

OCTOBER 2009

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

# OUR DAILY BREAD



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Spiritual School Days

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# Invitation

You are invited to use *Our Daily Bread* as a source of inspiration and as a guide for personal meditation and reflection. It is also a resource for home, small group, and church worship. Each issue has a theme, with weekly sermons focusing on various aspects of that theme. Daily meditations provide food for thought throughout the week.

*Our Daily Bread* has been published by the Swedenborgian Church since December 1949. May you be fed with spiritual nourishment as the Lord gives us this day our daily bread.

## Prayer

Care for us, O Christ, with your tenderness;

clothe us with your humility;

guide us with your gentleness;

rule us with your wisdom;

and exalt us with your love;

for your mercy's sake.

~ *St. Mechtild of Magdeburg (1212-1282)*

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**From the Editors**

Dear Reader,

Fall brings many transitions, but the start of the school season is front and center for many of us. With bright yellow schoolbuses and fresh new school supplies sold in stores, we are reminded of the start of what has traditionally been the season of learning.

Even more acutely (especially here in New England), we are reminded of the looming threat of the approaching winter. Fall is a time to buckle down, face unfinished tasks, and prepare for the season to come.

“Spiritual Schooldays” reflects upon how the Lord leads us through the lessons of life and the passage of time. The Reverend Eric Hoffman reminds us of our power as teachers and warns us about the not-so-heavenly messages we may be sending to our children. But never fear: the Reverend Sage Currie offers us the promise of the water of life, even in the face of hardship. The Reverend Alison Lane-Olsen reminds us that a life of discipleship is about constant learning and questioning. Finally, the Reverend Dr. George Dole teaches us that the quest for self-awareness demands prayerful reflection on our motives and actions so that we may better meet the needs of those around us.

May this issue lead you to reflect upon the various aspects of spiritual studenthood, opening new realms to your inner sight.

Blessings and Peace,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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# OCT **4** What Do We Teach Our Children?

— The Reverend Eric Hoffman

## **Isaiah 30: 19-26**

Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, "Away with you!" He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous.

On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

## **John 5: 1-15**

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk?'" Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

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According to professionals in the Sunday school community, there are four essentials in a person's education—skills that, once acquired, prepare a person for collecting and effectively assimilating all the other lessons life has to offer:

- 1) How to cope with adversity
- 2) How to learn from experience
- 3) How to enjoy learning in general
- 4) How to love oneself, the neighbor, and the divine.

This may be an incomplete list; you may wish to add other essential lessons of your own. Even so, as teachers (whether by choice or by circumstance), we have a responsibility to convey these skills to the next generation so that they may utilize their gifts for the betterment of themselves and the world of their future. Only a certain percentage of people are teachers by choice, but we are all, each and every one of us, teachers by circumstance.

Think back for a moment to your own childhood. Do you remember a person, older than yourself, to whom you looked for guidance? Perhaps you are thinking of a parent, an uncle or aunt, an older sibling, or even someone completely unrelated to you, such as a teacher or a

***In life, we play  
out the hands we  
are taught we are  
holding.***

boss. This is the person whom you watched carefully and quietly as he or she went about the usual business, and in your own affairs, you tried to be like this person. Perhaps you put shaving cream on your face as you saw your father do, or laughed like your mother laughed when company sat around your kitchen table. Perhaps your own career interests were influenced by a teacher whom you admired and respected and wanted to be like. It has been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but it is also one of the principle ways in which a child learns. Children watch us just as we watched our elders—and whether we intend to or not, we teach them simply by doing the things that come naturally to us. And, friends, some of the things we teach our children without realizing it may do them more harm than good.

There is a poem by Dorothy Law Nolte that begins with these lines:

*If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.  
If a child lives with hostility, he learns violence.  
If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.  
If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.*

Because our children look to us as examples of how to interact with others, they will learn from what they see us doing. As the poem points out, if they hear us criticize others when those others are not present to answer for themselves, they may learn that it is a socially acceptable practice to be agreeable face-to-face but judgmental in private. Since self-esteem is a very fragile thing, they may also learn that the way to feel good about oneself is to put others down. And if a child's role model has a volatile temper, they might very well learn that the "adult" way to deal with anger is to attack. Consistent ridicule will almost certainly teach a child that he or she has meager ability, and invoking shame will just as certainly communicate to them that they have little worth. You know, it's been said that in life we play out the hands we are dealt, but with regard to a child's emotional development, that old cliché isn't quite true; we play out the hands that we are taught we are holding.

It is easy to teach our children negativity, especially in today's stressful and complicated world, because they do watch us so intently for clues to their own behavior. It is important to realize that the negativity we may display for them wasn't born in a vacuum; we learned those behaviors from our role models. Reflect for a moment on some negative behavior or trait that you have cultivated—it may be a hot temper, a specific prejudice, a critical nature, or what have you. Ask yourself, "Is there someone in my upbringing who had those same qualities?" The lame man who sat by the pool at Bethesda had several who were more than willing to remind him of the "fact" that he was sick. They told him so whenever he asked for money and they showed him by crowding him out of the pool, and he believed them. We likewise grow to believe what we are told about ourselves and about the world around us until the Lord comes to us and says, "You don't have to be lame. Get up and walk. You don't have to rant and rave and throw things when you are angry. There are non-destructive ways of dealing with your anger that lead to inner peace. You don't have to criticize others to make yourself look better by comparison; you are special because I have created you to be special."

***We do not have to  
be bound by our  
own childhood... we  
can be healed.***

Until we realize that we do not have to be bound by our own childhood, that we can be healed of the "sins of our fathers" (to put it biblically), we run the very large risk of passing these same values and traits on to our children. This is not to say that we have to be perfect. Children can forgive us many of our shortcomings, and if they are taught the art of self-reflection, much of the negativity they do inherit can be dealt with in a spiritual way. But, it does mean that we are given the responsibility of opening ourselves up to the Lord and to our own understanding, and coming to terms with the negativity we have learned so that our children can benefit from our experience and avoid the pitfalls we have survived. The prophecies of Isaiah will come true for us: "Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teachers will not hide themselves anymore, but your eyes will see your teachers."

And so we arrive at the question that began our sermon: What will we teach our children? Shall we pass our faults and struggles on to them, or shall we heed the final words of Ms. Nolte's poem:

*If a child lives with encouragement, He learns confidence.*

*If a child lives with praise, He learns to appreciate.*

*If a child lives with fairness, He learns justice.*

*If a child lives with security, He learns faith.*

*If a child lives with approval, He learns to like himself.*

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to love the world.

I beseech you all as fellow teachers, whether by choice or by circumstance, to consider Ms. Nolte's words carefully, for our future depends on it.

The Reverend Eric Hoffman is the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.



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## Prayer

O Lord, we come before you now with a special request in our hearts: that you watch over and guide our children and young people, and also be with those who teach them.

Help us to search our souls and find those negative attributes that can find expression so easily and infect young hearts and minds, which are by nature so sensitive to ideas and impulses. Help us to convey to them all the wonder and beauty in the world, so that they may develop in freedom and security and love.

It is our love for them—love born by your divine presence in us—that moves us to ask this of you. Amen.



# Daily Meditations

Monday, October 5

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O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me. *Psalms 25:2*

There are two obligations incumbent on one after self-examination: prayer and confession. Prayer should be that the Lord may have pity, grant the power to resist the evils of which one has repented, and supply the inclination and affection for doing good, since man without Him cannot do anything.

*True Christian Religion 539*

Tuesday, October 6

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Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths. *Psalms 25:4*

A person is taught, however, by enlightenment, because to be taught and also to be enlightened are expressions applied to the intellect. *Divine Providence 166a*

Wednesday, October 7

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Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.  
*Psalms 25:5*

For the intellect, which is a person's internal sight, is enlightened by spiritual light in the same way that the eye or a person's external sight is by natural light. Both sights are also similarly taught, but the internal sight, which is that of the intellect, by spiritual objects, and the external sight, which is that of the eye, by natural objects. *Divine Providence 166b*

## **Thursday, October 8**

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Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord! *Psalms 25:7*

Repentance of the mouth and not of the life is not repentance.  
Sins are not forgiven through repentance of the mouth, but  
through repentance of the life.

*Arcana Coelestia (Potts) 8393*

## **Friday, October 9**

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Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way. *Psalms 25:8*

On the other hand, everyone who thinks about God from  
the point of view of His essence has the idea of one God, for he  
declares that God created us, the same God redeemed and saves  
us, and He also enlightens and instructs us.

*True Christian Religion (Dick) 623*

## **Saturday, October 10**

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He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way. *Psalms 25:9*

Divine mercy is a pure mercy toward the whole human race  
with the intent of saving it, and it is constant toward every  
individual, never withdrawing from anyone.

*Heaven and Hell 522*

# Testing God

The Reverend Sage Currie

11 OCT

## Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them,

"Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

## John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

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It has been a long journey—longer for some of us than for others. I've been traveling for just over twenty-eight years, which to some may seem like a short weekend trip, but to the children gathered for Sunday school, I assure you, it is a very large number.

However many years we each may claim to have been journeying in this physical human form, I imagine that we all share a common experience of, every now and again—for a second, sometimes longer than a second—feeling that, no matter how far we may have come or how long we've been at it, we haven't gone anywhere. Something happens, a perspective shifts, we lose a job or start smoking again or resume doing something we thought we had gotten past, or we become vulnerable, needy, anxious, fearful, or angry at ourselves or the people in our lives or the world. All of a sudden we look at ourselves and think, "I'm supposed to be a grown up? I'm supposed to have 'it' or at least something figured out? I'm not growing at all! I haven't learned anything! It's not worth it."

This is what the Israelites are feeling in today's passage from Exodus—as if they have not gotten anywhere.

Forget that Moses had led them out of Egypt, out of slavery and bondage; that God has parted the Red Sea, protecting them from

the Egyptian army in hot pursuit; that when they had cried out in hunger God had provided manna, and when they had asked for meat he had given quail from heaven; that when they had earlier cried out in thirst, unable to drink the bitter waters at Marah, the Lord had made the water sweet. This story of the Israelites crying out once more comes after all of that. After all of these blessings, after all that God has done for them, they find themselves thirsty once more, and instead of trusting that God will provide—the God that had cared for them every step of the way—they again cry out: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” In their moment of need they reconsider every step they have taken so far. They question where God is leading them and wonder whether they would not have been better off remaining in the state of bondage they were in before.

At this place called Massah and Meribah, the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” Massah means “trial, test or proof” and Meribah means “contention or quarrel.” The Israelites quarrel with Moses, not believing that God will provide. They want proof. They want to know that the Lord is still with them. They don’t care that the Lord has provided for them every day before today; they need proof today. Today is a new day. They are experiencing a new thirst. After all, just because God was there for you yesterday, why should you believe that God will be there for you tomorrow?

*It is amazing how shortsighted we can become when things go wrong.*

This feeling can be so real. It is amazing how shortsighted we can become when things go wrong. We become so absorbed by our thirst that we cannot think or feel or remember anything else. In an instant, we feel totally and completely abandoned.

This past Friday, the front page of *The San Francisco Chronicle* caught my attention. It was an article on the proposal to put up a suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge. It is believed by many whose loved ones have jumped from the bridge that such an act is impulsive. They believe that if their loved one had had just one moment to think about it, he or she would not have committed suicide.

The most compelling testimony came from a man who had actually survived the jump and suffered a broken back. He spoke of the impulsive nature of his decision and said that if there had been a barrier he would not have jumped—that all he really needed in that moment was someone to talk to.

***God does not, cannot, and will not abandon us... God is love and God is our very life.***

The subject of suicide, as painful and difficult as it is to grapple with and talk about, describes the power a single moment has to totally engulf our sense of gratitude, purpose, meaning, and especially hopefulness. In a single moment, like the Israelites, we can slip into a belief that God has abandoned us, and that we will never make it to the Promised Land.

But God does not, cannot, and will not abandon us. If for a second God were to abandon us, Emanuel Swedenborg tells us, we would cease to exist. Our very existence depends on the constant inflow of love from God. God is Love and God is our very life.

This is the great benefit of the scriptures—that they contain the stories of the Israelites' journey, a story that Swedenborgians believe contains a picture or a template for each of our personal journeys. We are lucky enough to be able to read the story from start to finish. We get to read Exodus 17, we get to read of the Israelites' thirst and murmurings, we get to hear them question whether God is with them or not—but then we get to read on.

We read on and hear that Moses pleads with the Lord on behalf of the people, and that the Lord responds by bringing fresh, gushing waters from the rock. In the Swedenborgian tradition, both rocks and water symbolize truth. But rocks (especially the large boulder we assume the rock of Horeb to be) stand for those large, heavy, strong, immovable, often straightforward, but foundational truths that we hold. "God is love." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Life has meaning."

It is for the sake of these foundational truths that the Lord leads Moses to bring water to the people, and it is to these basic foundational truths that we must now go when we fall into the false belief that we

have been abandoned by God. We cry out, we complain, we ask for proof that God is there, and we are led to the rock. We try to remember those foundational truths, which perhaps we had forgotten. We meditate on them and what they mean for us. We repeat them.

And God will be standing there. God will lead us, like Moses, to strike the rock, and refreshing waters or refreshing insights will flow forth. From the foundational truths that we had forgotten about or taken for granted will flow forth the useful truth we thirst for and need—the truth that applies to our situations, answers to the questions that have brought us to this place of abandonment and solitude. When we feel abandoned and we take the step of talking to someone, this is what they help us to do. “It will be all right.” “God is present.” “Just hold on and have faith.” “I’ve been there, too.” “You are not alone.”

We help each other to see the rocks in our lives, the boulders that are always present, that cannot be washed away. This is what brings us to spiritual community, to friendships, to scripture. I feel this way. Oh, and sometimes you do too? And the Israelites too? We are part of a community that stretches across the globe, throughout time, and into the spiritual world. This grand community has seen temptation and trial, has been on the desert journey time and time again.

We have grown and will continue to grow unto eternity. We have gotten somewhere. We will at times feel abandoned, but we will hold to what we know to be true, and we will be given drink. Ultimately we will be given the drink that Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman at the well when he says, “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” May we each share in this drink, having faith in the knowledge that we will never be abandoned, and that God will always be among us.

*It is to basic  
foundational truths  
that we must  
go when we feel  
abandoned by God.*



The Reverend Sage Serene Currie  
is a hospice chaplain in South  
Portland, Maine.

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## Prayer

Almighty God, our souls long for knowledge of you,  
and yet we fear the brightness of your presence.  
Today we bring ourselves to you,  
our joys, our cares, our sins, our griefs -  
and wonder that you can know us so completely  
and still love us without ceasing.

We are all blind, Lord -  
blind to the beauty in others' hearts,  
blind to suffering we think we cannot bear to witness,  
blind to our own failings.  
Our darkness comforts us, beloved -  
it declares that we are enough for ourselves,  
that life is ours alone.  
We forget that this comfort is thin and false -  
it makes us poor and lonely wanderers.

But you, great God, you are light, oneness, vision,  
a precious jewel of Love,  
shining in the morning sun of your own Wisdom.  
Lift our darkness, Lord,  
that we may see your radiance in others, and cherish it,  
heed suffering and find courage to soothe it;  
find our life in your life, and be filled to overflowing.

*~ Leah Grace Goodwin*



# Daily Meditations

Monday, October 12

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Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. *Isaiah 30:20*

Since these two loves--love for the Lord and love of controlling prompted by self-love--are absolute opposites, and since everyone who is caught up in love for the Lord turns toward the Lord as the sun it stands to reason that everyone who is caught up in a love of controlling prompted by self-love turns away from the Lord.

*Divine Love and Wisdom 142*

Tuesday, October 13

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The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious. *Isaiah 42:21*

Teaching truth is the same as teaching what is good, since all truth looks to good. *Arcana Coelestia 2372*

Wednesday, October 14

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Thus says the Lord,  
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
I am the Lord your God,  
who teaches you for your own good,  
who leads you in the way you should go. *Isaiah 48:17*

For a church to exist, there must be teaching from the Word, since the Word is not intelligible without teaching. But it is not teaching alone that makes the church in the case of a person, but living in accordance with that teaching.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 243*

## **Thursday, October 15**

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The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,\*  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word. *Isaiah 50:4a*

Priests who teach truths, and thereby lead to the good of life, and so to the Lord, are good shepherds of the sheep; but they who teach and do not lead to the good of life, and so to the Lord, are evil shepherds.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 315*

## **Friday, October 16**

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Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught. *Isaiah 50:4b*

By “to learn” is signified to perceive interiorly in oneself that it is so, which is to understand, and so to receive and acknowledge. He who learns otherwise, learns and does not learn, because he does not retain. *Apocalypse Revealed 618*

## **Saturday, October 17**

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Listen to me, you who know righteousness,  
you people who have my teaching in your hearts;  
do not fear the reproach of others,  
and do not be dismayed when they revile you. *Isaiah 51:7*

The teaching about charity, that is, how to live, was the chief teaching in the ancient churches. That teaching united all churches and so made one out of many.

*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines 9*

# A Story of Discipleship

# 18<sup>OCT</sup>

The Reverend Alison Lane-Olsen \_\_\_\_\_

## John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip said to him, "Come and see."

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

Nathanael asked him, "Where did you come to know me?"

Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

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I am a seminary student at Pacific School of Religion, located in Berkeley, and I am now officially in the middle of my seminary education. Every seminary student at the school is required to pass a "middler"— an appointed time during the middle of the student's

education during which he or she meets with a few faculty members and student peers to discuss the student's sense of call and beliefs.

Part of the middler is to write and present a lengthy paper on a host of theological topics ranging from our thoughts on the nature of the Holy Spirit to our understanding of Christian community. In this paper, we are to write about not only what we believe to be true, but how we know what we believe is true—a very challenging task, I think.

For centuries, philosophers have asked questions about knowledge and truth. How do we know what is true? How do we decide what is real and true and right in our lives? Every day we are bombarded with new information demanding that we make a decision about whether or not we think a new piece of information is true or false, right or wrong. When I watch TV, I watch advertisements that ask me to make a judgment about whether a particular brand is better than another. I am asked to come to some kind of decision.

The information we are called to process and the decisions we must make in our lives are more substantial than mere TV advertisements. For example, yesterday I read in a news report that “Washington [was] making it clear that a case for war (with Iraq) was already developing.” Should I believe there is a case for war? How do I know?

We are called to consider and reflect upon many other serious questions. Many of us, for example, may be wondering what to believe about the church and about God. In the process of making decisions about these topics, a fair amount of doubt or skepticism can easily arise. The notion of doubting or being skeptical often carries a negative connotation, but I am referring to a healthy process in which our attitude is questioning, and even cautious in affirmation.

*How do we know what is true?*

It is no wonder, really, that doubt readily comes to the forefront of our mind as we try to decide how we feel about something—especially when we begin to recognize the natural ability of the human mind to kid itself, making things appear to be true when they are not, and vice versa. We know of optical illusions; we know that sounds can

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fool us, that we can be misled by our senses; we know that the sun appears to rise and set, but we know better. It begins to look doubtful whether we can distinguish between the real and unreal. When you come right down to it, we are faced with this very same problem all through our lives. How do we know what is real?

Eighteenth-century scientist and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg valued human freedom, insisting that if it were to have any meaning at all, it must include the freedom to call evil good and good evil. As the Reverend George Dole put it, “The free mind must be free to err; or, in more personal terms, the only truth that is fully accepted is the truth that is freely chosen.”

***An important and essential aspect of discernment is doubt.***

We must use our mind to discern as best we can the fact from the fiction—and an important and essential aspect of discernment is doubt.

In our story from the first chapter of the Gospel of John, I think Nathanael is asking this very same question—“How do I decide what is right or wrong to believe?—with this same sense of doubt. In the story, Jesus is just beginning his ministry, and is in the process of gathering disciples. First, Andrew and his brother Simon Peter were called. Next were Philip and Nathanael. Jesus finds Philip first, and it is Philip who seeks out Nathanael. Philip says to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.” Nathanael questions the news he hears. He is not ready to accept the good news without wondering, without doubting.

We find differences in the four gospels with respect to the story of Jesus calling his disciples, but in every case except Nathanael, as far as I can find, when the call for discipleship goes forth, it is followed at once by the response of obedience. In the Gospel of Matthew, when we read about Andrew and Simon Peter, they are casting a net into the sea—for they were fisherman. The Lord, who is walking by, says to them, “Follow me...” and we read that immediately, they leave their nets and follow him. The Lord passes by James and his brother John, who are in their boat with their father. The call goes forth, and

we read that they too immediately leave the boat and their father, and follow him. Later, we read that as the Lord is walking along, he sees Matthew sitting at the tax booth and says to him, "Follow me." And Matthew gets up and follows him.

***Nathanael represents that part of us that desires the truth, but also carries with it a certain skepticism.***

In our story from John, Philip too is ready to follow—only first, he must tell Nathanael. Nathanael is not ready to answer with the same response. Instead he questions, even doubts, the news he has just heard from

Philip. Before he is ready to believe, he asks two questions. First, he responds by asking "Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?"

One can hardly hear his question without hearing the doubt that must have been in his voice. Historians and archaeologists believe that at the time of Jesus, Nazareth would have been but a small village, with perhaps 25 families living within its boundaries. The village of Nazareth, though just 60 miles north of Jerusalem, was in fact very isolated, with no trade routes running through it. Nathanael, it is believed, would have grown up only a few miles outside of Nazareth—hence his incredulity that something so great as the Messiah would come from something so small, familiar, and close by.

After Nathanael poses this question, Philip answers him by saying, "Come and see." Nathanael agrees, and as he approaches Jesus, Jesus says to him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

It is in response to this statement that Nathanael asks his second question. He says to the Lord, "How do you know me?"

Nathanael is satisfied with Jesus' answer. Jesus responds, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Perhaps in Nathanael's mind, Jesus had demonstrated a kind of knowledge that marked him as a miracle worker. Nathanael is now a believer, and he says to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel."

If we were to think of each of the disciples as representing different aspects of ourselves, I think it would be safe to say that Nathanael

represents that part of us that desires the truth, but also carries with it a fair amount of skepticism. We need that skepticism—we must have the courage to ask questions before we bring something into our lives. Asking questions is a part of discipleship, even if it means asking questions of the Divine.

Swedenborg, in his work *Arcana Coelestia*, made this statement: “No one should be instantly persuaded about the truth—that is, the truth should not be instantly so confirmed that there is no doubt left. The reason is that truth inculcated in this way is “second-hand” truth—it has no stretch and no give....This is why, as soon as something true is presented by open experience to good spirits in the other life, something opposite is presented soon thereafter, which creates a doubt. So they are enabled to think and ponder whether it is true and to gather reasons and thereby lead the truth into their minds rationally.” (7298:2).

The love of truth should be accompanied by the fear of error. This comes somewhat naturally to us, I think, because it happens that with many of us, the mind does not at once accept and confirm the offered truth. Hasty and unquestioning reception and confession of truth is likely to result in persuasive rather than in rational faith, and however sincere that faith may be, it is easily shaken. When Philip responded to Nathanael first question by saying, “Come and see,” it was as though he was saying, “Approach Jesus yourself, use the faculty that God has given you for discerning the truth, and you will see that it is beneficial.”

*The love of truth should be accompanied by the fear of error.*

Throughout life, we will always be called to make decisions about what we believe and why. I think Nathanael calls us to remember that there is both healthy and diseased skepticism—in other words, we can have a state of doubt that leads to faith, or a state of doubt that ends in betrayal. Nathanael possessed a state of doubt that led to faith. When offered the opportunity to meet the Messiah, although he questioned it, he did not shut out the possibility of its being true. He was willing to be convinced, but did not at once yield to the evidence of the truth. This was the process through which Nathanael entered

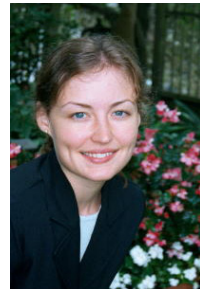
into faith. Healthy skepticism can lead us into faith, and diseased skepticism can keep us from faith, whether faith in God or faith in humanity.

Earlier I told you that I was called upon to write a paper about what I believe and how I know I believe it. I would like to think that in my own life, when I have to decide whether something is true, I ask two questions. First, does it help me to love the neighbor more? And second, does it help me to love the Lord more? These are the questions that help me decide.

Nathanael had his own set of questions. If you take just one thing from this message, I would like it to be this—a question. Ask yourself, “How do I decide what is real and true and right in my life—and am I prepared, as Nathanael was, to let truth be more powerful than what I might have considered true in the past?”

I would like to close with Proverbs 3:21: “Preserve sound judgment and discernment; do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you.” Amen.

The Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen is  
the minister at the Pretty Prairie  
New Jerusalem Church in Pretty  
Prairie, Kansas.



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## Prayer

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled.  
My Lord, fill it.

I am weak in faith; strengthen me.

I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent,  
that my love may go out to my neighbor.

I do not have a strong and firm faith;

at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether.

O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and my trust in you.

~ *Martin Luther (1483-1546)*



# Daily Meditations

Monday, October 19

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Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." *Matthew 16:24*

No one can shun evils as sins so as to be inwardly averse to them except by means of combats against them. *Doctrine of Life 92*

Tuesday, October 20

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Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."

*Matthew 19:23*

[One] should relinquish the things that are his own, which are loving self and the world more than God, and thus leading himself; and... acknowledge the Lord only and be led by Him. *Apocalypse Explained 934:3*

Wednesday, October 21

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He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" *Matthew 26:18*

One who receives [the Love and wisdom of the Lord] is redeemed in the degree in which he receives. *True Christian Religion 717*

## **Thursday, October 22**

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“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” *Matthew 6:24*

After death everyone must be either in good and at the same time in truth, or in evil and at the same time in falsity, because good and evil cannot be united.

*Divine Providence 18*

## **Friday, October 23**

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Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly. *Matthew 26:75*

The Lord is denied when there is no longer any faith, and there is no faith when there is no longer any charity. *AC 10134:13*

## **Saturday, October 24**

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And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. *Matthew 28:18-20*

The Lord is not in a greater and lesser degree of love and wisdom, that is, as a sun. He is not in a greater or lesser degree of heat and light with one than with another, for He is everywhere the same. But He is not received by one in the same degree as by another. *Divine Love and Wisdom 124*

# The Need To Know

The Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

# 25<sup>th</sup> OCT

## Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

## *Revelation Unveiled 82*

"But I have against you that you have left your first charity" means that it is to their discredit that they do not give the highest priority to living a good life, as was and is the practice, however, at the beginning of every church.

This is said to the church because that means the people in the church who put first focus primarily on theological truths and not on living good lives (see §73). Yet living good lives should be put first, that is, should be the primary focus, because to the extent that we are intent on living good lives we are effectively intent on theological truths. The reverse, however, is not the case. This is because the good decisions of our lives open the deeper reaches of our minds, and once they are opened, truths are visible in their own light. The result is that they are not only understood but are loved. It is different when theological issues are put first or made our primary focus. We may then gather true information, but without depth of insight and without loving this truth with a spiritual affection.

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This morning's sermon is prompted by an email from the Swedenborg Foundation calling attention to one in a long line of published misstatements about Swedenborg, in this case the assertion that "Swedenborg recommended irregular hours and sleep deprivation as a means of inducing sharper and more frequent images." There is evidence that Swedenborg himself kept irregular

***The truth we need is truth about how to live.***

hours and did not need much sleep, but there is no foundation for the claim that he recommended this as a practice. Wilson Van Dusen, in fact, criticized Swedenborg for not recommending any practice—a critique which he himself undermined with a single phrase in his excellent pamphlet on uses: "Enter into dialogue with your works."

The concern with "practice" is one result of the impact of eastern religions that we associate primarily with the sixties. There was a void in American religion that was wide open to a surge of interest in transcendental meditation, yoga, and the like. This surge was fueled also by the discovery of altered states of consciousness, and for a good many people, achieving such states became an end in itself. There was an exciting sense of the accessibility of higher truths, truths felt to be urgently needed to counter what was seen as the gross materialism of popular culture.

There can be no doubt whatever that both Scripture and doctrine are very much in favor of truth, and the higher the better; but when the quest for truth becomes an end in itself, we risk thinking that we are better simply because we know more. This is the pitfall of "faith alone" when "faith" is understood to be not trust in the Lord but simply the beliefs that we profess—"the faith of the church."

If we look at what Scripture has to say about truth, about learning, and about teaching, it soon becomes obvious that the truth we need is truth about how to live. "Teach me your paths; lead me in your truth, and teach me," says the Psalmist (Psalm 25:3-4). "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes" (Psalm 119:33). "Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me" (Psalm 43:3). In Deuteronomy we hear God enjoining Israel to "give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe" (Deuteronomy 4:1).

If we turn to doctrine, we do find statements that we are to love truth simply for its own sake (*Heaven and Hell* 347; see also *Secrets of Heaven* 10683), but this is usually in contrast to loving it as a means to wealth and eminence. Far more frequent are statements that we are to love truth for the sake of life, or for the sake of the good we can do (see, for example, *Secrets of Heaven* 1904, 3324, 3539, 3652, 3865, 8078, 8993, 9206, and 10266, and *Heaven and Hell* 517). This thought is further developed in *Heaven and Hell* (§356): “We should saturate ourselves with information and knowledge, because it is through them that we learn to think, then to sort out what is true and good, and ultimately to be wise . . . Factual information constitutes the elemental basis on which our civic and moral lives as well as our spiritual lives are built and grounded; and it is learned with a view to using it . . . Discoveries open a path to the inner person, and then unite that person with the outer in proportion to useful action.”

***Sometimes loving truth for its own sake is very much like loving money for its own sake.***

We speak sometimes of “a wealth of knowledge,” and our theology would have us take this image quite seriously. It is put quite concisely in *Secrets of Heaven* (§8628.3). “. . . in itself, information is spiritual wealth, and people who are well informed are like people who have worldly wealth, which in much the same way is a means of being of service to themselves, the neighbor, and the country.”

Earlier this month I mentioned that “one writer on financial matters has said that if you want to become wealthy you have to regard money as something you collect, like stamps or rare coins, rather than as something you use. . . . What good you can do with it is irrelevant at best and problematic at worst, because if you spend it you don’t have it any more.” There is a kind of “loving truth for its own sake” that is very much like loving money for its own sake, and it is all too possible that loving altered states of consciousness for their own sakes is of the same problematic quality—the more of this wealth the better, and that is all there is to it. This by no means denies the wisdom of having spiritual or material “funds” that we do not need at the moment. There is no necessary limit to the amount we

should have in reserve for future use, provided that it is truly being held for the sake of future use.

If we regard the central purpose of this life as being preparation for living in heavenly community, then we need to ask how altered states relate to this purpose. One immediate and obvious answer is that altered states can serve to convince us that spiritual reality is for

***We have already  
started living  
forever.***

real, but the question remains, what do we do with this knowledge? Specifically, how does it affect our ability to participate in heavenly community, our relationships with each other? Does it help us understand ourselves

and each other, to “sort out what is true and good, and ultimately become wise”?

Why do we want to know? Sometimes, it is quite clear that we want to know because we need to know in order to accomplish some particular task. Side by side on High Street are the “regular” high school and the regional vocational school. The students in the vocational school can see a very direct relationship between what they are being taught and what they will be doing to earn their livings.

Why go next door to the high school, then, and learn about things like geography and history and English? Simply because there is more to life than earning a living—much more. There are 168 hours in a week. Suppose we sleep eight hours a night and that our job takes another forty. That leaves seventy-two hours to account for, seventy-two hours in which we are members of the human race and inhabitants of this planet. What do we need to know about the world we live in and the people we live with? What do we need to know about how communities and nations work? What do we need to know about managing our income, about diet and health?

We cannot stop there, though. Once we have accounted for all the hours in our earthly lives, we have only scratched the surface. There is the little matter of eternal life to consider, and the first thing we need to recognize in this regard is that we have already started living forever. We are spiritual beings here and now, right here and right now. Whatever we are doing with our hands and feet, our eyes and ears, our vocal cords and tongues, still, our joy and sorrow, anxiety

and relief, determination and discouragement, are matters of the spirit. Above all, our caring for ourselves and for each other is a spiritual reality, not a physical one.

Here, clearly, there is a great deal that we need to know, and if we look with any candor at the world around us, it does indeed seem that we have a lot to learn. The essential fact about happiness is that it must be shared. This is about as simple a fact as a fact can be, but its depth is unfathomable. It goes to the very core of our being, where the Lord's life is flowing into us.

This means that any true spiritual awakening will heighten our consciousness not only of the depths of our own being but of the depths of others. Any so-called "spiritual experience" that inclines us to retreat into a private, inner world is suspect. It may not be out-and-out hellish, but it is certainly not angelic. As spiritual beings, we are capable of exquisite sensitivity to each other, but that is often smothered by our absorption in the physical world. Physical appearances sometimes correspond to spiritual realities and sometimes do not. I often think, for example, of Bob Kirven, who had an extraordinarily quick and agile mind and a distressingly unresponsive tongue; he was plagued by a lifelong stammering problem. I think of a couple of elderly women so slight that you wouldn't want them outdoors in a strong breeze, but with minds like steel traps and wills of iron. I think also of athletes with superb physical skills and severe moral weaknesses.

This ambiguity is not such a bad thing, not at all. If our physical senses never deceived us, we would come to trust them blindly. There would be no need to know more, to look deeper. It is our discoveries of the strength within the weakness or the weakness within the strength that call us to look deeper, to look within the physical that will perish in time toward the spiritual that will endure forever.

***Happiness must be shared.***

This attitude is inseparable from the desire and intent to be helpful. That is the clear message of the statement in Heaven and Hell that "Discoveries open a path to the inner person, and then unite that person with the outer in proportion to useful action." We learn in

depth as we engage each other in depth. An intellectual understanding of theory can help, but the lasting lessons are taught by experience. That is why, incidentally, education for pastoral ministry has come to require clinical pastoral education courses—time spent under close supervision with people in need of special care, with disciplined and searching reflection.

This brings us, finally, back to our text: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.” We use machines to carry heavy loads now, and I doubt that any of us could find an actual yoke outside a museum. The image, though, is clear as ever—the sole purpose of a yoke is to enable us to carry things, to do useful work. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me” says very clearly, “Learn by doing.” “Enter into dialogue

***We learn in depth  
as we engage each  
other in depth.***

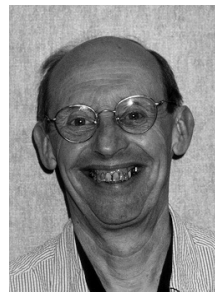
with your works.” Even more specifically, it says, “Learn by accepting responsibilities.” Even more specifically, it says, “Learn by accepting the responsibilities of care for each other,” because this is not just any old yoke,

this is the Lord’s yoke. In the words of our third reading, “the good decisions of our lives open the deeper reaches of our minds.” “Lead me in your truth, and teach me,” says the Psalmist, and it is said in that order.

When we accept the responsibilities of care for each other, we inevitably find ourselves needing to understand. Inner reflection certainly has its place in this process, and this reflection need not and should not always have some immediate, practical goal in mind. It can very well stem from something as vague as a need to figure out which way is up in a very confusing world. After all, we can scarcely look in the right direction, let alone move in the right direction, if we don’t know which direction is right, which way really is “up.” We may then treasure the guidance of those few words, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.” They tell us exactly what we need to know.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. George F. Dole is the pastor of the Bath Society in Maine. He is also a faculty member at the Swedenborgian House of Studies.





# Daily Meditations

Monday, October 26

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So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. *Deuteronomy 4:1*

Since man acts as he thinks and wills... it follows that when he shuns and turns away from evils, he does goods from the Lord and not from self; and this is why shunning evils is doing goods. *Apocalypse Explained 946.5*

Tuesday, October 27

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See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. *Deuteronomy 4.5*

Man cannot be reformed unless he thinks, wills, and does as if from himself..., while that which is not done by the man as if from himself, not being received in any life of sense, flows through like ether. *Apocalypse Explained 946.5*

Wednesday, October 28

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Blessed are you, O Lord;  
teach me your statutes. *Psalms 119.12*

By "blessing" is meant every good which man receives from the Lord, as power and opulence, and all that is implied by them; but especially every spiritual good, as love and wisdom, charity and faith, and the joy and felicity thence, which are of eternal life. *Apocalypse Revealed 289*

## **Thursday, October 29**

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When I told of my ways, you answered me;  
teach me your statutes.

Make me understand the way of your precepts,  
and I will meditate on your wondrous works. *Psalm 119:26&27*

Every man can be perfected-and consequently receive this gift of the Lord's mercy-in accordance with the actual doings of his life, and in a manner suited to the hereditary evil implanted by his parents. *Arcana Coelestia (Potts) 633*

## **Friday, October 30**

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As it was commanded to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be re-established for you from the time that you learn that Heaven is sovereign. *Daniel 4:26*

That man cannot discover a single Divine truth, except by approaching the Lord immediately, is due to this, that the Lord alone is the Word, and that He is the Light and the Truth itself; and man does not become spiritual except from the Lord alone, but remains natural. *Invitation to the New Church 22*

## **Saturday, October 31**

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He was driven from human society, and his mind was made like that of an animal. His dwelling was with the wild asses, he was fed grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until he learned that the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and sets over it whomsoever he will. *Daniel 5:21*

The chief cause of the consummation of truth and of good along with it, is the two natural loves that are diametrically opposed to the two spiritual loves, and that are called love of self and love of the world. *True Christian Religion 754*

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**The Swedenborgian Church** bases its teachings on the Bible as illuminated by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian. Swedenborg envisioned a new Christianity coming into being that was revitalized by the Spirit of the Lord.

We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God, who made himself known to us through his life as the divine human Jesus of Nazareth, and whom we continue to know through his Holy Spirit, which operates through and around us.

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.

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- God is pure love, pure wisdom, and pure creative power.
- God became human in Jesus Christ and dwells with us.
- The Bible is God's Word, and has many levels of meaning.
- God loves and saves people of all religions.

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