

## **A New Understanding Of Sacred Scriptures 2. The Garden of Eden.**

In the first of a series of talks designed to illustrate the new understanding of the Scriptures which is given to us in Swedenborg's theological writings, I spoke last week on the Genesis story of the creation of the world. Though one of the best known, it is also one of the least understood stories in the Bible, and over the last one hundred years or so has figured at the centre of more controversy than any other. Science has said one thing and the Bible has seemed to say another. All the evidence has suggested that the world can only have come into existence over a period of millions of years. Genesis says that creation took place in the space of only six days. And slowly, but surely, the weight of scientific evidence has won the day. Comparatively few people now attempt to uphold the factual accuracy of the Genesis story or argue in favour of it.

As for factual accuracy however this is not, and, when it comes to it, has never been, the important thing. People have thought that the Bible stands or falls on its being strictly accurate on every scientific and historical detail. But this is not so. What sets the Bible apart and makes it what it is, is the fact that the stories and incidents recorded there, contain within them a deeper, spiritual meaning - a meaning which is of timeless relevance and which is directly applicable to people in whatever age they are living. Because people now find little in these stories as they stand in our Bibles they are looked upon as curiosities and relics from the past. What we must realise is that the Lord has made use of them - as He made use of parables while on earth - because of the deeper and more interior truth they could convey.

As I explained in the previous talk, within the creation story from Genesis there is described the successive stages in the creation of a new person within us. Swedenborg pointed out that the seven days of creation, described in Genesis, are - "so many successive stages in the regeneration of man". (*Arcana Caelestia* 6). It is the spiritual re-birth of man that is dealt with here, and the different steps which are involved.

If we are to know the happiness with which the Lord would bless our lives not only in this world but to eternity in the world to come, we must be born again. As to attitude, as to the things which we love and which delight us, we must become a new person. Whereas at the beginning, and so far as our birth into this natural world is concerned, we have self and self-regard at the centre of things, all this must change. But such change doesn't take place overnight.

Regeneration is a gradual thing which progresses through specific phases or stages. And it is these stages which are dealt with in the inner or spiritual meaning of the creation story in Genesis. From the disorder, primeval chaos, and darkness, of our unregenerate natures when we love and mostly think only of ourselves, the Lord brings about the creation of a new person within us, gradually and by stages.

When God had created man He set him in the Garden of Eden which He had planted. It is a lovely story of innocence and tranquility, projecting a picture of beauty and perfection in human nature which is mostly outside our experience today. And what is meant and described by it is this. When God, with our co-operation, has effected the creation of a new person within us, long-time process though it may be, He brings us into a state of spiritual blessedness, of rest and inmost tranquility. Gone is the discontentment and hankering after other things which we formerly felt. Gone are the tendencies to hurt or to defame, to always have our own way and to want our ideas and opinions to be accepted. Gone is the desire to be noticed and praised. 'For these are things which we have overcome. The Garden of Eden is something which is experienced within. What is pictured here is not a place, for such a place never existed, but a state of mind - a state of mind into which people come; a state of mind into which God Himself brings a person once they become regenerate or are spiritually re-born. It is a state of mind where no evil intrudes and man is at peace and in communion with the Lord.

There are in fact other passages of Scripture which bear out this symbolism or representation, as in Isaiah 58, verse 11: "The Lord shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make fat your bones: and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not". Similarly, in Jeremiah Chapter 31, verse 12: "Therefore they shall come and sing in the heights of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and the herd, and their soul shall be as a watered garden. . ." People who become regenerate are those who are meant.

That the Garden of Eden is meant to be understood symbolically and as representing the mind and state of a re-born person is also pointed to in such things as the names given to the two trees mentioned. There is no such thing as a 'Tree of Life' or a 'Tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. Ask a botanist, and he wouldn't know what we were talking about.

The Tree of Life was in the midst of the Garden and what is meant is the Lord's love and life which is the centre of all things with the person who has become regenerate. It is the holy influence of the Lord around which all else revolves. It is the realisation of one's dependence on the Lord which is central to the thinking of every re-born person. This is the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden.

On the outskirts of the Garden was the other tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which depicts or represents, not a sense of dependence on the Lord, but a sense of dependence on ourselves. Whereas the Tree of Life pictures man's trust in the Lord and willingness to make HIM the centre of his life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents man's trust in himself which, with those who are regenerate is subordinate and only on the circumference of things. The re-born person has learnt that man can't trust in himself, can't trust his own ideas of right and wrong, and can't of himself resist evil or, from his own ingenuity, come up with lasting answers to life's problems.

Out of Eden there went a river "to water the garden, from there it was separated into four headwaters". Here is pictured the wisdom and spiritual intelligence of those who are regenerate - not a wisdom learnt at High School or University, but something which comes to a person from the Lord alone and which diffuses itself into the different parts of their mind and thinking faculties.

A moment ago I spoke of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as depicting or representing man's trust in himself, or sense of dependance on himself. In the Garden of Eden it is there, but on the outskirts. With the re-born person it is subordinate, on the circumference, and not the central thing. What is central with such people is the Lord, and His love and His life. But this is not to say that the situation goes unchallenged.

Even when things are so glowingly tranquil we are tempted to displace the Lord from the centre of our lives and exalt self in His stead. The serpent comes to us (or, in other words, our sensual nature rises up) urging us to abandon our trust in the Lord and in His teaching, and to take matters into our own hands. We may be incensed by the hurt someone has caused us. The Lord, as we know, counsels patience and forgiveness. But though we know this we are tempted to abandon it and deal with the situation in our own way. And if we do, then we fall, and the inner tranquility and peace of the Garden of Eden state is over.

The Bible is not a document about the world outside of us, although at first sight, and as it stands, it seems to be about things which happened long, long ago. It is not God's primary purpose to tell us about these things. The Bible is God telling us about the world inside of us. It is God speaking to us about our need for regeneration; our good and bad inclinations; our temptations; our waywardness and all the rest. As we read our Bibles it is important to set out silently asking ourselves, 'What is the Lord saying to me here? In this incident? In this story? So long as we read the story of the Garden of Eden as a description of something which happened long in the past we are critical of Eve and a bit self-righteous about it all. But when we read it - as we should - with regard to ourselves, putting ourselves in the place of Eve, we see how accurately the Lord is talking to us about ourselves and our own weaknesses.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 82.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>