

Bethlehem - The Birthplace of the Lord
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But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The one to be ruler in Israel
Whose goings forth have been from of old
From everlasting. (Micah 5:2)

These words of the prophet Micah foretold that Bethlehem would be the birth place of the Messiah. There was nothing about Bethlehem that would have indicated that something momentous would occur there. It was one of many small villages that dotted the land of Judea. Bethlehem was situated approximately five miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was built on the ridge of a hill just off the main road from Jerusalem to Hebron. Yes, it had been the birthplace of David, and long before his time, Jacob's wife, Rachel, had died giving birth to Benjamin near Bethlehem, then called Ephrathah and had been buried there. None of these events had significantly affected Bethlehem. It was just a small village.

Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, our Savior, because of its spiritual significance. The Lord was born there because Bethlehem represents a kind of insight that allows for His presence in our lives. This insight allows for the Lord's advent in our thoughts and deeds. With the Lord's presence comes a light to guide our ways. With His presence comes peace of mind and good will toward others. With His presence comes the possibility of a healing for our spiritual ills. The insight represented by Bethlehem allows for this presence. But like Bethlehem, this insight may not appear to be important. This insight is perhaps like a small out-of-the-way town prophesied to be significant in the future but shows little sign of significance in the present if one judges by the sight of the eye.

Bethlehem represents a kind of insight that is not understood by many. This kind of insight is not understood by those who are more concerned with right and wrong than with what is good and genuinely useful. The familiar terms used to describe this state of mind is that such people make faith most important and neglect charity. There are many ways of making faith most important. Faith is made to be most important when someone makes thoughts and words more important than intentions. Faith is made to be most important when someone makes learning more important than doing. Faith is made to be most important when someone acts with a legalistic coldness without considering what would be truly useful. The image of the Pharisees given in the New Testament often shows this frame of mind. Also, sadly, one of the stereotypes of a Christian minister that one sometimes sees and reads of also shows this legalistic coldness.

The kind of insight that is represented by Bethlehem allows a truly Christian life to come into existence (*Arcana Caelestia* 3010e). It is the insight that allows for genuine charity. It allows the motivation of willing well for all to express itself in wise actions. This insight helps one meet the immediate and eternal needs of loved ones. This insight, that underlies a truly Christian life, does not come from what a person knows, rather it comes from inner spiritual battles fought and won with the Lord's aid.

The insight represented by Bethlehem allows for the Lord's birth with each of us. This insight is described in the teachings for the New Church in several ways--ways that can be a challenge to understand. We well know that there are many challenges in the books that the Lord has revealed for the New Church. These books reveal more specific doctrine on the nature of the Lord and His presence than any of us will understand in a lifetime. He has revealed these things in part for those who want to understand and live better lives and in part for those who would have trouble believing without a specific explanation (see *Arcana Caelestia* 2094).

The teachings for the New Church call the insight that Bethlehem represents “the truth of good.” They also use the phrase “the spiritual of the celestial to describe this quality” (*Arcana Caelestia* 4592:13). What do they mean? Bethlehem represents the insight into what is true that comes from caring about genuinely good things. This is the spiritual with a person that comes from a celestial or heavenly origin. Hear what the teachings for the New Church say about this spiritual:

Essentially the spiritual existing with a person is his actual affection for what is good and true, loved for its own sake and not for any selfish reason, as well as an affection for what is right and fair, likewise loved for its own sake and not for any selfish reason. When we have inward feelings of delight and pleasure, and more so if feelings of blessedness and happiness flow from them, they constitute the spiritual present with us, which does not come to us from the natural world but from the spiritual world or heaven, that is, from the Lord by way of heaven. This then is the spiritual which, when it reigns in us, influences and so to speak gives color to everything we think, will, or do, and which causes our thoughts and acts of will to partake of what is spiritual, till at length these too become spiritual qualities present with us when we pass from the natural world into the spiritual world. In short, the spiritual consists in an affection stirred by charity and faith, that is, an affection for what is good and true, and in the delight and pleasure, and even more so in the blessedness and bliss that flow from them, which are feelings residing with a person inwardly and making that person someone truly Christian. (*Arcana Caelestia* 5639:2)

The spiritual that is spoken of in this passage is not an overwhelming force in human life. It is more like the small village of Bethlehem. For many it is hardly known. Despite of its quiet appearance this inner quality of life called “the spiritual of the celestial” or “the truth of good” has an essential use. One that we can recognize without too much difficulty.

As we learn throughout our lives, the information that we learn each moment is organized in our minds by the affections that are then active. These affections are often far from perfect. Their lack of perfection taints the ideas we first learn. Our first sight of truth, though tainted, is enough to head us on the path toward heaven, but not enough to be the most useful to ourselves and others. The truth that we learn from reading could be called the truth of books and the truth gained from listening could be sometimes called the truth of sermons or whatever. Sometimes it could be called the truth of self-interest or the truth of intellectual pride. The good things we do from the truth learned in these ways are called “the goods of truth.” They are good things done according to our limited understanding of what we have been taught. This good is imperfect.

For example, if you are in a bad mood and complaining about the problems you're facing to a friend, the friend may rightly recognize that you need to change your attitude, but if that friend tells you too directly that you're the one with the problem, this may merely deepen the bad mood you're already in. Unless you later gain perspective from your friend's candid observations, good

is not directly accomplished by what your friend said. Your friend may have rightly deduced the problem but his or her use of this information was imperfect.

There are countless other examples of this kind of misuse of what is true, sometimes by well-meaning people and other times by people who have no good intentions at all. In either case, the people are using their knowledge to try to do what is good, but not quite succeeding. This is the problem with the good that has its origin in poorly organized or incompletely seen truth. The good of truth is a useful beginning for the individual who is trying to follow the Lord, but it may not be very useful for those whom it is supposed to serve. If the Lord is going to be present in the good things that we do, the knowledge we initially gain in our lives needs to be reorganized. It must be reorganized for us to see the Lord's will, for us to see what is genuinely true.

In ancient times the village of Bethlehem had the name of Ephrata or Ephrathah. The name Ephrata represents the knowledge we first get from the Word (*Apocalypse Explained* 700:9). Initially this is where we must seek the Lord, as in the words of Psalm 132:

I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,
Until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty God of Jacob.
Behold, we heard of it in Ephrata; We found it in the fields of the woods.
Let us go into His tabernacle; Let us worship at His footstool.

We hear of a dwelling place for the Lord in Ephrata, that is, in the Word as we first understand it in its natural sense. But it was not called Ephrata when the Lord was born. It was called Bethlehem. A change had taken place. Bethlehem represents the spiritual sense of the Word--not just the sense gained from studying correspondences and the books the Lord has given us, such as the *Arcana Caelestia*, but rather it is the Word truly understood. Understood as the angels understand it. This understanding will never come just from intellectual work. Those who try to get seek the Lord exclusively in this way are missing the essential value of shunning evils as sins. Shunning evils isn't just a matter of getting rid of some bad habits. It is the process that allows the Lord to reorganize our minds and make a dwelling place for Himself in our lives. Repentance allows new loves and affections to organize our thoughts. Repentance allows for a new insight--a new insight that receives its life from a love of serving others. It receives its life from good loves. The truth given life by these good loves is far superior to any truth that we had previously been seen.

Bethlehem represents the truth of good which is the truth given life by these good loves. It was the birthplace of the Lord. And it is in the truth of good that the Lord can be present with us. Before we can receive its light and guidance, we must prepare the way. As each of us works on whatever particular evils our self-examination has brought to our attention, the Lord will be working the miracle of spiritual rebirth within our minds. The results of this miracle will far surpass the immediate implications of the evil being fought against. Spiritual rebirth will bring the desire to do what is genuinely good to our minds. And from this desire there will come a new organization of truth--the truth of good and so the Lord will be born with us as our Savior as prophesied long ago by Micah.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me

The one to be ruler in Israel
Whose goings forth have been from of old
From everlasting (Micah 5:2)
AMEN

Lessons: Micah 4:1-5, 5:1-5, *Apocalypse Explained* 449:3

Micah 4:1-5

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established on the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills; And peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. For all people walk each in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God Forever and ever.

Micah 5:1-5

Now gather yourself in troops, O daughter of troops; He has laid siege against us; They will strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting." Therefore He shall give them up, Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; Then the remnant of His brethren Shall return to the children of Israel. And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide, For now He shall be great To the ends of the earth; And this One shall be peace.

***Apocalypse Explained* 449:3**

Benjamin was called "the son of the right hand" because "son" signifies truth, and "right hand" signifies the power of truth from good [loves], and in the spiritual world truth motivated by good [loves] in the natural person has all power. . . For this reason he was called "Benjamin," that is, "the son of the right hand." And as "Bethlehem" has a similar meaning, namely, truth conjoined to good loves in the natural person, David too was born there, and also anointed as king (1 Sam. 16:1-14; 17:12); for David as king represented the Lord in the form of truth from good, and this, too, is signified by "king." For the same reason the Lord was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1, 5, 6) because He was born a king, and truth conjoined to good was with Him from birth. For every infant is born natural, and the natural, because it is next to the external senses and the world, is first opened, and this with all people is ignorant of truth and desirous of evil; but in the Lord alone the natural had a desire for good and a longing for truth; for the ruling affection in a person, which is his soul, is from the father; and with the Lord, the affection or soul from the Father was the Divine Itself, which is the Divine good of the Divine love.