

## “SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE”

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*Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (Genesis 28:16-17).*

One of the common experiences of life is waking up to something we did not realize before. It happens all the time. For years, we may act in a certain way and one day wake up to the fact that our actions have been objectionable to others. Or we may have labored blindly to acquire wealth or some cherished possession and then suddenly realize that there are more important things in life. We describe such a change by saying, “It finally dawned on me,” or “I saw the light,” or “I woke up at last.”

This is what happened to Jacob that morning after his memorable dream of the ladder that reached from earth to heaven. He awoke from his sleep with a new and powerful realization: “Surely,” he said, “the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16).

We sleep through much of our life, simply ignorant of all that the Lord is doing for us, unaware of His presence and leading. As long as we are in this state, we cannot respond to the Lord or cooperate with Him. We are missing out on a full sense of being alive. We are surrounded by a natural and spiritual creation that is full of life and meaning, but we fail to appreciate it.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to be influenced by an inspiring and gifted teacher knows the difference between a sense of awareness and a sense of boredom. A gifted teacher brings excitement and life to a subject, awakens the mind to its wonders, and charges us with a sense of its importance. We may walk through a woods without a second thought while a naturalist will notice the flora and fauna and see unity of purpose in their order. The words of a poem that leave us cold may thrill a sensitive reader with their expression of genuine human affections.

There is a wonderful teaching in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church about the development and perfection of little children in the other life. It is said that they are surrounded by an atmosphere from which they receive the heavenly idea “that everything around them is alive.” Swedenborg perceived that little children on earth have very similar ideas when they are at play; they think all objects around them have life. Because of this, children are often more observant and more affected by their surroundings than we are. They are intensely interested in and delighted with what they sense.

In fact, the Lord intends that we bring His life into outer or lower thing of His creation. Concerning this, the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that

*the human being has been so created that Divine things that are the Lord’s may come down through him even to the lowest things of the natural order, and from the lowest things of the natural order may go up to Him. Thus the human being*

*was created to be the means through which the Divine was linked to the natural world, and the natural world was linked to the Divine, and in this way through the human being as the means linking the two together, the lowest degree of the natural order might receive life from the Divine... (Arcana Coelestia 3702).*

If we wish to regain an awareness of the Lord's life, if we want to "wake up" to what is spiritual and truly living in this world, we must recapture that celestial innocence that has been lost to us.

In the beginning, it is simply a dream, like Jacob's dream of a ladder leading from earth to heaven. Yet the dream holds promise of the reality. In the original language, the term ladder is derived from an expression which signifies a "path" or "way", and we are told that such a way is seen in the world of spirits leading upward toward heaven whenever the angels speak of truths (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3699). The truths of revelation by which we may ascend that ladder or way have been given to us by the Lord. As we obey and live these truths, life from the Lord descends to fill them with His Divine spirit. Then, for the first time, we awaken with the realization that the Lord is with us.

Jacob had stolen the blessing intended for Esau his older brother. Though the promise of the blessing was his, he fled for his life. It was a day of distress and anxiety for Jacob. Are there not days in our life when we have states of distress? Our minds become mired in concerns of this world. The journey ahead seems long and difficult. We have little courage for it, little enthusiasm. We feel a depression and a deadness in everything we do. Our minds fall into a kind of mental darkness or obscurity.

It was night when Jacob found a place to lie down and sleep. The Heavenly Doctrine reveals that "passing the night" signifies living in a state of obscurity, that is, with little idea of what is really true and good. The setting of the sun, with the loss of its light and warmth, signifies the loss of charity and faith from our life as we linger in self-centered states of evil and falsity. Such is the human condition. When childhood innocence is lost, our hereditary nature casts its dark shadow over our life and we fall into a deep spiritual sleep.

Yet, just as the Lord did not leave Jacob in his day of distress, so He has not left us. He came into the world to bring a light of truth to shine in its darkness. The dream of Jacob and the Lord's promise in it can be our dream and promise as well.

Jacob saw a ladder or an ascending way leading from earth to heaven. And there is a way for us all to be uplifted from this earth and be led to heaven. Jacob saw angels of God ascending and descending. It is important that the ascent is mentioned first. We begin to climb from the bottom of the ladder. We are carried up by truths accommodated to our understanding, truths from the Lord given in the letter of the Word and grounded in the lowest things of nature. Only after this ascent can there be a descent. The angels descending the ladder signify the loves sent down by the Lord to meet us as we climb. These loves infill the truths with Divine life.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that the description of the angels ascending and descending means "an infinite and eternal communication and the consequent joining together—a going up, so to speak, from what is lowest, and after that, when order has been inverted, a coming down to

it” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3701). This takes place little by little throughout our adult life. Afterwards, we are told,

*he now sees that the truths belonging to his early childhood in relation one to another have existed inversely and that those same truths have been reorganized little by little into another order, that is to say, their interrelationship has been changed so that those which initially occupied the first place now occupy the last. In this way he sees that by means of those truths which belonged to his early and later childhood the angels of God so to speak went up by means of a stairway from earth to heaven, whereas now by means of the truths belonging to his adult life the angels of God so to speak come down by means of the stairway from heaven to earth* (*Arcana Coelestia* 3701:7).

The meaning of the dream is encouraging. It shows that the Lord has prepared a way for us to progress from where we are, no matter where we are, and to have clear hope that we can find new motives and new meaning for our life. For this purpose, we read,

*cognitions are instilled into him such as are not completely contrary to those he has already—for example, the idea that all love starts in himself; the idea that one should consider oneself first and others only after that; the idea that those people who are outwardly poor and wretched should be helped irrespective of what they are like inwardly; and that similarly widows and orphans should be helped solely because they are called such; and at length the idea that enemies in general should be helped irrespective of who they may be; and also the idea that by acting in these ways one is able to merit heaven. These and other ideas like them are the cognitions proper to the early childhood of his new life. They are such that because they derive to some extent from his previous life, or the disposition belonging to his previous life, they also derive to some extent from his new life into which he is being led in this way. They are consequently such as allow into themselves things that contribute towards the formation of a new will and of a new understanding. They are the lowest forms of good and truth, and it is with these that people who are being regenerated start out. And because these lowest forms of good and truth allow more interior truths into themselves, that is, truths closer to Divine truths, falsities which a person had previously believed to be truths are also rooted out* (*Arcana Coelestia* 3701:4).

Thus step by step with the Lord’s guidance and constant support, we can climb out of our selfish hereditary states. It is the Lord who makes this progress possible. That is why Jacob saw the Lord standing at the head of the ladder. The secret that lies in this fact is that “all goods and truths descend from the Lord, and ascend to Him” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3702). From the top of the ladder, the Lord promised Jacob possession of the land of his fathers, an increase of descendents, and told him, “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you” (Genesis 28:15).

These words are addressed to each one of us. The Lord will go with us on our journey, will protect us from harm and provide us with the spiritual nourishment and understanding we need.

This same truth is most beautifully expressed in the words of the 37th Psalm: “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way.... Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand.... Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land” (Psalm 37:23-24, 34).

Jacob awoke from his sleep with the sudden recognition “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28: 16). He had the new realization that his God was not distant or unconcerned but present in the very stones of the ground that he had placed under his neck for support. He took the stones on which he rested and set them up for a pillar and called the place by the Hebrew name, “Bethel,” which means “the house of God.” The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that stones here signify “lower truths such as the natural person knows” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3694). While these truths may seem remote from everything spiritual and Divine, they are the ultimates in which there can be an inner life, for the Lord is present in the truths of the literal sense—the very outermost parts—of the Word.

Jacob also said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (Genesis 28:17). Our mind should be a house of God and a gateway opening to the path that leads to heaven. Our hope should be that all the knowledges we learn will come alive with Divine purpose and that our whole life will be dedicated to the spiritual goals that lie hidden in everything of the Word and creation.

As we learn, we should continually strive for that awareness expressed by Jacob when he awoke from his dream: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” Through means that the Lord has provided we can return to that celestial state of children whose world is made alive by their innocence. To regain this, we must approach learning with the humility of children and with their sense of wonder at the Lord’s works, but with a knowledge that little children do not possess. For we must first “ascend” by acquiring the knowledges of truth. And this cannot be merely an intellectual exercise. We are taught that those who are being regenerated “do not learn such things simply as matters of knowledge but as matters of life, for they practice those truths (*Arcana Coelestia* 3701:5). Only then does the Lord’s life find a place to enter in and rest as it descends from heaven.

The promise of the Lord to bring us safely along the path of life is sure, but only if we make a commitment to it. Jacob vowed:

*If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You (Genesis 28:20-22).*

Once the vision is seen and the way is shown, we must follow in it to reach our spiritual destination. So Jacob went on to the land of his mother’s people, to take a wife and become prosperous. He remained and labored there for twenty years. The transformation of our life is not abrupt. We pass through many states, both prosperous and discouraging. Yet, the stone pillar at

Bethel stands where Jacob set it up and anointed it with oil, a constant reminder that the Lord is with us, in every state of our life, when we turn our thoughts to Him.

Throughout our life, we will experience awakenings. If we conscientiously study the Word and strive to put its teachings into practice in our daily life, we are preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord. And though we will pass through times of disappointment, anxiety, and temptation, the vision of Jacob can sustain us. For it is true that when we awaken from our spiritual sleep we will be able to proclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And we can confidently pray, "Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation..." (Psalm 25:4-5).

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 28:10-22; Psalm 37:5-9,16-24; *Arcana Coelestia* 3665:2,3,5