

A Deeper Meaning to the Bible

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Our subject today is the Word, and the way the Lord reveals His truth to us by means of it. For guidance we turn to an exchange that the Lord had with His disciples about how He chose to teach. The Lord had just finished telling the Parable of the Sower to a large crowd of people. When He finished, the Word says: “The disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’” (Matthew 13:10-11)

The simplest definition of the Word that I am aware of is: “The Word is what God has revealed” (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 251). What we have in the Bible is the Lord speaking to us. It is *His* Word, or the things He chose to teach us.

Imagine for a moment that you knew nothing about the stories of the Bible. You just knew that God’s Word was a written document about what He wanted us to know. What subjects would it contain? Wouldn’t we expect to find teachings about spiritual life within its pages? Wouldn’t we trust we’d hear about the Lord God Himself—the kind of God He is, how He leads us, and what He expects from us? Wouldn’t we assume we’d find teachings about how to live a good life—instructions on how to treat each other, how to worship and pray, and what principles of life we should follow? Wouldn’t we hope to hear about heaven—the Kingdom to which the Lord is leading us—the promised reward for our obedience and faithfulness?

Another teaching for the New Church says that the Word teaches just these things:

Without the Word no one would possess spiritual intelligence, which consists in having knowledge of a God, of heaven and hell, and of a life after death; nor would they know anything whatever about the Lord [Jesus Christ], about faith in Him and love to Him, nor anything about redemption, by means of which comes salvation. (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 114).

And yet, when we look at the way the Bible was put together, and the subject matter it contains, we don’t primarily see these spiritual concepts. Most of the Bible is a history of people who lived thousands of years ago—of Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Elijah, Peter, John and the other Disciples. Why would the Lord choose to reveal His essential spiritual truth by means of stories? Why would He give us details about journeys and choices people made throughout the ages—sometimes stupid choices with disastrous consequences? This sentiment is expressed in another passage:

Taken literally the Word appears like any ordinary book, written in a strange style which is neither so sublime nor so brilliant as secular books appear to be. For this reason a person...may easily fall into error concerning the Word, and come to despise it. While reading it he may say to himself, “What is this? What is that? Can this be Divine? Could God, whose wisdom is infinite, speak like this? Where

is there anything holy in it, and where does this holiness come from?" (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 1).

But we know the answer to these concerns. Most of us who have spent time with the Bible perceive its holiness and realize that it does teach powerful spiritual truths by means of all those stories. Still another teaching for the New Church about the Bible says, "The Word of the Lord is like a body which has a living soul within it" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1408). Or as Jesus Himself put it, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life (John 6:63). People throughout the ages have seen the truth of these statements and known that the Bible is the most holy book every written—not only because God wrote it, but because they have seen its power to teach them how to be good.

In the New Church we call this deeper meaning of the Bible "the internal sense" of the Word. The whole Word is written with carefully chosen words and images. When we understand the meaning, or the reason why those words and images were chosen, the Bible comes to life for us—we see some of the living soul beneath the stories, and we feel fed by the straight-forward spiritual guidance it offers.

A Symbolic Meaning

What do we mean by "the internal sense of the Word"? Perhaps the best way to begin our discussion is to look at some of the images or symbols of the Word to see how they contain hidden messages within them. And what better way to start than by looking at symbols for the Word itself.

In several places the Lord referred to the Word as "living water" or "the water of life." In the book of Revelation He says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts" (*Revelation* 21:6; Cf. *Zechariah* 14:8-9; *Revelation* 22:1,17).

Water is a very common symbol in the Bible. Everywhere it represents the truth which the Lord offers (or its opposite—the false ideas which can destroy). Add the adjective "living" to that symbol, and you see what the Lord is describing—the spiritual life that He offers within the pages of His Word. Think of the woman at the well in Samaria to whom the Lord offered "living water." To her He said, "Whoever drinks of this water [from the well] will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life" (*John* 4:13-14).

Even that natural well, next to which the Lord spoke these words, symbolizes the Bible. Think of how water is drawn from a well, like truth is drawn from the Word. Think of the depths of a well—the bottom of which is unknown—being like the depths of the Bible which contains more spiritual truth than any person can learn, even in a lifetime.

The Word is also referred to as “treasure hidden in a field” which a man found and delighted over (*Matthew* 13:44; Cf. *Psalms* 119:162). It is even symbolized by a “seed,” as in the Parable of the Sower which we’ll look at in a minute (*Matthew* 13:1-23).

All these many symbols represent the Bible itself. And this is true of every single image or detail in any story of the Bible. Each detail contains levels of meaning within it. Each encapsulates a spiritual idea, and when we see all those spiritual ideas connected together by means of the story, the spiritual messages come pouring out. In the New Church these symbols are called “correspondences.” Of them we read:

Interiorly the Word is spiritual and celestial. It is written exclusively by correspondences, which conceal within [them] all angelic wisdom.... The style of the Word is such that there is holiness in every sentence, and in every word, and in some places even in the very letters. (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 3,8)

The Word is a Parable

One way to see the power of correspondences, or how correspondential symbols all fit together is to look at one of the Lord’s parables. As noted before, His disciples asked the Lord why He chose to teach people by means of parables. This was right after He had taught the Parable of the Sower. The Lord went on to explain some of its symbolic meaning, which is exactly what we are able to do with any part of the Lord’s Word.

There is a whole list of details which the Lord chose to include in His Parable of the Sower: the sower himself, the seeds, the wayside, birds, the stony places, earth in general, the sun, roots, withering plants, thorns, good ground, and crops of a hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold. All of these details encapsulate spiritual truths, and all of them are tied together in the story. The Sower is the Lord, and the seed is His Word, or the teachings which He wants to give to the people of His church. The different types of ground are symbols for the different types of people in the church—people who either receive or reject what the Lord teaches. The wayside is a picture of a person who is hardened with false ideas, which do not allow the Lord’s teachings to penetrate. Such a person is much more interested in being busy or getting on with things in this world than caring about heaven and preparing for it. The stony ground is representative of the person who hears teachings from the Word, but does not act on them; they just sit in his or her mind and do not cause any change in the patterns of life. The thorny ground stands for people who have made some evil choices, who lash out at others instead of serving them. And the good ground symbolizes good people who hear the Lord’s Word and then live according to it. These are people whose lives bear fruit (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3310:2). Gathering all these symbols together into a story shows us the kind of attitude we should have to the Lord’s teachings—to beware of thorny evil tendencies, of false ideas, of spiritual complacency, and remember to receive His teachings and allow them to shape our lives. Such a person is led by the Lord through His Word.

Now it might be argued that this is a relatively easy parable to understand. The internal meaning is not that hidden below the images. But there are many places in the Bible where the meaning is not so clear. For example, what can we do with the following passage from the prophet Isaiah?

And the LORD of hosts will stir up a scourge for him like the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb; as His rod was on the sea, so will He lift it up in the manner of Egypt. It shall come to pass in that day *that* his burden will be taken away from your shoulder... He has come to Aiath, He has passed Migron; at Michmash he has attended to his equipment. They have gone along the ridge, they have taken up lodging at Geba. Ramah is afraid, Gibeah of Saul has fled... (*Isaiah 10:26-29*).

On and on it goes with names of places and people. Speaking of this section, the Writings for the New Church say: "Here we meet with mere names, from which nothing can be drawn except by the aid of the internal sense, in which all the names in the Word symbolize things of heaven and the church" (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 15). There is an internal meaning, but it's almost impossible to see in the way the prophecy has been written. Much of the Word has a similar character, as for example the lists of genealogies which occur from time to time.

All this begs a question which we haven't addressed yet. Why did the Lord choose to reveal His truth in this manner? It's all well and good that we can see spiritual truths in some places by means of the symbols, but why did He make some parts seem virtually unintelligible?

This brings us back to the exchange between the Lord and His disciples during which the Lord explained to them why He taught by means of parables. "It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven but to them it has not been given.... Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:11,3).

The Lord teaches His Word in ways that people can understand (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2520:5). To the ancient Israelites the Lord worked out their rewards and punishment in terms that meant something to them: a secure life in a land of their own in exchange for their obedience, *or* a miserable life, plagued by their enemies if they failed to obey. Whatever their other qualities, the ancient Israelites were not sophisticated scholars. When the Lord came on earth and spoke to them He expanded their horizons considerably. He taught them about the kingdom of heaven, about love toward their neighbors, about justice and mercy. These were new concepts to them. But they would have been "blown away" if He had revealed the full scope of the spiritual ideas that He wants us to know. Even His disciples had difficulty understanding most of what He tried to explain to them, including why He had come to earth in the first place, and how He was setting up a church which could be a means of leading all people to heaven for centuries to come. As He said to them before He left them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13).

The time has come for us to be guided into "all truth"—to see within the stories of the Word more spiritual wisdom than has ever been available to people before. The Lord our God wants us to believe in Him and obey Him. He wants us to understand not only *what* He commands, but

why. He longs for us to see what kind of God He is—the Creator and Redeemer of the world, who is intimately aware of each and every detail of our lives, who is a close and personal God, who uses countless Divine means to lead each of us to make wise choices. This is the core message of His Holy Bible, which strives in so many ways to show us His Divine qualities. He wants us to know about heaven—that it is a real place where we will continue to live as men and women, where we will live a life of usefulness together with a husband or wife whom we love most tenderly in a community of other people who love the Lord and desire to serve Him. All these truths are contained in His portrayal of the Land of Canaan as a land flowing with milk and honey—a paradise to which He led the people of His church, the Israelites. The Lord also wants us to be aware of that other place, called hell, and the terrible life which people live there—people who have chosen to live self-serving lives with little or no care for spiritual things or feelings for the people whose lives they ruin. These are all encapsulated in the repeated warnings of fire and brimstone, of dire punishments, of calls to repentance which fill the Bible. Our Lord yearns for us to know the steps toward heaven—the spiritual development He can lead us through. He wants us to see how He can help us tackle our evil tendencies, symbolized by the enemies in the Land of Canaan, and develop strong spiritual characteristics of trust and charity, symbolized by such people as Daniel and Joseph.

All this is why He has revealed the internal sense of His Word in the books which we call the Writings for the New Church. He has opened up the Bible. He has given us an understanding of the way it was written. He has listed the meaning of many of the correspondential images within it. He has drawn together principles of doctrine which form a philosophy of religion—a rationale about life and the way things work which takes away “the mysteries of faith.”

We are the people He calls to become His disciples, those to whom it is “given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 13:11). The Lord will enlighten us, if we approach the Word with awe at its holiness and if we seek to be led by Him to live the life which leads to heaven. This is His promise. This is the message which waits to be seen within the images and stories of the Bible—the internal sense—the spirit and life of the Word—which can allow the Lord to bring His life and His love to us.

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 4:5-14; Matthew 13:10-23; *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 1-3.