

Gaining Meaning from the Word

by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up (Exodus 19:20).

It is amazing how the Lord presents His truth to us in the Old Testament. There are such powerful, earthly images. We see a mass of Israelites camped in the plain before Mount Sinai. We hear the Lord command Moses to prepare the people for one of the biggest events in their history, when He would show Himself to them and reveal the core of their Law: the Ten Commandments. There is the sound of a loud trumpet. The Lord Himself descends in a thick ball of smoke, fire and cloud, which emits thunderings and lightnings of such magnitude that the whole mountain quakes. Then the Lord calls Moses up to Himself, and we see Moses walking up that mountain into the midst of the blackness to meet with God.

What do we gain from this imagery? On the surface we see that the Lord makes a revelation to His people. He ensures that the church has His Word, which teaches people who He is and what He requires of them. We also see from the dramatic elements of this particular revelation that revelations are major events; the people of the church need to pay attention to them and remember them.

The Israelites of this time were external people. Because of this character they needed powerful reminders to obey. And that's why this revelation took place in such a dramatic fashion. We have an amazing asset because of these external people. We can see spiritual ideas played out for us by means of their actions. The Lord commanded them to do things: perform sacrifices, cleanse themselves by washing their clothes or staying away from unclean foods, walk around cities, *etc.* These things represent the ways we obey the Lord—what our spiritual duties are. There is a message within the scene. Today's message is about gaining spiritual meaning from the Word.

Opening Up the Internal Meaning Through Symbols

In this story, Mount Sinai is a symbol for heaven (see *Arcana Coelestia* 805:2). This makes sense if we think of it as the location of a revelation. In the Word the Lord teaches us how to live so that we may get to heaven.

The people of Israel represent the people of the church. In other words, they represent you and me, or people who are trying to live according to the Lord's revelation (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8805:3). Moses symbolizes that part in us which can ascend into heaven to see spiritual truths (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8805:4). This is called our understanding. Moses is the middle man who relays information from the Lord to the Israelites. The Lord commands him directly, which parallels our ability to understand the Lord's will or to see how we need to live in order to go to heaven. Then Moses in turn commands the people. This represents our thought processes, instructing us (so to speak) to act according to what has been learned. Finally, the Lord or Jehovah in that smoky mass on Mount Sinai represents His truth accommodated to our

understanding, or put into a form that we can comprehend and use (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8760:2).

If we put all these things together, we have the formula for a revelation. But it is not a revelation that the Lord makes to the church as a whole. Instead this is a revelation He makes to each one of us—a personal revelation about how His truths will work to make our lives better. As we read in *Arcana Coelestia*, “By revelation here in the internal sense is not meant revelation such as was made to the Israelitish people...but such a revelation...as is made...inwardly in a person” (8780:2). This is not some mystical vision, but rather an understanding of what the Lord wants us to do, based on the teachings in His Word. We see the relevance of the Word to our personal situations, much as we can read a poem and see a message in it which far surpasses the words.

The Lord Descending onto Mount Sinai: Accommodation and Enlightenment

The first aspect of this personal revelation is the Lord’s accommodation. This means that He puts His truths into a form that we can understand. It is a manifestation of His love, since He offers us a means of conjunction with Him. We see Him descending and making Himself available. And we hear Him call Moses up to Himself. By means of the Word we too can talk with God.

If we look at the actual forms of the Word, we can see that the Lord presents Himself in very different ways. The Old Testament is different from the New Testament, and both are different from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church. But in all these forms, there is always the need for this more personal communication which our story represents.

In the Old Testament the Lord presents Himself as a wrathful and commanding source of power. He threatens punishment, and He scares people with awesome displays of might. It is easy to see that we need to look beyond these images to see the God we worship—the loving Heavenly Father who would never get angry with us. The truths in the Old Testament are heavily veiled over—the Lord’s glory and majesty are clothed in the dense cloud on Mount Sinai.

In the New Testament the Lord presents Himself differently. In contrast to the cloud of smoke and fire, we see a Man, Jesus Christ, who performs miracles and teaches heavenly parables. All of a sudden God is a warm and friendly figure rather than a Divine disciplinarian. But still, we have to see through the appearance that He is the Son of God and not God Himself. His parables also require interpretation. It was only to a select few of His disciples that He revealed internal things, and then only sometimes. But most of the gospel is in imagery: the kingdom of heaven is likened to a mustard seed, or a plant growing in the ground. We need a personal revelation to see the relevance of these analogies to our relationship with God.

In the revelation of the Lord’s Second Coming, the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, He promised to reveal Himself clearly. We can think of the image of the Lord in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (see Revelation 1:9-17). The disciple John heard Him saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (verse 11), which we can think of as the Lord saying, “I am the one God of heaven and earth.” This appearance of the Lord impressed John so much that he “fell at His feet as dead” (verse 17).

In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church we do see a clear picture of the Lord and a detailed path to heaven. But even then we need enlightenment to see how to respond to what is revealed there. Anyone who has spent time reading the Heavenly Doctrine will realize that sometimes it's heavy going. It's not that the path to heaven is complicated—it's quite simple. But there are so many details about how to follow this simple path.

There is a teaching in the work *Divine Providence*, which says: “The Lord admits a person interiorly into the truths of wisdom and at the same time into the goods of love only so far as he can be kept in them right to the end of his life” (232, emphasis added; cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 8794).

Even the clearest truths in the Word are protected. We can think about the many things we have struggled to understand in the Word. Maybe it's some aspect of the Lord's Providence, or about how skilled evil spirits are at tempting us, or about one of the Ten Commandments and what it really means. These concepts may not sink in until the twentieth or thirtieth time we've heard them. It's only when we have prepared fully that suddenly it makes sense. It's like a breakthrough.

Researchers say that a child learning to speak has to hear each new word five hundred times before he or she can recognize it, and another five hundred times before she can repeat it. I think a similar thing is true of the Word; only when we are ready to listen—when we've been saturated with the truth or when we've tried hard to understand some aspect of our regeneration—does the Lord switch on the light. This light is the personal or inward revelation pictured in this story.

Sanctification of the People: Our Preparation

One way to ensure that we get this revelation is to prepare for it. We have to approach the Word in the right way. Moses gave the Israelites detailed instructions on how to ready themselves for the Lord: they were to wash their clothes, take measures to purify themselves, listen for the sound of the trumpet and then approach the boundaries of the mountain. These arrangements represent bringing our minds into order (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8788). We can receive enlightenment or hear the Lord talking to us only if we are willing to listen.

One teaching describes the correct approach to the Word as “an affection for truth from goodness” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8780:2). “An affection for truth” means that we desire to learn from the Word—we wish to hear our Lord speaking to us by means of it. “From goodness” means we recognize that the Word has authority—it has power to make our lives better and to lead us toward a good life. The people of Israel prepared themselves for the Lord, and we, in turn, need to read the Word with the correct attitude.

Moses Going Up to Receive Instruction: Approaching the Lord

If we approach the Word with this attitude, the Lord can make a personal revelation to us. We now reach the climax of the story as told in these words: “Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” (Exodus 19:20).

Going up the mountain means using the Word to ascend into heaven—to see how the Lord wants us to live so that we may go there one day. That’s exactly what we are trying to do here in this world—prepare ourselves with the Lord’s help so that we can live to eternity in heaven.

Few people in the Word spoke face to face with God. It could be argued that Moses was the most privileged person in the Old Testament. Certainly, we see a beautiful picture of union with the Lord. The Lord approaches and accommodates Himself, and Moses responds by walking up the slopes. And the Lord offers this privilege to everyone by means of His Word. Each one of us has a chance to meet with the Lord our Creator. He is always available and waiting to teach us things that will make sense to us, which we know will make a difference in our outlook and choices.

We can open His Word and feel a warmth which can come only from the Lord Himself—an excitement and connection which will remain with us. All people have the ability to gain meaning from the Word if only they approach it with a desire to hear what the Lord has to teach from an affection for the truth from goodness. The Lord has descended onto Mount Sinai. He asks us to prepare ourselves to receive Divine instruction from Him. He calls to us from the midst of that mountain to come up to Him. This is a manifestation of His love, which shines through the pages of the Word and desires our obedience only because it will make us happier. In this story of a revelation to the Israelites, we are represented by Moses of whom it is said, “Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” (Exodus 19:20).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 19:3-25; *Arcana Coelestia* 8780:2