

Coming Home

by the Rev. Geoffrey S. Childs

“I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2)

There are travels in history that stir the imagination of the child in us, and perhaps touched us with wonder when we *were* children. Marco Polo, Columbus, Magellan—these explorers discovered new worlds, and discovery is the drawing power of space travel—the potent desire to find what is unknown and beautifully new to the mind. And, on a more subtle level, hopes for the discovery of truth, of concepts that liberate, are behind scientific, medical, philosophical and other research. These, too, are journeys, travels of the inquiring mind.

We are told that all genuine natural delights are changed after death into their corresponding spiritual delights (see *Heaven and Hell* 485-490). So, too, after death with natural journeys. They are transformed into their spiritual counterparts. In fact, angels see an entire lifetime on earth as a spiritual expedition—a travel that has marvels within it. There are new angels, recently elevated to heaven, who look back at their lifetimes on earth and see them, spiritually, as a pathway. They see that they have been led by the Lord from the foot of a mountain, gradually up a winding pathway, across meadows and plateaus, over rushing streams. And they see spots on this journey where, on the higher slopes of the mountain, they came to a dangerous corner, a narrow ledge, where they could so easily have fallen. They see that the Lord guided them, helping them—unseen—on their upward climb, until at last they reached the mountain height, with its clearness, sweetness and serenity. They then fall on their knees in gratitude for the Lord’s leading and care.

There are also a number of stories of journeys in the Word. There were the wise men, who saw the natal star of the Savior and left Syria for that long journey west and then south to the great Mount Hermon, and on past this, southward toward Jerusalem itself. Here they learned from prophecy the name of the village where the Lord was born, and took that short but wonderful trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. There they found the Savior of the world.

Abram, perhaps still a young man, left Ur of the Chaldees with his father, Terah, and traveled far to the north and west to Haran. It was in Haran that he heard Jehovah call to him to leave Haran and his father’s house, to travel to a “land I will cause you to see” (Genesis 12:1). So he took Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his nephew, and started on the caravan route toward the land of Canaan. And here, after further travels to Egypt and the Philistine country, he found his home.

And there was the prodigal son, who asked his father for “the portion of the goods that falls to me” (Luke 15:12), and “not many days after, the younger son gathered all together [and] journeyed to a far country, and there wasted all his possessions on prodigal living” (Luke 15:13). A famine hit that distant land, and the younger son, destitute of money and possessions, hired himself out to a farmer. Food was so scarce that that son wished even for the husks eaten by the swine. But no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to

my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'” And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him (Luke 15:17-20).

This returning son openly confessed his evil to his father and said he was unworthy. But his father welcomed him to his heart and gave a great feast of homecoming. When the older son protested out of jealousy, the father responded: “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (Luke 15:31-32).

Journeys in the Word are travels of discovery. In the case of the wise men, it was a search for the Lord Incarnate. And this is the goal of what is wise in each one of us, the goal of our spiritual lifetime—to find the Lord and a welcome in His arms. Abram’s journey was the leading of Providence toward a homeland, and within that homeland, a special dwelling place or house. Abram’s call out of Haran represents the first touch of angels upon an infant’s tender mind. And Abram’s life in Canaan and Egypt and then back into Canaan is our growth out of infancy into sweet childhood, and finally early youth. Again, this is spiritual traveling, a time of discovery and implanting of innocence, trust, and mutual love. Abram’s lifetime represents the instilling of innocence and good affections throughout infancy and childhood and youth—those vital, trusting loves that remain with us to help us find the way to heaven.

The journey of the prodigal son to a far distant country has special meaning for those of the New Church. For the prodigal son represents those who have many heavenly riches but waste them in selfish living (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9391:6). Those who have clear knowledge of the Heavenly Doctrines are so blessed—we know things kings and wise men have yearned to know. And yet, humanly, at times in our lives nearly all of us waste these spiritual riches in prodigal living. Self-worship and the world’s honor are terribly enticing, and these can undermine our earlier idealism until nothing is left, and we starve for true feelings of love and mercy. Then we can come to ourselves, and feel repentance and genuine humiliation of heart, and we can come back home to our Father, who is the Lord. He welcomes us with such tenderness, knowing our failure and repentance. We were dead and are alive again; we were lost and are found.

Each of us has a path of life, and there are major stages on the way. In *True Christian Religion* this journey of life is described:

Every person from infancy even to old age is changing his locality or situation in the world of spirits. When an infant, he is kept in the eastern quarter toward the northern part; when a child, as he learns the first lessons of religion, he moves gradually from the north toward the south; when a youth, as he begins to exercise his own thoughts, he is borne southward; and afterwards, when he judges for himself and becomes his own master, he is borne into the southern quarter toward the east, according to his growth in such things as have regard interiorly to God and love to the neighbor. But if he inclines to evil and imbibes it, he advances toward the west (476).

This is a spiritual journey—one that our spirit or inner mind takes—throughout our entire lifetime on earth. As we take this journey from the north, to the south and then hopefully toward the east, we pass through a series of major states for the directions of the compass correspond to spiritual states. In infancy the primary state is one of innocence and ignorance, while the Lord works within, secretly preparing the child for a future use. Then, as he or she journeys southward in spirit, knowledges are learned. This is the time of childhood and youth, when true and open knowledges guide the mind toward spiritual light. Then comes adult life and the decision to turn toward the Lord or away from Him. If a person turns away from the Lord and the Word, he turns toward the west in the other world, and in this there is a deep sadness, a journey toward darkness and inner death. But the Lord is still there: “If I make my bed in hell, behold You are there” (Psalm 139:8). And still open is the chance, the free choice, to turn around, back to the Lord.

If the choice in adult life is to shun evil and turn to the Lord, then, in our spirit, we turn toward the south and the east. Our interiors are open toward heaven, even while we are in the world. And we travel into genuine intelligence and toward a stronger and stronger love of the neighbor, until at last we may arrive from the south at the eastern quarter of the world of spirits. Here are those who love the Lord first, “heart, soul, mind and strength,” and desire to serve Him in every way they can. And thus they love the neighbor too. It is said in *Arcana Coelestia* 10225 that such spirits are in the innocence of wisdom and the ignorance of wisdom. This means that they know that, of themselves, they are ignorant, and they have an innocence that turns them openly and fully to the Lord. Their love is no longer to understand truths, but rather to will and do them. And their lives are filled with love. What was in outmosts when they were infants—innocence and ignorance—is now in the inmosts of their minds. They have a sense of personal ignorance without the Lord, and an open innocence. They are like little children—wise children—who are ready for the kingdom of heaven. They know that all true gifts come from the Lord, and they love it to be this way.

Inwardly, life on earth, then, is a journey, and the signposts on this journey are from the Word. “If you abide in My Word, then are you My disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:21,33)—free finally to admit our personal ignorance and our deep need for the Lord.

The Lord invites. The response is up to us. If we respond with love and faithfulness, He gathers us on the path toward heaven. It is said that “the willing ones of the people are gathered together, even the people of the God of Abraham” (Psalm 47:9). And in an anthem we sing, “You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy.”

If on earth, led by the Lord, we have tried to follow the path of travel the Lord has prepared, then, after we enter the other world, a thing of quiet beauty occurs.

When spirits have been prepared for heaven by instruction...which is effected in a short time on account of being in spiritual ideas...they are clothed with angelic garments, which are mostly glowing white as if made of fine linen; and they are...brought to the way that leads upward toward heaven, and are delivered to angel guards, and afterwards are received by other angels and introduced into

societies and into many blessednesses there. After this, each one is led by the Lord into his own society, which is effected by various ways, sometimes by winding paths. The ways by which they are led are not known to any angel, but are known to the Lord alone. When they come to their own society their interiors are opened; and...they are immediately recognized and received with joy (Heaven and Hell 519).

They are...among their like, as among relations and friends whom, because they are in similar affection, they love from the heart, and there they are in the enjoyment of their life, and in a fullness of...delight derived from peace of soul (Apocalypse Revealed 611a).

Swedenborg writes that when he came into his own angelic society, he was with people it seemed he had always known. He was with his true family.

This is like the prodigal son who finally came back home—a son who was “lost” but now was found, who was dead but now was alive (Luke 15:24). So there is a place that is waiting for each of us, a place that the Lord has prepared for us. If we follow the path of life, after death the Lord will disclose to us our own unique path, up from the world of spirits toward our home society. And when we arrive there, we will be coming home—home to our conjugal partner, home to a loved use, home to our closest and dearest friends. In a way this seems almost too beautiful to be true. And yet the guideposts to this coming home are straightforward and honest: shun one’s ruling evil as a sin against the Lord Himself, and do goods or uses faithfully. Then it is the Lord Himself, our Savior, who says directly to us: “Let not your heart be troubled.... In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 15:11-32; *True Christian Religion* 476; *Arcana Coelestia* 10225:1,6,7