

LESSONS

1st Lesson: Exodus 15: 1-19

1. Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and spoke, saying: “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea. 2. The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will exalt Him. 3. The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is His name. 4. Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea. 5. The depths have covered them; they sank to the bottom like a stone. 6. Your right hand, O Lord, has become glorious in power; Your right hand, O Lord, has dashed the enemy in pieces. 7. And in the greatness of Your excellence You have overthrown those who rose against You; You sent forth Your wrath; it consumed them like stubble. 8. And with the blast of Your nostrils the waters were gathered together; the floods stood upright like a heap; the depths congealed in the heart of the sea. 9. The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my desire shall be satisfied on them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’ 10. You blew with Your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. 11. Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? 12. You stretched out Your right hand; the earth swallowed them. 13. You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation. 14. The people will hear and be afraid; sorrow will take hold of the inhabitants of Philistia. 15. Then the chiefs of Edom will be dismayed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling will take hold of them; all the inhabitants of Canaan will melt away. 16. Fear and dread will fall on them; by the greatness of Your arm they will be as still as a stone, until Your people pass over, O Lord, until the people pass over whom You have purchased. 17. You will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which You have made for Your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. 18. The Lord shall reign forever and ever. 19. For the horses of Pharaoh went with his chariots and his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them. But the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

2nd Lesson: John 12: 20-26

20. Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. 21. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22. Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. 23. But Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. 24. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. 25. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.”

3rd Lesson: Arcana Coelestia 8326

‘And plant them’ [Exodus 15: 17] means regeneration going on continuously. This is clear from the meaning of ‘planting’ as regenerating, for regeneration is like the activity of planting. When a tree is planted it grows into branches, leaves, and fruit, then from seeds in the fruit it grows into new trees, and so on. A person's regeneration is similar, which also explains why in the Word a person is compared to a tree, and one who has been regenerated to a garden or paradise. The truths of faith with that person are compared to the leaves, and forms of the good of charity to the fruit; the seeds from which new trees grow correspond to truths which spring from good, or what amounts to the same thing, to faith which springs from charity. The expression ‘regeneration going on continuously’ is used because a person’s regeneration has a beginning but never ceases; he is continually being made more perfect not only while he lives in the world but also in the next life for evermore. Yet he can never reach any kind of perfection that enables him to be compared with the Divine.

S E R M O N

Fresh Starts

A Sermon by
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Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain (John 12:24).

Introductory Ideas:

It is at the beginning of the year that many people examine their life and make an assessment of their successes and failures. A person reflects upon the year that has passed by. At the same time another year lies ahead and provides opportunities for fresh starts. Hopefully we may learn from our past mistakes and not repeat them. In regard to our spiritual life, let’s hope for a better future and strive for improvement in our endeavor to live the life of heaven. As we turn to the Heavenly Doctrine we discover the source of inspiration: “The love of good, that is, love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor, compose the fire of life in a good person and in an angel of heaven” (AC 9141).

We say therefore that it is heavenly love that should provide the foundation for the life that we live. Our love should be directed away from selfish motivations. Instead, we may turn our love toward reverence of the Lord and to serving heavenly uses to our neighbor. It is true that we may take inventory of our life at anytime during the year. But at the end of one year and the beginning of the next, it has become customary to take a snapshot of your life. This is a useful tradition that we repeat year after year at the time commonly know New Year. Another year has passed by ever so quickly, so it seems. The circumstances of today require your attention. And the days, weeks and months ahead provide opportunities for fresh starts.

Grain of Wheat:

One way to start the New Year is to consider the Lord's Word about a grain of wheat: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." In illustrating our spiritual life the Lord uses the symbolism of a grain of wheat - something that grows. This grain of wheat has its beginning however in its death. Something miraculously instilled by the Lord in the life cycle of the grain of wheat becomes alive when something within it dies.

We can say the same for our own spiritual development. Something within us must die so that over the course of our life we may receive of the Lord's Divine. We do not reach a level of spiritual maturity instantaneously or within a short span of time. It is after day-by-day, and week-by-week, and year-after-year that our spiritual development takes place. During our lifetime, as long as we shun evils and falsities, the Lord wonderfully transforms us into the image of God. It is while we are shunning evils and falsities and at the same time serving heavenly uses that we are miraculously reshaped by the Lord into angelic beings prepared for heaven. But there is a beginning, a starting point for each and every one of us.

When we consider the life cycle of the grain of wheat we see that first the seed must fall to the ground and die. Shortly after this "death" the seed cracks open, forming little fingers that develop into roots. As the roots attach to the dirt a foundation in the soil takes place and provides an anchor for the plant. As this tender plant grows it shoots upward forming a small stalk, then buds, and finally the grain of wheat along with more seeds. In His Divine Wisdom, the Lord provides that this process continues once again from these new seeds. It is something akin to a fresh start.

Grain of Wheat Must Die:

"Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it is alone." Something about the grain of wheat must be shed away. Otherwise, if it remains with the grain, the grain is alone. Once again, the Lord uses the symbolism of a grain of wheat to describe our spiritual growth. First we consider the spiritual meaning of wheat. In the Heavenly Doctrine the Lord teaches that "wheat signifies spiritual good" (AE 1153:3). In this instance wheat symbolizes the good that characterizes our loves - love of the Lord and the neighbor. Wheat also "signifies the good of the natural man" (AE 374:3). In this case wheat then symbolizes the good that defines the kind of life that we live.

The Lord says the grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die. We should not conclude that the Lord means that spiritual and natural good with us must come to an end or otherwise not define our character. This is especially so when we consider in the Heavenly Doctrine that "almost all things in the Word have also an opposite sense" or what is sometimes referred to as "a contrary sense" (AC 4240:3, AC 10540:9, AE 376:31).

The grain of wheat that must die can symbolize something about us that we must avoid. Wheat can be ground into flour. A product of the flour is bread. Bread represents good. Still in the Word we learn that "in a good sense grinding [such as wheat into flour] signifies application to

good uses but in the opposite sense application to evil uses” (AC 10303:6). Another teaching tells us that “in a good sense grinding [such as wheat into flour] signifies truths from good, but in the opposite sense truths perverted in order to mislead” (AC 4335). So again, the grain of wheat that must die can symbolize negative, hellish loves that we must shun and also false, distorted ideas we should avoid.

The grain of wheat must die; otherwise it is alone. Think of Adam who was alone in the Garden of Eden. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that by “alone” “is signified that man was not content to be led by the Lord, but desired to be led by self and the world” (AC 138). A person who is alone abides only with himself and no one else. All alone, he exists without the fellowship of others. But in a higher sense to be “alone” is to be without the Lord’s guidance. It is when we govern ourselves without the Lord’s influence over our will and understanding that we are alone and left solely to our self.

It is imperative to our spiritual growth that a part of us must die. Like the grain of wheat we must fall into the ground and die. We turn to the Heavenly Doctrine for instruction about what it is about us that must die. In the Apocalypse Explained we’re taught that “natural death is a rejection of the unclean things of the body, and spiritual death is a removal of the unclean things of the spirit” (AE 899:13). This passage continues to tell us that a person “must die both as to the body and as to what is his own [proprium], which is in itself infernal; for unless both of these die he does not have the life of heaven” (AE 899:13).

Consequently, the unclean part of us that must die is our proprium: that trait within human nature that is corrupted and beyond regeneration. The Word of the Heavenly Doctrine tells us that “man’s proprium is hell” and “is the love of self and the love of the world” (DP 206):3, AE 151:6)). Our proprium is our sense of “self.” Our “self” is corrupted and causes us to stumble and fall. Past mistakes can be burdensome. Sin and transgression against the Lord causes guilt, anxiety, or frustration. The cause of sin in the first place is our propensity to lean toward our own guidance. The cause of the sin in the first place is our tendency to favor our “own” loves.

We must strive against our corrupted self each and every time it rises up to influence what we love, and what we think about, and the way we live. When we combat against and prevail over our proprium it is like a death. This “death” of our proprium, is the extinguishment of hellish loves. We must engage in this task every day. After combating against our proprium, in any given instance, we can step forward in a fresh start away from damnation. We can step forward in a fresh start toward serving heavenly uses that contribute to our salvation. We may approach each new day with inspiration to cast off from ourselves anything and everything contrary to the Lord. Meanwhile the Lord implants the life of heaven within us not just when we renew our commitment at the beginning of a New Year, but continuously each and every day.

The Lord Plants His People:

The people of Israel crossed the Red Sea to the other side. The Egyptians pursued after them into the sea. When Moses stretched out his hand over the sea the waters returned and covered the Egyptians and all of them drowned. “Not so much as one of them remained” (Exodus 14: 28). Then Moses and the people sang a song of rejoicing to the Lord, singing in part about what

the Lord would do for His people: “You will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which You have made for Your own dwelling.”

Again, the Lord uses the symbolism of something that is planted and grows to describe our spiritual development. When we think of something “planted” tress, fruits, vegetables, flowers, or something grown from a seed planted in the ground comes to mind. But the Lord will “plant” his people in the mountain. As we turn to the Heavenly Doctrine we learn that “and plant them” has the spiritual meaning of “regeneration going on continuously. This is clear from the meaning of ‘planting’ as regenerating, for regeneration is like the activity of planting” (AC 8326). As our “regeneration has a beginning but never ceases” (AC 8326) we can cooperate daily with the Lord in His work of regeneration and preparation of us for heaven. The New Year can be about fresh starts. Let’s start by continuing our work in living the life of heaven.

As a New Year has dawned upon us we can begin by continuing to allow the Lord to plant the good of His love within us. And even when we stumble and fall we can turn to Him in repentance and step forward in a fresh start. When Nathan confronted David who had committed adultery, David said “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13). But Nathan’s words to David “The Lord also has out away your sin, you shall not die” (2 Samuel 12: 13) show us that David was given a fresh start. The Lord told the woman caught in adultery “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8: 11). She was given a fresh start. To one of the criminals crucified with the Lord, the one who was repentant saying “we receive the due reward of our deeds,” the Lord said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23: 41-43).

These words, “today you will be with Me in Paradise” seem to imply that a person can live an evil, wicked life and on his deathbed make a lip confession and then somehow is instantaneously transformed in a moment. But this is not the case. The spiritual meaning of these words, given to us in the Heavenly Doctrine is that man lives after death; the body will not rise again, but man as to his spirit will be resurrected in the spiritual world; people who acknowledge the Lord can be saved; heaven and hell are from the human race and all who live well will go to heaven (AC 10597, AC 4783:4, AE 600:6, LJ 19).

Concluding Ideas:

We have an important role to play our regeneration. Our grain of wheat must die as we begin each new day with inspiration to live the life of heaven. We must reject and remove unclean things from our spirit (AE 899:13). Our regeneration does not occur in a day. The Lord gradually develops us into angelic beings fit for heaven. Our spiritual growth does not occur in a moment of inspiration such as when we’re making resolutions at the beginning of the year. There is a good use in following the New Year tradition of renewing our commitment to do better. Any progression away from evils and falsities to what is good and true proceeds from a beginning.

Let’s take advantage of the beginning of the New Year as yet another opportunity for a fresh start. The hope is that throughout the course of the year the fire of our inspiration does not fizzle

out but continues to glow. Surely along the way we may stumble and fall. But in His mercy the Lord will pick us up and allow us a fresh start.

No one can be purified from evils and falsities except the man who is being regenerated; the regenerate man is being purified from day to day (AC 10239:2).

Amen.