

Little By Little: Spiritual Rebirth is a Gradual Process

A Sermon by the Rev. Mark Pendleton
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We live in a world in which we are increasingly able to get from point A to point B quickly:

- In the city of Chicago (where I'm from) we get in a car and we drive from the Loop in the downtown area to "Half Day" Road in the northern suburbs in about twenty minutes or half an hour, and that's something that used to take, well, half a day.
- We celebrate the change over to a new year in England, and then we hop a Concorde jet and fly to New York City and celebrate it there again.
- We get a message from Pennsylvania to California (or anywhere else in our world) in an instant via e-mail--something that used to take days or weeks to accomplish.

Now compare these things to the movements that we witness in nature:

- The movement of the tectonic plates, for example.
- The growth and then erosion of mountains
- The change of the seasons
- The turning of the tide
- The growth of a tree
- Or the physical growth of an infant into adult stature.

Isn't it true that so many of the most beautiful things in life and in nature don't move or grow or develop with great speed? Instead, their movements are slow and gradual. Their growth is, we say, an organic process. Part of the wonder of nature, in fact, is getting to see the different pieces of it gradually unfolding according to an order and time frame established from creation by the Lord--like a bud that opens into a flower.

And how do things happen when it comes to spiritual growth and rebirth, that is, shifts in the things that we love and care about most; the maturing of thoughts and feelings and attitudes; changes in patterns and habits of life; the strengthening of friendships, commitment, and love? Do these things move and develop quickly--with the speed of a Concorde jet, or the speed of e-mails zipping around the globe? Or is spiritual growth more like the growth of a human body or the growth of a tree--slow and gradual, seasonal and majestic?

The Lord's Word seems to answer this question both in its overall story line and in the direct teachings that it gives to us. If we think of the Lord's Word as the story of our spiritual life from start to finish, then think of the number of years that that book spans. Think of the number of stories that the Word contains -- each one picturing a different

piece of human growth and development. Think of the infinite number of thoughts and feelings and shifts in human states of mind that are represented in the Word, each one of them descriptive of part of your life experience.

And here's a question: Do you ever wish that your own spiritual growth could happen faster than it does? So easily we read or learn something new from the Lord's Word. We learn, for example, of the peace and happiness and innocence and integrity of angels in heaven; we learn about the way that relationships truly can be. We love these things that we learn about, and at times we might wish that we could "be" all of those things all at once.

But the Lord tells us very carefully what the reality is, and what we can expect in terms of human growth and development. In the twenty-third chapter of Exodus He forecasts to the Children of Israel what it will be like for them to enter into the land of Canaan and to receive it as an inheritance from Him. Their entrance into the land of Canaan and their inheritance of it symbolically pictures our entrance into heavenly states of mind and life.

Well, if this is true, then what do you think it means when the Lord said to the Children of Israel:

Behold, I send an angel before you to keep you safe on the way, and to bring you to the place which I have prepared, and I will drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from you in one year, lest perhaps the land become desolate and the wild animal of the field multiplies against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land.

What the Lord is telling us in His Word, right from the opening chapters of Genesis, on through the story of the Exodus, by the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness, in the many battles that they had to fight in the land of Canaan, on through the time of the prophets, and finally by way of the Lord's own thirty-three years of life on earth and the many mighty works and healings that He accomplished...what the Lord is telling us by all of these things in their chronological order, and explicitly in Exodus 23, is that spiritual growth and rebirth, and also the growth of human relationships, are slow...and gradual...and seasonal...and majestic...

- Like the change of the seasons,
- And the turning of the tide,
- And the growth of a tree,
- And the opening of a flower.

He's telling us that we can't expect to break out of dysfunctional, false ways of thinking, or destructive tendencies, or hurtful attitudes or habits of life—which in the New Church we call "evils" and "falsities"—all at once. In short, He's telling us that we can't hope or expect to be catapulted from any experience of hell in our lives into heavenly bliss *immediately*: "Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land."

But human nature, and perhaps a bit of human longing, would have us believe differently. There is a tendency that many of us may feel to believe that somehow any experience of hell within us can be changed into an experience and life of heaven in an instant. We might feel this tendency beginning at a very young age, any time that we learn something new from the Lord's Word that strikes us as true, or good, or wholesome, or beautiful, and it's something that we long for in our own lives.

For example, we learn about destructive forms of anger and opposite forms of love, and we don't want to be angry people; we want to be loving people instead. And so we may begin to *act* like we "aren't angry" (...and that's a good start!) We might even think that because of our new outward behavior, that suddenly we *aren't* angry any more. But does *acting* like we aren't angry and *thinking* we aren't angry really take anger away--remove it (finger snap) in an instant? Often it doesn't, and we end up just kidding ourselves, and our anger goes on burning, like fire in wood under ashes.

Here's another example: Think of a young man or woman who learns about chastity in relationships or in marriage in heaven. They believe and love the mental pictures of these things that are being shown to them. And so they begin to *act* in more chaste and pure ways (...and *that's* a good start!) They may even think that they themselves are now suddenly chaste and pure because of their outward behavior. But once again, does the outward behavior actually and (finger snap) in an instant remove the deeper issues of pride, lust, and domination or "control" that stand in the way of their hopes becoming reality? Often it doesn't.

The truth is that human nature can't be changed in a moment, but only gradually--as we daily learn the truth of orderly living from the Lord and then with the Lord's help and power put that truth to work in both the inner and outer parts of our lives, refusing to do what is hurtful or "evil" to other people because it is against the Lord's will and good intentions, and then acting on the goodness that presents itself to us as an option for our lives. "He or she who has My commandments and lives them," the Lord says, "he it is who loves me; and I will come to him or her and make My home with him."

"Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land." It's in keeping with this Scripture that the teachings of the New Church suggest that spiritual growth is not hurried; rather, it is slow and gradual.

The reason we're given for this is that everything that we have ever thought; everything that we have ever intended in our hearts; every word that we have ever spoken; and every action that we have ever done--from our earliest childhood on through to the present moment--becomes part of the *composition* of our lives. It helps form the *tapestry* of who we are. In addition, we know that each one of us has certain destructive tendencies and dysfunctional ways of thinking that we inherit through our spiritual DNA, so to speak, and through the example of other people around us; and we add more of these things to ourselves through our own unguided reasoning and free choices as we make our way through life. And finally, each one of these things – these destructive elements – is something that we become *used to*. It's something that we gain an "attachment" to and develop a kind of fondness and even *affection* for. Each one of them holds a place in our lives and provides its own kind of "payoff" or feeling of *delight*.

We're told that all of these negative elements are inter-connected within us. They form an intricate lattice or network in our lives--in such a way that any one of them cannot be moved without all of them being moved at the same time. The teaching continues that if the removal of these things were to happen suddenly, our lives would be thrown into complete chaos, and we would be sapped of spiritual life. We're told that this is what is meant when it says, "I will not drive them out before you in one year *lest the land become desolate*."

An *illustration* of this might be a hanging mobile. If you snip one of the strings and let one of the suspended objects fall to the ground, symbolizing the sudden and complete removal of just *one* negative element of our character, what happens? The entire rest of the mobile collapses.

An *example* of this line of teaching might be a teen-age boy who is being careful in his social interactions, and he's doing this (perhaps unbeknownst to himself) mainly for the sake of how it will boost his reputation, how it will reflect back to him from other people, and how it will help him get what he wants out of relationships--especially relationships with members of the opposite sex. Mixed in with his developing social skills is a streak of selfishness that he doesn't yet see or acknowledge. In fact, this is such a significant part of his life right now that if the Lord were to yank it completely out of him all at once, a significant part of his own sense of life and vitality would be torn out of him as well.

So what does the Lord do? Well, think of what any wise and loving parents do with a teenager like this who they're hoping to influence for good. Instead of trying to take this form of selfishness completely away from this teenage boy in an instant, the Lord works *with* him--within his very weakness--helping him gradually to see and acknowledge the selfishness of what he's doing, helping him then to resist that form of evil in his life, and then breathing new and healthier motivations into the social skills

that are developing within him. "Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land.

Notice too that the Lord says, "I will not drive them out before you in one year *lest perhaps...the wild animal of the field multiplies against you.*" What does that mean?

Well, think for a minute of how defensive and self-justifying we can become if something that we love, or a way of life that we've become used to or fond of, feels challenged or threatened. For example, think again of the teenage boy who's working on his social skills to selfish ends. He is enjoying what he's doing; it's delightful to him; it's fun; it feels vital and alive. There's nothing that he sees to be wrong with it. If the Lord were to enter in to him and suddenly and completely take away this thing that he loves, his *passion*--that is the "wild animal" of his field--might become aroused in such a way as to start multiplying reasons and excuses that support what he's up to. In that way, he would actually be *strengthened* in what he was doing rather than being gently turned away from it.

A similar kind of reaction can happen any time we try to take something away from an infant that he or she wants to play with--even if it's something that's not healthy for him or her.

So what's the point? The point is that the growth and development and rebirth of the human spirit, also the growth and development of human relationships, isn't something that happens (finger snap) all at once. Instead, the Lord's mercy is *constantly* at work with us--every moment, throughout the entire course of our lifetimes--guiding us and gently moving us with all of the love, and wisdom, and beauty, and majesty that we see in nature --

- In the change of the seasons;
- In the turning of the tides;
- In the growth of a tree;
- And in the opening of a flower.

Behold, I send an angel before you, to keep you safe on the way, and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. And I will drive out the Hivite and the Canaanite and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from you in one year, lest perhaps the land becomes desolate and the wild animal of the field multiplies against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land. Amen.

Readings: John 1:1-4, 10-13; Exodus 23:20-30; Rev. 21:1-7; 22:16, 20

The Scripture, "Little by little I will drive them out from before you" means a removal effected gradually according to order. ... When we undergo spiritual rebirth (or "regeneration"), which is accomplished by the implantation of spiritual truth and good, and at the same time by the removal of falsity and evil, the rebirth is not hurried but takes place slowly. The reason for this is that all the things we have thought, intended, or done since early childhood have entered into the composition of our life. They have also formed themselves into a network which is such that one cannot be moved without all of them together being moved. From this it is evident that the evils and falsities with us cannot be removed suddenly from where they are. They can be removed only in the measure that forms of good and truths in their proper order have been implanted more deeply within us; for heaven with us removes hell. If the removal were done suddenly we would pass out, for the whole network of things, every single one, would be thrown into confusion and deprive us of our life. The fact, then, is that spiritual rebirth, or the implantation of the life of heaven with us, begins when we are young children and continues right on to the final phase of our life in the world, and it continues in the other life for evermore... In addition, and this is a secret, our regeneration in the world is merely the foundation for the *unending* perfection of our life. What's more, since humankind knows scarcely anything at all about these things, many have thought that the life of hell with us can be changed to the life of heaven with us in an instant, by mercy. But in actual fact mercy lies in the whole act of regeneration; and none of us undergo spiritual rebirth apart from those who receive the Lord's mercy in *faith and life* while they are in the world, in keeping with the Lord's words in John,

As many as *received* Him, to them He gave power to be sons of God, to those believing in His name, *who were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but *of God* (John 1:12-13).

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven* 9336:1,3; 9334:2 (emphasis added)