

Becoming an Angel

The Right Rev. David H. Lindrooth

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“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28: 17)

This morning we look three parts of the Jacob narrative that illustrate the Lord’s operation in our lives as He reforms us from sensory oriented human beings into angels who can live happily with him to eternity in heaven.

We enter the story in a desert night, Jacob had lain down on the dirt and rested his head on a stone. While sleeping, he had the most amazing dream. He was at the foot of a ladder that went up to heaven with angels ascending and descending from where he lay. When he awoke he recognized that the dream was prophetic. The dream was as if a window had opened showing the secret, inner realm of heaven with all its beauty and the attentive care offered by the Lord and His angels. It must have been amazing to recognize that all this was present and alive within the drab exterior of Jacob’s life as a simple shepherd as he wandered in the parched desert.

It is a wonderful story. For us today, the story not only illustrates the wonders of heaven that the Lord is leading us toward, but shows us something of how the Lord is constantly working secretly from within the depths of our souls, lifting us, gently reforming us. The dream captures the Lord’s careful, miraculous, operation that helps us to grow into the angelic life that He offers all of us in the life to come. The point is that even when life seems drab and we are left feeling alone, the Lord is within, working every moment for our eternal welfare and happiness.

The dream is an illustration of the passage in the Arcana Caelestia that says: **“everything that befalls us moves us toward an end that is good”** (AC 8455). Or to put it another way, Divine Providence is constantly at work in our lives nurturing and securing for us a happiness that will satisfy us to eternity.

The vision reminds us of the miracle of spiritual life, that the Lord is constantly flowing into our lives, so fully and completely that, in the words of True Christianity, **“everything good, that is truly good and that exists in us and is done by us, is from God”** (TC 8) Or to put it in the words of the Psalms: **“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it”** (PS 127:1).

These passages articulate the truth that (whether we believe it or not) we completely depend on the Lord for His power to grow spiritually. While we can prepare our minds, and lives for Him to enter into us, it is He alone who has the power to change us.

This truth can be totally unrecognizable to us when we are immersed in the daily concerns of a worldly life. When caught up in trying to pay bills, take care of physical needs of ourselves and our loved ones, the Lord can seem so distant that we forget to look for His presence in our lives. In our story, the dream seemed to awaken Jacob from this. Jacob echoes this with his sudden realization that: **“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.”** And **“How awesome is this place, it is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.”** (Genesis 28: 17)

Perhaps part of the power offered by the New Church is that it promotes a similar recognition. That the Lord actually never distances Himself from us, especially in regard to our own progress and development as a human being. The truth is that nothing good in our lives happens independently from the instrumentality and immediate presence of God.

Our lesson this morning from True Christianity (24) speaks of uncovering secrets of how the Lord, through the spiritual world is constantly interacting with the world of nature. We can see it with the technology that offers us the incredible ability to view the early formation of a baby in a mother's womb. We can see cells as they repeatedly divide; we can observe them gradually differentiating, and forming all the parts of a perfect little human body with all its organs, its faculties of sight and sensation! External observation could lead us to conclude that those cells are acting on their own initiative – but how can that be true? Deeper thinking leads one to recognize that there has to be some quiet (Divine), interior, organizing Force that is responsible. The New Church teaches that when one takes an interior perspective, the whole of the natural universe **“is like a stage on which proofs are constantly being demonstrated that God exists and that there is one God”** (TC 12). None of the organic growth of anything living on earth happens without influx from the Divine. This is true on earth, and it is equally true for the development of a person's spiritual nature. It is helpful to recognize the source of our spiritual growth and remember that our angelic bodies are constantly being formed and shaped by our Heavenly Father, the Divine Author of all humanity.

Shortly after Jacob's dream of the ladder, he has another remarkable encounter with angels. He is crossing the brook Jabbock and preparing to meet his estranged brother Esau. He had sent everyone ahead and was alone, when again, at night, he was met by an angel who wrestled with him until morning. When dawn came and the angel desired to break free, Jacob wouldn't let him go without demanding a blessing. The angel then blessed him and changed his name to “Israel” – a name associated with struggle. The angel also dislocated Jacob's hip, causing him to limp for the rest of his life.

This curious story is also told in the Jacob narrative because its internal sense adds important information about the Lord's miraculous creative work that forms and shapes us into angels. It is particularly referencing how He develops our spiritual minds enabling the powers of angelic reason. We are taught that Jacob's limp is an illustration of those times when our spiritual growth is incomplete and our truths are lacking in their power. It speaks of those ‘in-between’ times when we have not yet fully developed a clear sense of direction and purpose for the truths that we have learned in life. Without that clear sense of purpose, these truths are weak. When a concept of truth lacks a firm connection with the intended good that it is designed to perform, that truth is going to be halting and lame. Similarly, muscle tissue that is separated from bone makes it difficult to walk. Anytime there is separation between goodness and the truths we have learned, that separation causes our spiritual progress to be halting and unsteady. So, while the spiritual progress certainly continues, it is a sign that the Lord still has work to do within - He is still at work connecting our thinking from the Word with clearer insights of how to serve the Lord and others.

The story of Jacob's limp appears here as a reminder that as we grow spiritually, we will encounter times of indecision and uncertainty. It is a part of the narrative to let us know that this is okay, and that it is a part of the process of becoming a spiritually motivated human being. Again, it is important to remember that it is the Lord alone who is doing this work within

our minds and hearts. And so clearly, this is also, in-part, a message about the need to be patient. It is helpful to remember to be patient when we experience this internal struggle resulting from lack of insight. While we can feel the strong desire to move forward, we stumble because we simply are uncertain of how to do it. This is as natural a part of our adult spiritual development as it is for a toddler to stumble and halt while learning how to walk. Spiritual growth and the clear, steady insights that come from truths that are wrapped with good take time.

I suspect this concept applies to our church as well. The New Church is a church that stresses individual freedom and inquiry into all facets of faith. This free investigation can lead to divergent ideas and conflicting opinions about how the church should be progressing with its efforts. The truths that are being contemplated are not always tightly connected with the good benefits that they offer. The church in these states, like Jacob here in the story, shows something of a limp. That limp can be there even when we recognize the general direction in which the church is called to go. We still limp because that recognition that lacks the enlightenment of the specific applications that are drawn from a more mature spiritual love. Again, the story seems to call us to exercise patience and recognize that in the long view, the Lord is still at work, guiding and gradually aligning our efforts to understand truths so that we can clearly see the goods that they may bring forth. It is a reminder that while we are directed to pray that the Lord's church be established on earth, the Lord's work of opening our eyes, guiding our hearts and gently building the common bonds that form the basis of His church all take time and is part of a greater organic process.

But spiritual life in this world isn't always characterized by limping. That is just an intermediate state. The limp resolves itself as the Lord continues to work in our lives. Eventually the connections between the truths we learn and the goodness that is served by those truths is better recognized. These connections offer states of brilliant spiritual light that offer insights, guidance and wisdom.

Think of a moment when you were struck by an insight that changed your life permanently for the better. Maybe you met a stranger and suddenly you recognized that that stranger would become your spouse, a flash of brilliant insight, feeling as if by chance, but bringing so much value that it could not possibly be due to simple random happenstance. Or maybe you were struck by an idea that led you into a new career or field that, while you could never have planned yourself, it has given you and others immeasurable satisfaction. Those moments of recognition can strike us with wonder, and a sense of awe and they feel like they are gifts given freely by the Lord – as if we had no role in their appearing in our lives at all! Yet these insights have more connectivity to our spiritual progress than we might see on the surface. For these moments are not random, but are also the product of the Lord, working from within, arranging, creating and forming us step by step for heaven.

This aspect of our spiritual growth is also captured in the Jacob story later in the book of Genesis. Now, Jacob is an old man. Years earlier, he had lost his beloved son, Joseph, when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery out of hatred and jealousy. As the story unfolds Joseph becomes the de-facto manager of Egypt, helping it accumulate great wealth and storehouses filled with grain.

Eventually, a famine brings the brothers to Egypt where they encounter Joseph (whom they don't recognize) and from whom they purchase grain. But Joseph recognizes them. When they return home, and open their sacks of grain, the brothers discover silver in the mouths of the sacks- what appears to be their money returned to them! The brothers are stunned by the presence of the money in the sacks and worry that they will be thought of as thieves.

The internal sense of the story shows us again that this is really about our human minds as they are developed by the Lord and the deepening connections that He is making between the truths we learn from the Word and their applications toward a good life. The sudden presence of the money in the sacks represents these sudden, unexpected flashes of insight that become more common as the Lord more tightly bundles our rational thinking together with the desires for good. These valuable insights are characteristic of a person's growth as it moves beyond the 'limping stage' into a stage of deeper connection. The Lord's purpose of this greater clarity is to better help us serve others.

The story draws two points to our attention. First, is that the silver, which represents new truths and insights in our lives, is suddenly present in our lives due to what can only be seen as an act of God. When the brothers return to Egypt later to purchase more grain, they try to return this silver but the Egyptian in charge of the accounting, clearly states that the money is theirs to keep. This is intended to remind us that the wisdom that the Lord offers is truly a gift from Him, and as such is more useful than any insights we might generate on our own.

The second point to the story is that the silver was found in the grain. This points out the reality that new ideas and insights come into being through the context of our efforts to serve others from love. The sacks of grain represent our efforts at charitable action. This is helpful to remember when we are looking for what is next in our lives. Through this story, the Lord reminds us if we are looking for leadership and wondering what is next in our lives, we can find His guidance by looking among what is represented by the sacks- looking among our efforts to serve Him in ways that help other people.

The pattern of a person's spiritual growth is organic. It is gradual. And it is a breathtakingly beautiful process for a human being to become an angel – a person living in the spiritual world, happy, and useful to eternity in the Lord's kingdom. Our task is to prepare the way by turning to the Lord in His Word, learning the truths there that He presents to us, and diligently seeking to apply them to life. In that effort, the Lord comes to us, takes us by the hand and lifts us up. As Jesus said: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.** (John 11:25)

-Amen

Lessons: Genesis 28 (portions); Isaiah 40: 1-5; TCR 24 (portions).