life. Even the early beginning of spiritual life has its rewards: a new sense of self-respect; a new feeling of satisfaction in life; friendships based, not on what advantage each can get out of the other, but on genuine thoughtfulness for one another. Being a laborer has its own rewards, even if they are modest.

It is precisely when we are engaged in this labor of spiritual growth that we come across a treasure we had never dreamed of before. You see, when we have spent all of our lives focused on taking care of our own wants and needs, without much thought of a higher purpose in life, we don't have any idea what spiritual life is all about, nor any conception of how rich and deep its rewards can be. We think that without the old physical and material pleasures we have run after all along, our life would be a real drudge. We think we will be laboring away forever, toiling in that field, and never getting anything like the pleasures and thrills that used to keep us going. Swedenborg expresses it this way:

When selfishness and materialism are the reasons we do things, we cannot possibly be kind people. We do not even know what kindness is. We have no concept at all that wanting and doing good things for other people—and not just to get something out of it—is heaven in us. We cannot comprehend that there could be as much happiness in the desire to do good things as the angels in heaven have—and the happiness of the angels cannot even be described! We think that if the enjoyment from the prestige of status and wealth were

taken away from us, there would be nothing left to enjoy. Actually, that is where heavenly enjoyment first begins—and it is infinitely greater. (*The Heavenly City* #105)

If we are sincere and hard-working in our new life of honesty, integrity, and actively loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, we will indeed discover a hidden treasure that we had known nothing about. Right there in the fields of our new commitment to a religious way of life, the shovel of our seeking mind will strike upon something solid hidden in the deeper levels of our mind—something that will bring us great joy.

The field we are laboring in is the field of spiritual goodness in our hearts, minds, and lives—which is the true church of the Lord. We have made a commitment to live as Christians, according to the teachings of the Lord given to us in the Bible. And we labor in our minds and hearts to figure out just what the Lord would have us do in each of the situations we face. We work the fields of religious life, planting the seeds of truth that the Lord has given us, and cultivating those fields so that we may bring forth crops of goodness and love.

There in our labor we discover that completely unknown to us, the Lord has hidden far deeper knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. We thought that the spiritual life would be hard work . . . and for quite a long time, it is! What we didn't expect was that a whole new level of our mind and heart would be opened up, containing greater treasure than we ever imagined.

What is this treasure hidden in the field? One way to look at it is to consider that as we do our work in the

spiritual fields of life, the Lord's Word is our guide. For Christians, the Word of the Lord is contained especially in the Bible. And when we become Christians, we are eager to know what the Bible teaches about how to live in God's way.

Yet when we first encounter the Bible, it may look like a dry document full of a lot of rough history and primitive rituals; a stern document full of many "Thou shalt nots." When we first start our new life, the Bible is a book that tells us that we cannot do all the things we always used to enjoy! Or at least, that's how it feels.

But as the kingdom of heaven is opened to us, we discover that this is only the external crust of the Bible. Within those tough stories and stern laws lies the treasure of the spiritual meaning—which is all about the infinite love and wisdom of God, and how we can bring our lives into harmony and relationship with that love and wisdom. Especially today, when we are living in a new Christian era, the treasure for us is the great discovery that within all the history, law, poetry, prophecy, and parable, there are deeper and deeper levels that open up for us the kingdom of heaven—and our own soul along with it. The treasure hidden in the field is the deeper truth and wisdom we gain as we persist in living from spiritual motives and principles. This is expressed well in the book of Proverbs:

My child, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear

of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:1–6)

You see, the treasure spoken of in the Bible has nothing to do with earthly treasure—with becoming materially wealthy. As Swedenborg explains in our reading from *Heaven and Hell*, when the Bible speaks of rich people, it is really talking about people who have gained a wealth of knowledge and understanding of what is true and good. Wisdom is the true wealth that is most worthy of our seeking and finding. If we become wealthy in money and material goods, we will leave it all behind when we die. But if we become wealthy in our understanding of the ways of God and spirit, and use that wealth well, it will remain with us to eternity.

If we are truly seeking this kind of treasure, we can find it in the church, and in our own reading of the Bible and of other spiritual literature. We can also find it as we take what we learn and put it to use—because the truth does not become ours until we have made it a part of our lives. In the language of the parable, we must *buy* the field in which the treasure is hidden if we want it to become our own.

In order to do that, we must “sell everything we have.” This does not mean we must give up all our worldly possessions, as many have believed from a literal and materialistic reading of the Scriptures. Rather, it means that we must give over to the Lord, who is the owner of the fields in which we labor, all of our previous misconceptions and misguided desires. Before we turn our lives over to the Lord, “everything we have” is the

self-centered and materialistic desires that have been our primary motivation, together with the false and deceptive ways of thinking that we have used to justify those desires. We cannot gain the field of spirituality in which we have found the treasures of deeper wisdom until we “sell off” all those old desires and attitudes. Then we will have the spiritual “capital” to buy the field, and make those spiritual treasures our own.

Notice that in the very next verse we are no longer a laborer, but have become a merchant in search of fine pearls. With our newfound treasures of understanding and wisdom, we have set ourselves up as a comfortably well-off merchant trading, not in material goods, but in the knowledge of God’s ways. Like a trader buying and selling merchandise, we seek spiritual wealth not merely for our own use, but to pass it on to others, while having our own spirit and life enriched in the process.

Though we have already hit upon the treasure of a deeper understanding of the ways and the joys of spiritual living, we have a still greater treasure to discover. We are in search of fine pearls: beautiful gem-like spheres of insight built up through applying spiritual principles to all the gritty realities of life.

As we search for that spiritual beauty, we find the greatest beauty of all. The one pearl of great value, the greatest treasure in the Christian religion, is the knowledge and experience of the Lord God Jesus Christ as our master and our friend. When we have found the Lord in our hearts and lives, we will once again be ready to sell everything we have and buy that precious pearl, which will supply all of our spiritual needs forever.

A Fish Story To End All Fish Stories

READINGS

Ezekiel 47:6–12

The river from the temple

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I returned, I saw on the bank of the river a great number of trees, on one side and on the other. He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region, and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the sea. When it flows into the sea, the water there becomes fresh. Wherever the river flows, swarms of living creatures will live. There will be large numbers of fish because this water flows there and heals the waters. Wherever the river flows, everything will live.

“Fishermen will stand along it; from En-gedi to Englaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish in it will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not be healed; they will be left for salt. And by the river, on the banks on both sides, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because their water flows out from the sanctuary. Their fruit will serve for food, and their leaves for healing.”

Matthew 13:47–52

The parable of the net

“Once 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, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous, and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus asked them, “Have you understood all these things?”

They replied, “Yes, Lord.”

He said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasury things new and old.”

Heaven and Hell #425

Sorting good from evil

So that we may gain either heaven or hell, after death we are first taken to the World of Spirits. There, if we are going to be raised into heaven, goodness and truth are brought together in us. But if we are going to be cast into hell, evil and falsity are brought together in us.

No one in heaven or in hell is allowed to have a divided mind—to understand one thing and intend something else. Whatever we intend, we understand; whatever we understand, we intend. So if we are in heaven and our intentions are good, we also understand

what is true. And if we are in hell and our intentions are evil, the things we understand are false. If we are good, our false ideas are taken away, and we are given true ideas that go with our virtue. If we are evil, our true ideas are taken away, and we are given false ideas that go with our vice.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into baskets, but threw the bad away. (Matthew 13:47–48)

It's been a long time since I caught a fish—over thirty years! And I don't intend to take up fishing now. But I do remember walking down the path along the Saco River, headed to the little spring-fed sand bar at the river bend where we kids used to go fishing during camp in August. For me, going fishing was not as much about catching fish as it was about being down on the river with my friends. I loved that little sand bar—and I was very disappointed when, some years later, I went back and found that in the ever-changing river, that special spot of my boyhood memories was gone.

None of us was all that good at fishing anyway—except for my cousin, who actually knew what he was doing, and generally caught the best fish. Most of the fish we caught were too small, and we just threw them back in. Even when we did catch something big enough to eat, it was usually a chub—which was nowhere near

as exciting as catching a “real” fish like a trout or a bass. Still, we would put any edible fish we caught into our bucket or fishing basket, take them back to camp, and the cooks were nice enough to cook them up for us. As I remember, those chub had more bones than flesh. But at ten or twelve years old, we thought it was really great to eat something we had caught ourselves. We were never able to parlay our catches into much of a fish story, but we sure had a lot of fun!

The Bible, on the other hand, does have some great fish stories. In fact, the first four disciples Jesus called were fishermen. Three of them, Peter, James, and John, became his closest followers. When he called Peter and his brother Andrew from their fishing nets, he said that from then on they would fish for people. And that is exactly what they did. Jesus himself explains that the parable of the fishing net is about catching people for the kingdom of heaven. And the results of *that* fish story will last to eternity!

Let’s explore the meaning of this parable. We’ll do it on two levels: what it means for humanity as a whole, and what it means within each of us as individuals.

On an individual level, the sea represents our memory of everything we have learned in life. Water is truth, or understanding. Rivers of flowing water are the things we are actively learning and experiencing. All of this knowledge and experience flows into the vast reservoir of our memory, where it is available for our future use. However, as long as it remains in our memory, even if it includes knowledge about spiritual things, it remains on

a natural, worldly level because it is not being actively used for our spiritual life.

On a collective level, the sea, as compared to the land, represents the entire vast sum of human culture that is focused on the things of this world rather than on the things of heaven. As we look at the human world around us, there is a whole sea of work, recreation, and leisure activities that focus primarily on our material needs, and on physical and social pleasures.

And it is right and proper that this vast sea should exist. As long as we are here on earth, we do need to take care of our physical and material needs. And having done our work, it is also good and healthy for us to enjoy this beautiful earth that God has given us, to take full advantage of these incredible bodies that God has blessed us with, and to enjoy the company of the friends and family that God has provided for us.

For people whose lives are built around spiritual motives and values, the sea becomes a place of recreation and a source of supply for spiritual living. In comparison to fish, spiritual people are symbolized by the land-dwelling animals, and by human beings. Personally, though I don't go fishing anymore, I love to go to the beach and romp in the water! And as I said, God does want us to take a break from time to time, and enjoy the pleasures of this life.

Swimming in the world of earth-bound work and play is a vast school of human fish: millions of people whose entire lives are focused *only* on the things of this world. The job Jesus sent his disciples out to do was to catch as many of these human fish as they could, and

draw them out of the sea of worldly life and onto the dry land of spiritual life. It is the same job that the Lord, through the church, sends each one of us out to do. Those of us who have committed our lives to the church are also disciples of the Lord. And it is part of our job as disciples to reach out to others who may be receptive to a more spiritually oriented way of life.

What is the “net” that we are to use in this work of spiritual fishing? Let’s think about it. A fishing net consists of a whole system of cords knotted together in a highly regular and orderly way to make a container that will capture fish, while letting the water they swim in flow through. In precisely the same way, our personal faith—the system of beliefs we have woven for ourselves according to the orderly divine pattern found in the Bible and the teachings of our church—is the “net” that we can use to capture worldly people’s minds, and draw them out of purely materialistic living into a more spiritual way of life.

The New Jerusalem Church provides an especially good net. All of the beautiful teachings of this church fit together to make a broad and comprehensive system of spiritual and natural thought that applies to all areas of life. This can be very attractive to people who want something more out of life, but must have something that satisfies their minds as well as their emotions. It is true that many people come to the New Jerusalem Church either by family connections or through friends who invited them. Yet what keeps most Swedenborgians in the church is the reasonable and soul-satisfying

answers it offers for the deepest and most difficult questions we face.

This is the net with which each one of us can equip ourselves for the job of fishing for people. The more we learn about the teachings of the new Christianity, connecting them with all our other thoughts, and the more we ponder those teachings and make them an active, working part of our lives, the bigger and more effective a net we will have at our disposal.

As we go out among family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances, we can cast that net out into the world, seeking other souls who might also be captured by this net of spiritual doctrine, just as we ourselves were.

And the parable is very clear that we are seeking to catch fish of *all* kinds. We never know who will end out being receptive to a higher way of life, and who will not. So we must spread our nets broadly, and not count anyone out—even if he or she looks like a poor prospect for the church. Later in the parable, the good fish are sorted from the bad. But we have to catch them first!

I encourage you to engage the people you see each day in conversation, and let the subject move to spiritual subjects when it is appropriate and there is a willingness to go in that direction. Be willing to look below the surface of people's lives, and listen for their deeper struggles and questions. If you find that you have something to offer from your faith, have the courage to offer it with no strings attached, as a possible pathway of thought or action that might be helpful to them. As time goes by, you will find out which ones also get "caught up" in this wonderful faith.

Let's get back to the individual level. I mentioned that the "sea" in us is the reservoir of our memory—the gathering place of everything we have learned and of all our experience. Our mental fish, then, are those parts of our learning and experience that have come alive for us. And what comes alive for us are the thoughts, ideas, and experiences that relate to things we love and enjoy.

We can tell where our mental fish are from the things we pay attention to and gravitate toward in the sea of information and activities around us. It is like standing in front of a big magazine display rack in a store. Which magazines catch our interest? Which ones do we take off the rack? Sports? Cooking? Science? Politics? People? Nature? Expand that to all the things we encounter in the world around us each day that engage our mind, and we have identified our mental fish.

As with fishing for people, fishing for living ideas in our minds involves forming some orderly, coherent principles of life that we can use as a net to draw out of our memory those particular living ideas and experiences that will feed our mind and heart, and help move us forward on our chosen path. Each of us has many life experiences. Each of us has learned many things. All of them form a part of our memory and our life. But some of them will stand out especially strongly for us, and become an integral part of how we live each day. Others we will throw back into the sea of our memory, perhaps to catch again some time in the future when they have matured, or perhaps to leave them behind for good. We will need to sort one from another, and decide which, for us, are the good fish, and which are the bad.

This time of sorting is a time of judgment.

When speaking collectively of humankind, as Jesus does in his explanation of the parable, the time of judgment is the time when we are gathered into the spiritual world after death, and our true inner character becomes known. Then we will each find ourselves sorted out according to our own desires, inclinations, loves, and actions. If we enjoy serving our neighbor and doing the Lord's will, we will feel more and more strongly drawn toward heaven, where others like us live. But if the only things we love are having others serve us and gaining money, power, and pleasure for ourselves, then we will find ourselves drawn strongly toward hell, where others live who care only for themselves, and not at all for others, and who actively hate and reject God because they have chosen a path contrary to God's way of love.

If we do choose hell, the fire we encounter there will not be literal fire burning our bodies, but the fire of our own burning hatred for others who stand in our way, and the flaring of anger and revenge against one another. The weeping will be our frustration at never being able to fully satisfy our destructive desires. And the gnashing of teeth will be the continual clash of one person's false, self-serving beliefs against the conflicting false beliefs of others.

Within ourselves, we also need to sort out our thoughts and desires. There are many things we enjoy; some of them are good, and some of them are not so good. Some of them lead to health and happiness, to peace and mutual love in our relationships with the people around us. Others lead to sickness and sorrow, and

to interpersonal conflict, anger, and ruptured relationships. As we gain more experience in life and a greater knowledge of the ways of God and spirit, we come to turning points, to times of judgment in our lives, when we must evaluate and sort out our thoughts and desires. At times of major life change, we must make choices about which of our ways of thinking and acting we will keep, and which ones we will reject—just like those ancient fishermen who collected the good fish into baskets, but threw the bad ones away.

Perhaps you are at a time of change and personal re-evaluation right now. Perhaps you are facing these kinds of choices. If so, you have a great opportunity to begin a new stage in your life. You have an opportunity to leave behind thoughts, feelings, and habits that are dragging you down, and move forward on a path of higher and more spiritual principles and motives.

Just as he asked his disciples, the Lord will ask each one of us, “Have you understood all these things?” If we have been doing our spiritual fishing, we will be able to answer, “Yes.” Then, nourished and enriched by the new knowledge and understanding we have caught for ourselves, we will become like the homeowner, bringing out of our storeroom treasures both new and old. The old treasures are the good experiences of our earlier life, before we embarked on a spiritual path—such as my memories of youthful days fishing in the river. The new treasures are the greater depths of spiritual life and joy that we gain when we turn our soul toward the Lord, and our lives toward serving our fellow human beings.

Debits and Credits

READINGS

Deuteronomy 15:1–11

Be generous with your neighbor

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. This is how the release is to be done: Everyone who has made a loan to a neighbor shall cancel it, not requiring payment from the neighbor or community member, because the time of the Lord's release has been proclaimed. You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt that a member of your community owes you.

However, there will be no one in need among you, for the Lord will richly bless you in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, if only you listen obediently to the Lord your God, and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. For the Lord your God will bless you as he has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but will not borrow. You will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

If there is a poor person among your community members within any of your gates in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. Rather, be

open-handed and freely lend enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful not to harbor this evil thought: “The seventh year, the year of release, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward your needy neighbor and give nothing. Your neighbor may then cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously, and do so without a grudging heart. Because of this, the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your community members, and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Matthew 18:21–35

The unmerciful slave

Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. As he began the settlement, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife and children and all his possessions, and that payment be made.

“The slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ Filled with pity, the slave’s master released him, and forgave him the debt.

“But when that slave went out, he found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’

“His fellow slave fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went out and had him thrown into prison until he paid back the debt.

“When the other slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and went and told their master all that had happened.

“Then the master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me. Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow slave, just as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master turned him over to the torturers until he paid back his entire debt.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother’s offenses from the heart.”

Heaven and Hell #357

Rich and poor: literal or spiritual?

There are various opinions about being accepted into heaven. Some people think that the poor are accepted but not the rich; some think that rich and poor alike are accepted; some think that rich people cannot be accepted unless they give up their assets and become like the poor; and all of them support their opinions from the Bible.

But when it comes to heaven, those who differentiate between the rich and the poor do not understand the

Bible. In its heart, the Bible is spiritual, though it is material in the letter. So if people take the Bible only in its literal meaning and not in some spiritual meaning, they go astray in all kinds of ways—especially about the rich and the poor.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. (Matthew 18:23)

In this chapter I am going to talk about debits and credits. In other words, I'm going to talk about money. I will *also* talk about that paper stuff that's in your pocket or pocketbook.

There is a great misconception floating around that money has little or nothing to do with religion, the Bible, and God. But in fact, one of the Lord's favorite topics was wealth and poverty, great treasures and small pittances, gold and silver, and little copper coins. More than once he compares the kingdom of heaven to treasure. And in today's parable, he speaks of heaven as a king settling his accounts.

You don't have to be an accountant to know that account books consist primarily of debits and credits. Debits are everything that goes out—or debts that are (or must be) paid *by* us. Credits are everything that comes in—or debts that others pay (or owe) *to* us. Debits go on the minus side, and credits on the plus side. And even though it doesn't make much sense in reality, at a gut level we *like* credits, and we *don't like* debits. In other words, we think money coming in is *good*, and

money going out is *bad*. That is because we tend to focus on the money itself, and not on its usefulness.

After all, what is money? Today we do not actually have money in our pockets—except the coins. Instead we have “notes,” or “bills,” both of which mean “debts.” In our current monetary system, it is hard to figure out exactly what debt is represented by a “dollar bill.” However, the bills are issued under the auspices of the U.S. government—which is trillions of dollars in debt. The paper bills in our pockets and pocketbooks are essentially *debt* that we have all agreed to use as a medium of exchange, so that they *represent* money.

Money itself is a store, not of debt, but of positive value. In the earlier history of our country, and throughout most of the history of civilization, that store of value was primarily gold and silver. These metals provide an excellent store of value because they are durable, easily carried, have intrinsically useful qualities, and are sufficiently plentiful to provide enough to go around, but scarce enough that the law of supply and demand keeps their value high.

In material terms, gold and silver, and to a lesser extent other useful metals such as copper and iron, have real value in themselves, while providing a convenient medium of exchange. That is why gold and silver are the most frequently mentioned, and the most desirable, forms of money in the Bible. Gold and silver are used in the Bible to mean something *valuable*. But what is the Bible really talking about when it mentions this money?

On the strictly literal level, when the Bible is talking about money, it is talking about what we ordinarily

think of as money: a material thing that we use as a store of material value, with which we can buy material goods and services. But the Bible itself also points to a deeper meaning of money. In the Psalms we read:

The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold. (Psalm 19:9–10)

And the Lord tells us:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19–20)

Now we can begin to understand Swedenborg's statement in our reading from *Heaven and Hell* about why people are so confused by the Bible's teachings about money, and about rich people getting into heaven. As Swedenborg points out, when the Bible talks about money—about gold and silver, treasure, pearls, diamonds, and so on—it is not concerned with *material* money, but with *spiritual* money. Spiritual wealth is *real* wealth, whereas what we have here on earth is only a crude and temporary form of that real wealth.

We are back to the question: What is money? We can find out what real, spiritual money is by learning the spiritual significance of gold and silver in the Bible. Gold, Swedenborg tells us, corresponds to the goodness of love, while silver corresponds to our understanding of the truth—especially spiritual truth. In other words, real money, real wealth, is the only real value in the universe:

love and truth. And these come from God. All of the “money” we carry with us physically is only a material shadow of that *real* wealth, which we carry, not in our pockets or pocketbooks, but in our hearts and minds.

This can be hard for people to accept in this materialistic culture. But the old saying, “You can’t take it with you,” sums it all up. When we die, we leave behind all the “treasures on earth” that we may have built up here. But we will carry with us all the “treasures in heaven”—the love and goodness, the truth and understanding—that we build up within and around ourselves while we are here on earth. In an entry in his diary of spiritual experiences, Swedenborg expresses it this way:

Being promoted to honor and wealth in the world are not real gains or real blessings, both because they seduce us and lead us away from heaven and because they are temporary, and thus nothing in eternity. Therefore, relatively speaking, they have no reality in themselves. The Lord’s gifts are *eternal* gifts. He gives these gifts by means of things that lead us to heaven—and riches and honors do not lead us to heaven. (*Spiritual Experiences* #5710)

To borrow a phrase from Paul, the wealth we possess materially here on earth is only a “copy and shadow” of the wealth that is in heaven (see Hebrews 8:5). And we are being rather foolish if we work only for temporary wealth that we know we will eventually lose, and neglect working for eternal wealth, which we will continue to enjoy forever. That eternal wealth, as I already mentioned, is God’s love in our hearts, and God’s truth in our minds.

With all of this in mind, we can begin to understand what the Lord was talking about in our parable from Matthew: the parable of the unmerciful slave.

This parable is prompted by a question from Peter: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” And the Lord’s answer means, in essence, that there should be no limit to our forgiveness. Jesus answered Peter, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times.” He then went on to tell the parable of a man who was forgiven a huge debt (millions of dollars in today’s currency) by his king, but who then turned around and refused to forgive a small debt (a few dollars in today’s currency) to someone who owed him money—and the consequences of that man’s lack of mercy when he himself had been shown great mercy by his master.

As Jesus indicates in the final line of the story, the king in the parable is none other than God, our heavenly Father. And the fact is, all of us owe a huge debt to God. If you have any trouble accepting this, here is a simple demonstration: That big old universe out there, and the earth that we live on, the air that we breathe, the sunshine that sustains life on earth, and all the plant and animal life that we depend on for our sustenance? God created them all. It’s simple. If God hadn’t made the universe and everything in it, including us, we wouldn’t exist. So we owe our very life—everything we have and everything we are—to God.

This is a debt we can never repay. We simply don’t have the ability to create a universe and give it back to God in payment for the one God gave us. Every single

one of us is in the position of that slave who owed the king millions of dollars. When the Lord settles spiritual accounts with us, we will have to admit that we simply cannot repay all that the Lord has done for us.

In fact, each one of us would have to admit that not only can we not repay the Lord, but we have actually squandered much of what the Lord has given us. Instead of using all of our abilities and all of this world's goods to do good to others as the Lord has done to us, we have used much of it to gain benefits for ourselves, even at the expense of others. We humans have laid up a lot more treasure here on earth than we have in heaven. We are all hopelessly overdrawn on our spiritual bank accounts, and we can never catch up on our own.

If the old Christian theology were correct, and God was a God who condemns us, we would all be heading straight to hell, and all we could do would be to beg God's mercy and hope for the best. But the parable clearly shows that the old theology is *not* correct. It shows that God is not a God who condemns us, but a God who has mercy on us, and forgives us our debts. When the man who owed ten thousand talents fell on his knees, begged the king to be patient, and promised to pay it all back, the king took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

This is how God will treat us, also, if we recognize that we are hopelessly indebted to the Lord, and commit ourselves to do what little we can to repay that debt.

We will get to that in a minute. But first, a word about the nature of God's forgiveness. The parable makes it sound as if God's forgiveness is changeable and

conditional. First the king demands repayment of the debt, then he forgives the debt, and then, when he sees how hypocritical the slave is, he demands the debt again, throwing the debtor into prison. The reason the story gives the impression that God's forgiveness is conditional is that when Jesus spoke to the people—and when the Lord speaks to us—he has to do it in terms that we will understand. So he uses human character traits to illustrate divine ones. In this case, he uses the character of a king whose forgiveness is conditional.

In fact, it is not the Lord's forgiveness of us that is conditional. God forgives everyone "until seventy times seven times"—meaning always, continually, forever. In the words of Jesus, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). It is our *acceptance* of God's forgiveness that is changeable and conditional. The slave who owed the ten thousand talents was happy to have his debt forgiven. But he turned around and refused to show the same mercy to someone who owed him a far smaller debt.

Spiritually and psychologically speaking, we cannot accept the Lord's forgiveness when we do not have forgiveness in our own heart. If we are hard-hearted and unforgiving of others, we simply do not believe in our heart of hearts that the Lord forgives us for the wrongs we think and do. So we laugh at the idea of God's forgiveness, and close our minds and hearts against accepting it. We spiritually condemn *ourselves* to prison.

Then, like the unmerciful slave, we will find ourselves "turned over to torturers until we have paid back

our entire debt.” In other words, if we refuse to learn love, mercy, and forgiveness the easy way, through listening to the Lord, we will learn it the hard way: through pain, struggle, trial, and temptation—until from hard experience, our hearts soften and our minds open to the Lord’s truth, the Lord’s love, and the Lord’s forgiveness.

The parable does speak according to how we humans see things. When we are facing the pain and struggles of this life, we tend to blame it all on God. When something particularly hard has happened, we even say things like, “Why is God doing this to me?!”

But God does not do anything evil to us. God merely allows us to experience the results of our own individual and collective actions. When those actions are wrong, they bring pain and suffering not only on us, but on those around us. That is why the Lord wants us to build up our *spiritual* capital.

The Lord offers us fabulous treasures of love and understanding. We do not have to repay that incredible debt. We are simply asked to show our fellow human beings a little bit of the infinite love and mercy that God has shown us.

Buying Into Heaven

READINGS

Psalm 103:8–14

The Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
Nor will he harbor his anger forever;
He does not treat us as our sins deserve,
Nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is his love for those who fear him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
For he knows how we are formed,
He remembers that we are dust.

Matthew 20:1–16

The parable of the workers in the vineyard

The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day, and sent them into his vineyard.

About the third hour he went out and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. He told them, "You also go into my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour, he went out and found still others standing idle. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

They answered, "Because no one has hired us."

He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right."

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last and going to the first."

The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came, and each received a denarius. So when the ones who were hired first came, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the householder, saying, "These who were hired last worked only one hour, yet you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden and the heat of the day."

But he answered one of them, "My friend, I am not treating you unjustly. Didn't you agree with me for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Isn't it legal for me to do what I want with my property? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

So the last will be first, and the first will be last; for many are called, but few are chosen.

Arcana Coelestia #9180

Working to deserve heaven

There are people who learn and absorb true ideas from the Bible, or from the teachings of the Church, or from various other people, or even from themselves by drawing their own conclusions—but they do it for the sake of personal gain. In other words, they do it to earn important positions, to gain wealth, or so that they will deserve heaven. In the deeper meaning these are symbolized by “hired servants who will come for their pay”—that is, who must submit themselves and serve.

For religious people, personal gain should be the last priority, not the first. When it is the last priority, it is a servant; but if it is the first priority, it is the master. People who consider personal gain to be the first priority are upside-down people. In the next life, they appear upside-down, with their head in hell. But people who see kindness and faith, and therefore the Lord and the neighbor, as the first priority are right-side-up people. In the next life, they appear upright, with their head in heaven.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. (Matthew 20:1)

Here we are, still talking about money!

The previous parable of the kingdom of heaven was about the great debt we owe to the Lord, which we can never repay, but which the Lord forgives if we do our best to use what we have been given in acts of mercy and

kindness toward our fellow human beings. In our parable for this chapter—the parable of the workers in the vineyard—we have gotten to work doing just that. We have allowed the Lord, who is the “householder” in the parable, to hire us to work in the vineyard of spiritual life. The hook embedded in the parable is about the payment we will receive for our labors—and our attitude both toward the rewards and toward the labor itself.

The most obvious zinger of the parable is that Jesus, in telling it as he does, blatantly flouts the laws of fair wages and equitable hiring practices. Obviously, those who work more should get paid more, and those who work less should get paid less. It’s only fair. And for the Lord to construct a story in which people who have worked just one hour, in the cool part of the day just before sunset, are paid the same as those who have worked twelve back-breaking hours through the heat of the day . . . well, how else can we say it? This guy would have the labor unions picketing his house in short order!

That was exactly the effect that the Lord intended the parable to have on his listeners—and on us today. Parables are not meant to soothe us and confirm us in the things we already “know” and believe. Instead, they are meant to jar our sensibilities, to shake us up, to get us moving beyond the boundaries of our habitual ways of thinking, to expand our level of love and compassion beyond their current smallness. The parables are *meant* to be subversive. They are intended to break up all our comfortable, habitual, worldly patterns of life.

If this parable annoys you; if it causes you to protest, to inwardly shout, “That’s not fair!” . . . wonderful! It

has done its job! It has gotten your attention. It has found a chink in your armor, and is worming its way into your psyche to turn things upside-down there.

The ways of the Lord are radical and revolutionary. They are in direct opposition to many of our most ingrained attitudes and beliefs. They run counter to the world's values. And the point of this particular parable is that the attitudes common to this world will end out last and lowest, while the spiritual principles that "practical" people see as impractical, if not downright unjust, will be first and highest in the end.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8–9)

Let's get specific. The "common sense" attitude of the world is, as I mentioned before, that the more we work, the more we get paid. We earn our money through the work we do. And it is obvious to us that if we do more work, we deserve to get paid more.

That is what those workers who were the first to be hired thought. Notice that it says, "He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day." This implies that there was some bargaining, and he agreed to the rate of pay that the workers bargained for. For those hired later in the day, the householder simply told them, "I will pay you whatever is right." There was no bargaining. They simply went and did the work, trusting that they would receive just compensation. But not the first ones to be hired; they had to make a deal, assert their rights, get the

promise of a specific rate of pay from the householder before doing a lick of work.

That is where we are when we first start out on our spiritual life. Up to that point, we have been living and working for what we can *get* out of life. For our earlier, materialistic self, the main focus is the reward, the pleasure, the money, the power that we will get if we expend our energy and do some work. The work itself is just a means to that goal. And our goal is satisfied every payday, when we get our wages and can enjoy the fruits of our labor for ourselves and for our family and friends.

When this is our mindset, the most important thing is that we get paid as much as possible for the work we do. We will take a higher paying job even if we don't like the work as well because more money is *obviously* better! And like the laborers who were hired first, we will be very jealous of our right to receive what we consider to be just compensation for our work.

Spiritually speaking, this means that as we start out on our course toward heaven, we are focused primarily on heavenly (and material) reward for ourselves. And if we can get some immediate benefits and satisfactions, so much the better! The main idea for us at that time of our lives is that if we are going to go through all the trouble of living according to God's rules instead of our own, we had certainly better get handsomely rewarded for it!

We speak of "having our priorities backwards," but in Swedenborg's colorful language, this attitude describes a person who is "upside-down." Our feet are where our head should be, and our head is where our

feet should be. In other words, we put our own happiness and well-being—which, for truly spiritual people, is at the low end of the priority scale—right up at the top of our priority list.

And what *should* be at the head of our priority list? We can all answer in unison: loving the Lord and loving our neighbor. Jesus himself said that these are the most important of all the commandments. This means that we are not fully reborn—not fully angels—until our primary goal in life is to love the Lord by loving and serving our fellow human beings, and putting their happiness before our own.

When we are still materialistic in our thinking and motives, this looks completely naïve and ridiculous. In fact, we think it would lead to great injustice and harm if we were to adopt it. But the main harm we are worried about is harm to ourselves. “If I don’t stick up for myself, who will?” That’s how the reasoning goes. As long as we are in the grip of this mindset, we continue to agitate for our own rights, privileges, comforts, and happiness, thinking we are just being “fair,” and doing what “anyone would do.”

But notice that the Lord calls us to work in his vineyard anyway!

When those morning workers bargained with the householder, he didn’t say to them, “Well, if that’s your attitude, I don’t want you working in my vineyard anyway.” No! He went ahead and hired them. And in exactly the same way, the Lord “hires” us to work in his spiritual vineyard even if we start out with many faulty attitudes. The point is to get us moving, get us working

toward spiritual life—and let the rest sort itself out along the way.

Now let's consider the workers who were hired during the day. In those times, the work day was twelve variable hours, reaching from dawn to dusk. In the summer, the hours would be longer, and in winter they would be shorter, in order to fill the day. The grape harvest in Palestine begins in August, the hottest month of the year, and reaches into October. So it spans the fall equinox, when days and nights are of equal length.

Roughly speaking, then, the workers we have been focusing on so far—those hired at the beginning of the day—started at our six o'clock AM, and worked until six o'clock PM, a full twelve hours that stretched through some of the hottest days of the year. More were hired at the third hour, our nine o'clock AM; the sixth hour, our twelve o'clock noon; the ninth hour, our three o'clock PM; and finally the eleventh hour, our five o'clock PM, just an hour before the workday ended.

And not only were they all paid the same wage that the twelve-hour workers received, but the last hires got their wages first, and those who had started first had to wait until last!

From a material world perspective, this is all wrong. But it begins to make sense when we think of each crop of workers as a new development in our spiritual life and growth. As I already mentioned, those hired at the beginning of the day represent the beginnings of our spiritual life, when we are still thinking, "What's in it for me?" We bargain with God, trying to get the best eternal deal for ourselves. As we start out on our spiritual path,

we are still thinking of ourselves first, and of God and other people afterwards.

Notice that these workers later complain that they “have borne the burden and the heat of the day.” When we are in our natural state, and thinking of ourselves first, spiritual growth is, indeed, hard, hot labor! We face many struggles in overcoming our natural selfishness and our societally approved materialism. It is a burden for us *not* to think of our own advantage first, but to give others equal consideration. We get hot under the collar at the thought that others might get spiritual benefits without all the struggles *we* have to face in order to “get paid.”

To put it another way, we must face the heat of our desires for lower things—physical pleasures, money, and personal power—in order to make it through to the point where we are focused on higher things: God’s love in our hearts, leading us to love and care for the people around us.

The workers hired at the various hours represent our progress from our upside-down spiritual beginnings. Each of the hours mentioned is a multiple of three. And three represents a state of completeness, when our heart, head, and hands—or our love, understanding, and actions—are working together. Each time we complete a phase in our spiritual development, we metaphorically hire a new crop of workers within ourselves, appropriate to our new phase.

As far as I know, Swedenborg does not give a specific meaning for each set of workers. He simply says (in *Apocalypse Explained* #194) that three, six, and twelve

have a similar meaning. But the meaning he is referring to is the general meaning of completeness.

However, based on the general stages of spiritual development we go through, we could assign these meanings to the three sets of hires:

1. Those hired at the third hour could be seen as the time when we willingly *obey* the Lord's commandments, whether or not we understand them.
2. Those hired at the sixth hour could be seen as the time when, through working in the vineyard of learning from the Lord and the Bible, and making what we have learned a part of ourselves, we follow the Lord's commandments based on an intelligent *understanding* and appreciation of them.
3. Those hired at the ninth hour could be seen as the time when we begin to follow the Lord's commandments not from mere obedience, nor even from mere understanding, but because we are beginning to *love* doing what the Lord leads us to do.

In the story, none of these bargained for their wages. In each of these states—acting from obedience, from understanding, and finally from love—we are not so concerned about what we will *get* out of doing the right thing. Instead, we are concerned to *do* the right thing. The work itself, and serving the Lord and our neighbor, begins to be our first priority. In Swedenborg's words, we are turning right-side-up by getting our priorities straight.

Finally, we hire our spiritual "eleventh hour workers" when at last we realize that in ourselves we are nothing, and the Lord is everything. We are nearing the end of

our spiritual work day when we are willing to simply listen to the Lord, and humbly and innocently be led where the Lord wants us to go. Then our work is light; we work one short hour, and immediately get our spiritual reward.

At that point in our lives, we are no longer trying to buy our way into heaven. Instead, we are allowing the Lord to spiritually buy our life from us, so that it is the Lord's and not ours. And the beautiful thing is that once he has bought our life, he gives it back to us with rewards richer than we could ever have imagined.

The Biggest Banquet Ever

READINGS

Isaiah 25:6–9

A feast of rich food for all peoples

The Lord of hosts will prepare on this mountain a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of wines on the lees, of rich food filled with marrow, of wines on the lees strained clear. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth—for the Lord has spoken.

On that day they will say, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation!”

Matthew 22:1–14

The parable of the wedding banquet

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the banquet; but they refused to come.

“Then he sent more slaves and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet!’

“But they paid no attention and went off—one to his own field, another to his business. The rest seized his slaves, insulted them, and killed them. When the king heard this, he was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding banquet is indeed ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go to the street corners and invite anyone you find to the banquet.’ So the slaves went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both bad and good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ But he was speechless.

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, take him away, and throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Heaven and Hell #274

Spiritual food

Wisdom perfects angels and forms their life; and heaven with its blessings flows into them according to their wisdom. Because of this, all the angels in heaven long for wisdom, and seek it out almost the way a hungry person seeks out food. In fact, information, intelligence, and

wisdom are spiritual nourishment, just as food is physical nourishment. They correspond to one another.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. (Matthew 22:2)

You are all invited to the biggest banquet ever. In fact, everyone in your town, everyone in your state, everyone in the country, and everyone in this world—and for you fans of extraterrestrials, everyone in this *universe*—is invited to one great big huge banquet! If you take Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter dinners and roll them all into one, it doesn't come anywhere near *this* banquet.

The banquet we are all invited to is the banquet of heaven. Jesus says so right in the parable. “The kingdom of heaven,” he says, “is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.” At first only a certain number of invited guests were called to the banquet. But soon, anyone and everyone was brought in to make sure that the wedding hall was filled with guests. And there is a *lot* of room in the heavenly banquet hall!

Our general theme in this book has been, “On Earth as it is In Heaven.” We have been using the spiritual meaning of Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven from the Gospel of Matthew, together with passages from Emanuel Swedenborg's best-loved book, *Heaven and Hell*, to bring some light from heaven into our lives here on earth. And of course, when we make our life here on earth a heaven, we are also being prepared for

life in heaven forever. In other words, we are becoming angels.

There are two parables left in our series of parables from Matthew that are specifically identified as being about the kingdom of heaven. Both of them tell the story of a wedding banquet. In the final chapter we will look at the parable of the ten virgins—five foolish and five wise—and how they fared getting into a wedding banquet. In this chapter, we take our theme from the parable of the wedding banquet thrown for a king's son.

Why would Jesus, in his crowning parables about the kingdom of heaven, use the metaphor of a wedding banquet? Is heaven *really* like a wedding banquet?

You bet it is!

First of all, heaven is like a *wedding*. This metaphor is used in many places in both the Old and the New Testaments. In many powerful passages from the Prophets, the God of Israel is said to be the husband of the people Israel. Israel is usually portrayed as an unfaithful bride and wife. In the New Testament, these two final parables of the kingdom of heaven are only two of many references to marriage and heaven. Toward the end of the final book of the Bible, heaven is called “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9).

For us here on earth, weddings are one of our most joyous occasions. They are celebrations of love. In fact, they are celebrations of the deepest and most intimate type of love that one human being can have for another. The New Jerusalem Church's belief is that if a couple is truly married in their souls, and if they grow in love for one another, and grow together in love for the Lord and

their fellow human beings, then the marriage begun here on earth continues to grow in mutual love, intimacy, and joy forever. From this perspective, heaven can be seen almost as a literal wedding banquet, since the angels live in a continual celebration of the joys of marriage, in heavenly community with other joyfully married couples.

For the people of Palestine two thousand years ago, a wedding was also one of the most joyous of occasions. To be invited to a wedding feast—especially one given by a wealthy person or a king—was considered a great honor. The festivities often went on for days, and the guests would be treated royally, with no expense spared to bring them the finest foods, drinks, and entertainments. It was an all-out celebration!

For Jesus' hearers, then, it would have been truly amazing, even shocking, that none of the guests invited to the banquet for the king's son were willing to come. Not only would they miss a tremendous party, but in refusing to attend, they would terribly offend the king—who was not a good person to offend! Any one of the crowd of common people in the Lord's audience would have been overjoyed to take their place at the wedding feast. And in the parable, that is exactly what happened. The common people were accustomed to coming in and finishing up the leftovers after the invited guests had their fill. But to be the first seated at a wedding feast thrown by the king? This was something few of them could ever hope for.

Of course, at the time it was told, the barb in Jesus' parable was aimed at those well-to-do, powerful, and

self-satisfied Jews of the ruling classes who refused to hear his word and join the spiritual wedding banquet that he was offering first to the Jews, and then to the people of all the other nations and clans as well. And the part about sending his army to destroy those murderers and burn their city was literally fulfilled four decades after the Lord's death, when the Romans besieged and sacked Jerusalem in the year 70 AD.

Meanwhile, the people of the highways and byways, both good and bad, who were invited into the banquet hall to replace those rude and ungracious invited guests, referred to the crowd of common people who heard the Lord's words gladly—and from whom most of the converts to Christianity came.

Even the detail about the man without a wedding garment had its fulfillment in Jesus' immediate circle: Judas, one of the twelve disciples, showed himself not to be truly in the spirit of the kingdom of heaven at the banquet of the Lord's last supper with his disciples. At that time, he went out into the darkness, both literally and in his spirit, and thus shut himself out of communion with the Lord.

Yet as with all of Jesus' stories and teachings, this parable refers to much more than the immediate situation in the Palestine of his day. If these parables are, indeed, part of the eternal Word of God, then their meaning must also be timeless and eternal. That means they must speak to us today just as much as they spoke to the Jews and Gentiles of two thousand years ago.

That is why I opened by saying that you are invited to the biggest wedding banquet ever! The invitation that

the king extends to his invited guests is extended also to each one of us, and to all of us together.

The king, of course, is the God of the universe, who invites us to his own wedding banquet. It is the banquet in which we, as his congregation, are invited into spiritual and eternal union with our Creator, and into joyous community and celebration with one another.

What is the banquet of heaven? In our reading from *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg tells us that information, intelligence, and wisdom are spiritual food for us. And unless our minds have gone completely dead, we do seek out information, understanding, and wisdom the way a hungry person seeks out food.

This is true both on the material level and on the spiritual level. For example, if we are in the market for a new car, what is the first thing we do? We look into the various makes and models, and find out which ones would meet our particular needs. For a family, seating and cargo capacity are essential! For a commuter, something smaller and more maneuverable might be the ticket. For a contractor, the vehicle of choice will likely be a truck.

Once we have narrowed it down to a particular type of car, we search out the best comparative information we can find on the various models in that category. Which is the safest? The most reliable? The best on gas mileage? What features do they have? We know that if we don't do our homework, we might get stuck with a purchase we regret. So we spend hours researching the various models, visiting the car lots, and educating

ourselves so that once we make our choice, we will be happy with the vehicle we buy.

Moving up a level, we spend many years educating our children and ourselves for life in this world. Twelve years of grade school is just the beginning. Then there is college, and for many, graduate school. That is a tremendous chunk of our lives spent gaining knowledge and understanding for our life's work! And it doesn't stop once we leave school. We continue with on-the-job training, continuing education, reading, and many other ways of seeking out and gaining fresh knowledge that will be useful and enjoyable to us.

Isn't the same thing true if we are seeking eternal life in heaven? If we want to develop our *spirit* and live in the ways of the Lord, don't we also need to seek out *spiritual* information, intelligence, and yes, wisdom?

Today more than ever, people are seeking spiritual understanding. Mainstream bookstores that used to have perhaps a shelf or two of religious books now have major sections devoted to spirituality. In greater numbers than ever before, people are realizing that the things of this world—money, power, physical pleasure—have their limits; that they do not bring real happiness or satisfaction. And so there is a great hunger for spiritual knowledge and insight.

In other words, people are hearing God's invitation to the spiritual wedding banquet. Never mind that the political and intellectual leaders of our country and our world have generally refused God's invitation to live for love, peace, justice, and integrity, and have chosen instead the way of wealth, power, greed, and war. These

are the invited guests—those who have access to all the social advantages and all the leading-edge knowledge of the world. And they have made excuses—one going off to the fields of power and influence on the international stage, another to the business of corporate profits.

Meanwhile, the common people, traveling the highways and byways of life, are responding to the call. Not all, of course; but enough to make the quest for spiritual growth one of the fastest growing trends in our culture.

Within each of us there is a similar choice. Each one of us also has our worldly-wise self, educated in how to get more and better for ourselves. This is the part of us that considers a commitment to spiritually based living to be a hindrance to our ambitions. Each one of us has reasons why it would be more convenient to refuse the Lord's invitation to the great wedding feast, and focus instead on the business of getting along in this world. And each one of us has, at times, made excuses and gone our own way instead of the Lord's way.

Yet if we lift our minds to a higher level, and look at what we humans are doing when we refuse the Lord's invitation, it really does look ridiculous. In fact, it looks just as crazy as being invited to a banquet at the king's house, and refusing the invitation. How many of us, if we were invited to dinner at the White House, or at one of the nation's wealthiest homes, would send our regrets? Who wouldn't cancel whatever had been scheduled at that time, if only for the once-in-a-lifetime experience?

Refusing the Lord's invitation is even crazier. This invitation is not just for an afternoon and evening of fine food, drink, and entertainment. It is an invitation

to an eternity of love, joy, satisfaction, mutual companionship, and fulfillment of our deepest desires.

Here on earth, the Lord's invitation is to a way of life that goes beyond the temporary satisfactions of money, power, and physical pleasure. It involves becoming people who can be in loving and lasting relationships that don't break up and go sour. It involves finding the life's work that we love most, and that will give us continuing satisfaction and joy as we serve our fellow human beings in ways that are truly constructive and good. It involves gaining the peace of knowing deep within ourselves that whatever we may go through in this life, the Lord is always with us, always guiding us toward greater joy and happiness.

We are all invited to the biggest wedding banquet ever. The Lord is sending out messengers to us in the Bible, in the teachings of our church, in our teachers, mentors, and friends.

Will we answer the call?

It would be foolish not to! What we leave behind will be nothing compared to the rich blessings that the Lord will give us.

Answering the Lord's Invitation

READINGS

Isaiah 62:1–5

God will rejoice over you like a bridegroom

For Zion's sake I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest until her righteousness shines out as the morning light, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. You will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will you be called Forsaken, and your land named Desolate. But you will be called My Delight Is In Her, and your land Married. For the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your Creator marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Matthew 25:1–13

The parable of the ten virgins

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise and five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps, but did not take oil

with them. But the wise took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all nodded off and slept.

At midnight the cry rang out: "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out!"

But the wise ones replied, "There may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves."

However, while they were on their way to make the purchase, the bridegroom arrived, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut.

Later the rest of the virgins came, saying, "Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!"

But he answered and said, "I tell you the truth, I do not know you."

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come.

Heaven and Hell #366–67

Marriage in heaven

Heaven comes from the human race—which means that there are angels of both sexes there. And by creation itself, woman is for man and man for woman, each for the other; this love is inborn in both sexes. It follows, then, that there are marriages in the heavens just as there are on earth. However, the marriages in the heavens are very different from earthly ones. . . .

Marriage in the heavens is the union of two people into one mind. . . . In heaven, this is called “dwelling together,” and they are not called two but one. Therefore two married partners in heaven are not called two angels but one angel.

REFLECTION

The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. (Matthew 25:1)

Have you ever noticed that in the movies, novels, and fairy tales the favorite “happy ending” is for the couple to get married and live happily ever after?

I must admit, this used to annoy me. Sure, it’s great that the two finally fall in love and get married, but “happily ever after?” What about all the rest of those years of marriage? Where are all the movies, novels, and fairy tales that deal with all those years of happy married life? I suppose there are a few, but most of the stories seem to end just when things are really beginning.

That’s frustrating for those of us who are now married, and find that the “happily ever after” isn’t exactly as advertised. Of course, there are many happy times in a good marriage. But there are also struggles, disappointment, pain, and some *un*happiness along the way. Even the best marriages have their down times. That’s why “happily ever after” bothered me. It just didn’t seem all that realistic—and it didn’t tell the rest of the story.

However, it recently dawned on me that the “happily ever after” isn’t talking about marriage on this earth at

all. What it's really talking about is *heaven*. Our "happily ever after" comes at the end of our story here on earth. At the end of our struggles and sorrows, trials and triumphs of this earthly life, we enter into a new phase of life in the spiritual world. And if we have done our work here, it is indeed a case of getting married and living happily ever after. Not that we don't have challenges in the other life, too; but they are the challenges that come with doing the things we love and enjoy.

Ever since I had that thought, the "happily ever after" ending doesn't bother me anymore. The end of every story is when the conflict is resolved, the struggle is over, and we go on to enjoy the fruits of our labor. The human mind and spirit knows the truth of this, and almost instinctively tells its stories that way. And the human heart knows that the happiest ending is a marriage that is the beginning of eternal love.

That's why the Bible also ends with a wedding.

"Wait a minute!" you might say. "The Bible doesn't end in a wedding! It ends in the Holy City New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven." The Bible begins with a *garden*, and ends with a *garden city*.

But take a look at Revelation 21:2. In the verse that introduces the New Jerusalem, we read, "I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*" The Bible *does* end in a wedding. The bride is the New Jerusalem itself—which stands as a symbol of God's universal church, made up of all the people throughout the world who believe in God, love God, and live according to God's commandments. So the

Bible begins with the wedding of Adam and Eve in the garden, and ends with the wedding of the Holy City, New Jerusalem.

Who is the bridegroom in those final chapters of Revelation? As the Bible makes clear in many passages, the bridegroom is none other than God himself. This metaphor of God marrying his church is found in many places throughout the Bible, and especially in the Prophets. But for now I'll just mention one passage, from two chapters earlier in the book of Revelation, where a great multitude shouts in a thunderous voice:

“Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Revelation 19:6–8)

By the end of the book of Revelation, the wedding of the Lamb, who is the Lord God Jesus Christ, has come. And the bride who has made herself ready is the Holy City, which comes down out of heaven from God as a bride beautifully dressed for husband—who is the God from whom she came. In other words, *heaven itself is a marriage!* That is why the last two of Jesus' parables of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew are about weddings.

Now let's talk about marriage and heaven.

Swedenborg departed from traditional Christianity by saying that angels are married, and that marriage is eternal. This is one of the beautiful jewels of the New Jerusalem Church.

Even today, most traditional Christians—especially the more conservative and literalistic ones—will tell you

that there is no marriage in heaven. This is based on a misunderstanding of a single statement of Jesus recorded in the Gospels of Matthew (22:30), Mark (12:25), and Luke (20:35): "In the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." This isn't the place to give a full exposition of the Lord's words here. However, it is important to realize that the Greek words used in this passage are not talking about the state of *being* married, but about the act of *getting* married. Spiritually speaking (and Jesus does speak spiritually in his teachings and parables), *getting* married is something we must do here on earth if we are going to *be* married in heaven. We'll return to that in a minute.

Those who think this saying of Jesus applies to the state of being married aren't paying attention to what he said a little earlier in Matthew, in his teaching about divorce:

Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let humans not separate. (Matthew 19:4–6)

The things God does are not temporary, but eternal (see Ecclesiastes 3:14). If, as the Lord says here, God created male and female, and joined them together into one, then marriage is not merely a temporary joining that lasts only for our lifetime here on earth, but an eternal union that lasts forever in heaven. This is assuming, of course, that the marriage in question is a relationship

that was truly made by God, and not a mismatch made by human beings.

Further, as I've already mentioned, heaven is often compared to a marriage in the Bible. And this refers to the marriage of the Lord with the church. Yet we humans, created in the image and likeness of God, also have in our own individual relationships a likeness of that eternal union of Christ and the church: we have the marriage relationship of a man and a woman. And like the marriage of Christ and the church, the marriage of man and woman is eternal.

This teaching can be gained from a broader-based and more careful reading of the Bible than traditional Christians usually engage in. It is also the testimony of Emanuel Swedenborg, who tells us from his personal experience in heaven that angels are married. We gain the insight from Swedenborg that being "like the angels in heaven" means being married, since in heaven, a married couple is not called two angels, but one angel. As taught throughout the Scriptures, the whole atmosphere of heaven is an atmosphere of marriage! And the teaching that we will spend eternity with the person we love most in a heavenly, God-given marriage is indeed one of the precious gems of genuine Christianity.

If you would like to learn more about this, Swedenborg devotes an entire chapter in his book *Heaven and Hell* to marriage in heaven. He also devotes an entire book, *Marital Love* (traditionally titled *Conjugal Love*), to marriage as an eternal, spiritual union.

What is marriage, from a spiritual perspective? Between two individuals, it is "a union of two people

into one mind,” as Swedenborg says in our reading from *Heaven and Hell*. But there is also a “marriage” within each one of us. That inner marriage, which comes from the marriage in God, is the source of our outer, interpersonal marriages.

These days, it is universally understood that we humans have two fundamental parts to our nature, popularly known as “head and heart,” or more abstractly as “love and understanding.” We have loves, feelings, motives, emotions, and desires. These form our spiritual “heart.” And we have knowledge, understanding, thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. These form our spiritual “head.” Everything we say with our mouth and do with our hands comes from these two together.

In fact, it is only when our heart and head, or our motivation and understanding, are “married” to one another and working together that we can say or do anything at all.

For example, if we want to bake a cake, but don't have the faintest idea of how to use an oven, we will not be baking a cake any time soon. On the other hand, we may know perfectly well how to bake a cake, but have no desire to do so. Again, no cake gets baked. But if we both *want* to bake a cake and know *how* to bake a cake, all that's needed is ingredients, utensils, and an oven, and soon there will be a delicious aroma wafting from the kitchen!

Our inner marriage is an equal relationship of our head and our heart.

It is quite possible for us to be unbalanced—to *not* be truly “married”—within ourselves. If our head gets too

far out in front, we may be convinced that we are right about everything and have all the answers, but be lacking in love and compassion for other people. In this case, our intelligence is hard, cold, and unyielding, because it has not been balanced by the soft, warm influences of love.

On the other hand, if our heart gets too far out in front, we may “love, love, love” ourselves into all sorts of foolish relationships that give us far more pain than joy. A year or two ago, when I was teaching a class on love and marriage to a teen group, I mentioned that if we have lots and lots of love, but don’t think about it and make smart choices, we can get ourselves into lots and lots of trouble. As I was saying this, half the girls in the class were nodding their heads “yes” and saying, “I’ve done that!” The warmth of our love needs the guiding direction of our understanding if it is going to result in genuinely good relationships and good ways of living.

We are “married” inside of ourselves when we have a love for God and for our fellow human beings in our hearts, together with a wise and thoughtful understanding of God’s truth, so that the things we say and do are good, constructive, and useful. This is the “heavenly marriage” that we must make within ourselves here on earth if we are going to be “like the angels in heaven.” We also need this kind of marriage of head and heart within ourselves if we hope to be in a loving, happy, growing marriage relationship here on earth.

This is what the parable of the ten virgins is all about.

The ten virgins represent all people who are part of the Lord’s church. But notice that some of the virgins

were wise, and some were foolish. Not everyone who goes to church and professes to be spiritual and religious is truly, inwardly a part of the Lord's church. The wise virgins brought both lamps and extra oil, whereas the foolish ones brought only lamps with a bit of oil in them, but no extra to keep their lamps going once that oil burned out.

The lamps that the virgins were carrying were not the traditional "Aladdin" type lamp that we often think of from Biblical times. Rather they were a special torch type lamp that consisted of a short pole with a shallow cup on top that had a bit of rag or wicking material in it, which could be kept burning by replenishing its oil from a flask that was carried separately. So the foolish virgins had light for only a short time before the bit of oil in their torches was used up; once that ran out, they had no more oil to keep the flame going.

The lamps in this parable represent our understanding, which is a container for all of our knowledge and experience. The oil, which is the fuel for the lamp, represents our love, which fuels everything we say and do. So the message of the parable is, once again, that we must have both understanding and compassion if we are to answer the invitation and enter into the wedding feast of heaven.

No matter how deeply we may have studied the Bible and the teachings of the church, and no matter how comprehensive our doctrinal understanding may be, if we do not have love for God and compassion for others in our hearts, all of that religious knowledge means nothing. Without love, compassion, and kindness, we

are the foolish virgins whose oil quickly burned out, and who found the door shut to them when they tried to enter into the banquet and enjoy the wedding festivities. If we are not married within ourselves, there is no way we can enjoy the heavenly marriage.

From all of this we can understand what it means to answer the Lord's invitation. The bridegroom in the parable is the Lord, who invites us all to enjoy his wedding feast. No one is excluded from this invitation! If we do not go, it is not because we weren't invited, but because we failed to respond to the invitation.

And what do we need to do in order to answer the Lord's invitation? We need to have both lamps and oil. We need to both learn the spiritual teachings of the church *and* love God and our fellow human beings.

The foolish virgins weren't ready to answer the invitation. They had lamps, but very little oil. If we have plenty of knowledge, but have neglected to love and serve our fellow human beings, we will not answer the invitation either. We may think that we will be ready for heaven when the time comes; but we will have a rude awakening when we find that the door has closed, and we are on the outside. This will not be because God is unwilling to let us in—as might appear from an overly literal reading of the parable—but rather because we ourselves have rejected the heavenly marriage within us.

If our lamps are filled with oil, though—if everything we learn is filled with love, kindness, and compassion, and we spend our lives actively doing what we can to give comfort, service, and happiness to others—then we

will be ready and waiting, our torches burning bright, when the call of the bridegroom comes.

We answer the Lord's invitation to the wedding feast of heaven when we have become inwardly "married": when our heart and head work together to show God's love to our fellow human beings.

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On Earth as it is In Heaven

Reflections on Jesus' Parables of the Kingdom and Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*

Heaven and Hell has always been Emanuel Swedenborg's most popular book—and for good reason. Yet here we all are, living on earth, *not* in heaven. What good is talking about heaven if it doesn't make a difference for our lives here on earth?

Jesus responds with: “On earth as it is in heaven.” You can think of this book as a commentary on that one line from the Lord's Prayer. What does it mean for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? What is God's will, anyway? And how do we do it here on earth?

Another way of asking these questions is: How do we make earth more like heaven?

In eleven reflections originally preached as sermons in the fall of 2003 at the New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, the Rev. Lee Woofenden explores this question, drawing on Jesus' Parables of the Kingdom from the Gospel of Matthew for inspiration, and using Swedenborg's spiritual classic *Heaven and Hell* as a guide.

You are invited to delve into these pages and seek out many pearls of wisdom about the kingdom of heaven, and its practical meaning for our everyday lives on earth.

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