

## **Living in the Covenant of the New Jerusalem**

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The Swedenborg Church is in a great position to bring a message of hope when it comes to the subject of the covenant that the Lord has given us to live with. It is a message of hope that is very psychologically and spiritually healing for the times we live in. This message is useful to me in my work everyday. I am a fulltime chaplain at Kaiser in Vallejo, and as you can imagine everyday is full of stories, often-difficult ones, but always-meaningful stories that require me to show up with my whole self; Stories that require me to rely on the Holy Spirit.

To begin today, I am going to talk about the nature of the covenant that the Lord has promised us, and to do that it is important to see the difference between the covenant before and after His advent. So first I hope to offer a glimpse into the Mediterranean world around the time of Christ. Because to understand the nature of the covenant we live in it is essential to see what Jesus redeemed humanity from. The height of Joy is best understood from the depth of suffering.

The great Bible anthropologist Bruce Chilton tells us that in Jewish/Mediterranean cosmology, at the time of Christ the people believed there was a firmament outside the earth's atmosphere in the sky. It was thought this firmament was a hard metal shell, and that the stars were holes in it. This casing was believed to hold back great waters, and the people feared that if they displeased the gods the firmament would break, and the water would come crashing down and destroy them, just as it had during the time of Noah. It was also believed that there was a host of angelic and demonic beings behind the firmament. Leading up to the time of Christ demonic beings had begun to greatly outnumber the angelic. All this is a symptom of the darkness that had gathered in the religious state of the earth at this time.

To give you an idea of the nature of people's mindset at the time, I will read a quote from the famous anthropologist and critical historian Bart Ehrman:

In the Mediterranean at the time of Jesus, people did not think of sin as we do today. Sin was believed to be a kind of cosmic power, an evil force that compels people to live in alienation from God. The human problem under this model is that people are enslaved to this demonic power and are unable to break free from its bondage...Furthermore the power of sin is related to the power of death. Death was not thought of as something that happened. It was a cosmic force that was intent on

enslaving people; when it succeeded, it totally removed a person from the realm of god. The situation was desperate.

All this corresponds to Swedenborg's claim that at the time Jesus was born, there was no charity left in the church, and this was indeed the reason for his coming.

Now let's contrast this picture with what the Gospel narratives tell us about the firmament when Jesus comes on the scene. When Jesus started his ministry, the people knew something huge was changing in the cosmos and in their lives. Jesus did not redeem simply by showing up with his divine presence; it was a process and a battle. He was subjugating evil spirits, and He was a master psychologist; he knew where the people hurt the most, and where the people had the most resistance to change. For instance when John baptized Jesus, the scripture says, "Behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove." The dove flying down from the firmament was a restorative image par-excellence. Waters and demons did not come rushing down, but the loving and comforting presence of God, and it landed on Jesus! When Stephen was being stoned to death he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God", another stunning story that un-conditioned and healed their weary psyche. Imagine the relief in their mind that this oppressive darkness they have been under - is lifting. It is not only the image of it, but the reality of the work of the risen Lord.

In Acts you may remember the story of how Peter overcame his own deeply ingrained prejudice, and that of the people, toward the gentiles. Peter takes the time to explain the story of how the Lord changed his attitude from beginning to end. In the story he prophesies, "I saw an object like a great sheet let down from heaven..." He repeats the story three times to get the idea through to the people. It needed to sink in, for they have adamantly opposed the gentiles for centuries. Nevertheless the people are humbled and surrender to the turn of events. Scripture says, "when they heard these things, they became silent, and glorified God, saying 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'".

The heavens being opened corresponds to spiritual sight. These events are the introduction into an internal relationship with the Lord. The new image of the firmament, and the message that all people are children of God, was a profound and joyous revelation to their mind. With this good news, reconciliation was kindled in their hearts.

In the covenant of the New Jerusalem it is promised that the Lord is near, and he always will be near. The church before the advent was a representative church, where everything in the Jewish nation signified heavenly things, and acted as an intermediary for heavenly conjunction. The difference now is that there is no intermediary. The Lord is in direct relationship with everyone and

everything. He is the innermost of all of us, and nature. Never again will an imbalance take place as took place at the time of Noah, at the time of the Lord's advent, and at the time of the second coming. At each of these times the hells began to overrun heaven and there was a terrible separation between Humans and God. In the covenant of the New Jerusalem it is proclaimed that this will never happen. The divine human, Christ as God, will always be in intimate relationship with us. This is a message of boundless hope and psychological assurance, especially for those who have suffered trauma and despair.

Jesus said, "it is expedient that I leave, but I will send the comforter to you". The comforter is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the divine human of the Lord. In my work as a chaplain, I am continually learning about bringing what we call presence to the patient. I pray ahead of time that the Holy Spirit orchestrate whatever healing and comfort a person may need. I experience the Holy Spirit simply as a feeling of affection. It is almost like I fall in love with something about the patient, but without the romantic overtones. In talking with the patient, I simply seek to take the conversation deeper as opportunity arises, that is if the person can speak. If they cannot speak I hold the their hand and talk to them about the weather, or the flowers in their room.

I had a patient on Friday that had knee surgery. She was a low-income, kindly, Latin woman. She told me a lot about the details of her surgery, and other things in her life, but showed little inclination to reflect, in spite of my open-ended questions fishing or something deeper. I asked if there was anything that she was worried about, inviting her to go deeper one last time. The flood-gates suddenly opened. She began to cry and told me about her despair over her son. I wont tell the whole story here, but it was about how her son was a sweet boy and then got involved with drugs. He ended up stealing \$40,000.00 from her account, and she had to put him in jail in order to get him to stop taking drugs. When he got out, she put him in rehab, which cost another \$37,000.00, and it worked; he stopped using drugs and got a job. But she was now in such stress and despair over the debt, and no doubt traumatized from the experience, she attempted suicide. Fortunately her older son stopped her. She said she had held these things in for a long time, and had told no-one. She needed to talk, and the Holy Spirit orchestrated a way for it to come about. She was crying out for help, but you couldn't see it from the outside. Many of us may feel the same thing sometimes. When we care, and seek the Holy Spirit, He leads us on a path to go through our trials and grow stronger. And when we listen to the Holy Spirit we can learn to trust and help each other.

When Jesus said, "you shall do greater things than I", I believe he was talking to all following generations, including all of us gathered here today. This is of course not an egotistical matter, but a matter of humility. I believe this statement basically means that the internal work of healing hearts is

greater than the external work of performing miracles. Jesus had to perform miracles because that was the way to get through to people who were in an external state, but the greater part is to change within, and to seek to heal the hearts of others, by approaching the Lord in humility. This leads to an eternal change, and a heavenly state.

A covenant with the Lord is a real living thing. It has moral and spiritual value, and consequences. He is intrinsic in our mind, and by our covenant with him we are tethered to Him. We can choose to be led by him or not. It is a good to remember.

Amen.

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