

Seeing Providence, Week 4: Old Age

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Deuteronomy 34:1-9 (NKJV, modified)

¹ Then Moses went up from the deserts of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the head of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And Jehovah showed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah, even to the sea behind, ³ the South, and the plain of the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. ⁴ Then Jehovah said to him, "This is the land of which I promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

⁵ So Moses the servant of Jehovah died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Jehovah. ⁶ And He buried him in a ravine in the land of Moab, next to Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day. ⁷ Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were not dim, and his freshness had not fled. ⁸ And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the deserts of Moab thirty days. So the days of weeping and mourning for Moses ended.

⁹ Now Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as Jehovah had commanded Moses.

John 21:18-19 (NKJV, modified)

¹⁸ [Jesus said to Peter], "Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."

Secrets of Heaven §3492

"Old age" in the Word means both the casting aside of the previous state and the assumption of the new one. [O]ld age is the final stage of life, when bodily things start to be cast aside together with the loves which belong to the preceding stage, and so when interior things start to be enlightened; for once bodily things have been removed interior things are enlightened.

Secrets of Heaven §10225:6

The last state... is one of wisdom and of innocence within wisdom, which exists when a person is no longer concerned just to gain an understanding of truths and forms of good, but is concerned to make them part of his will and life; for then the person has wisdom. And how far that person is able to make them part of his will and life depends on how much innocence he has, that is, on how far he believes that left to himself he has no wisdom at all, but that whatever wisdom he has is derived from the Lord, and also on how far he loves this to be so. So it is that this state is also one of innocence within wisdom.

Introduction

- We've come to the final week of our series on seeing providence throughout the stages of our lives.
- Today, we're going to focus on seeing providence in old age.
- We've been working our way through the Moses story in this series and the image for today is of Moses, about to die, up on a mountain in Moab, looking out over the promised land.
 - What a perfect and poignant image of the work of trying to see the Lord's providence in our lives.
 - As he looked out at the view, we can imagine that Moses must have been able to see countless examples of the Lord's providence, guidance, and care in his life.
 - There is no way he would have been anywhere near that mountain or that he would have done any of the things he did in his life, without the Lord leading him and providing for him.
 - And, at the same time, we can only imagine that Moses must have felt some sadness and regret that things didn't work out quite as he had expected.
 - He may have understandably expected to end his earthly days in the land of Canaan, a place that he had brought his people to the edge of forty years earlier.
 - But instead he was ending his days on a mountain in Moab, only able to look into the promised land.
- Today, we're going to look at this final stage of life and what the teachings of the New Church say about its value.
 - And we're going to talk about the spiritual work of old age and how the Lord, in His providence, uses the stage of old age and its challenges to prepare us for eternal life.

The Value of Old Age

- In our lessons we read some passages about the final stage of our earthly lives.
- The one passage talk about the age of wisdom starting at the sixtieth year (*Secrets of Heaven* §10225).
 - Sixty might seem a little young for the age of wisdom.
 - I've talked to some sixty year olds who feel a little baffled by this teaching.
 - They don't feel particularly wise.
 - But that's because it's just the beginning of the new state.
- It's like the previous state.
 - The state of adulthood starts in the twentieth year.
 - But we can all agree that a person isn't really fully an adult until some years later, right?
 - Or at least, it's only some years later that that new state seems more fully realized.
 - The same goes for the stage of wisdom.
 - A person grows into it more and more as the years pass.

A Return to Infancy

- This stage of life is a return, in some ways, to the stage of infancy, but with the benefit of age.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §5608:9
 - A person is so created that when he grows old and becomes like a little child, the innocence of wisdom conjoins itself with the innocence of ignorance which he had in infancy, and so he passes into the other life as a true infant.
- Like the Lord said, "Amen, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).
 - This innocence of wisdom and humility is all about acknowledging that anything good that we have – all of the love or wisdom that we might have is a gift from the Lord, not the product of our own goodness or cleverness.
 - One of the readings said that we're wise to the extent that we not only believe this to be so but also *love* that this is the case.
- This makes sense a desired stage to achieve at the end of our earthly lives.
 - How does the Lord provide for us to get to this stage of spiritual development?

Not Everyone Follows This Path

- We'll talk about some of those ways in just a minute.
 - But before we do, it's worth acknowledging that not everyone follows this path.
 - Some people reach old age but, because of their own decisions, they don't seem to have done much developing spiritually.
 - Other people have developed spiritually but then their circumstances or declining mental health mean that it's pretty hard for them to share their wisdom.
- So it might be that some of the old people that you're dealing with in your life don't match this description of sweet, gentle, wise old people.
 - If so, that's really hard.
 - May the Lord bless you in your work to be in relationships with difficult people in difficult circumstances.
- Maybe it can still be a help to know that the sweet innocence of wisdom stage is what the Lord, in His providence, is trying to lead each of us towards, even if we can't see much evidence of it in a particular person's life.

The Value of Knowing We're Going to Die

- One of the ways that the Lord moves us towards the wisdom of old age is through having to confront our mortality – knowing that we're going to die one day.
- In the story, the reason why Moses went up on the mountain was because Jehovah had told him to go up and die there (Numbers 27:12-13; Deuteronomy 32:48-50).
- Even if you don't know exactly when you're going to die, when you get older and have more brushes with death or have loved ones pass away, it reminds you that your physical body isn't going to last forever and that life isn't all about this natural world.
 - One of the lessons said that, in this stage, "bodily things start to be cast aside" along with some of the things that we loved in earlier stages of our lives (*Secrets of Heaven* §3492).
 - Our priorities start to shift when we realize that our time is limited.
 - Psalm 90 says this:
 - ¹⁰ The days of our lives are seventy years;
And if by reason of strength they are eighty years,
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
....
 - ¹² So teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.
- That's the goal: to gain a heart of wisdom and part of how the Lord helps us gain that is by learning that our days are numbered.
 - A cool detail about that Psalm is that it is titled, "A Prayer of Moses the man of God."

Regrets

- Another way the Lord brings us to the wisdom of old age is through regret.
- Moses must have felt regret that he didn't get to go into the promised land in his lifetime.
- It was because of a time when the children of Israel needed water and Moses got annoyed at them and got full of himself and acted as if it was he that had the power to do miracles.
 - Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Numbers 20:12).
- It might feel unfair: Moses makes one mistake and then he's not allowed to go into the land?
 - Remember that the Lord's goal for Moses – which is the same goal that He has for all of us – was to prepare Moses for heaven.
 - And to be ready for heaven, Moses needed to learn some humility.
 - If he hadn't had this consequence, he might have continued to get more and more proud.
 - "Look at all that I have done! Look how powerful I am! Look how good I am!"
 - Moses looking back and remembering how he messed up would help him be humble.

- One feature of old age is that we typically have a lot of time to look back on our lives and think about the things we've done.
 - Inevitably we're going to run into things that we regret doing or regret saying.
- We will probably want to say to the Lord, like the Psalmist,
 - ⁷ "Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions;
According to Your mercy remember me,
For Your goodness' sake, O Lord" (Psalm 25:7).
 - Though we can't undo the things that we've done, the Lord is always ready to teach us a new way of being, if we're humble enough to follow.
- The Psalm goes on from there and says,
 - ⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.
 - ⁹ The humble He guides in justice,
And the humble He teaches His way. (Psalm 25:8-9).

Regret About Our Apparent Lack of Spiritual Progress

- One thing we may particularly regret, when we look back on our lives, is our apparent lack of spiritual progress.
 - We will likely still be wrestling with the same issues we've wrestled with for our whole lives.
- When we read or hear these passages about the wisdom and innocence of the final stage of life or other passages about the final stages of regeneration, we can feel pretty far from the mark.
- It could be that we need the wake up call to get serious about finally growing up a bit in our old age.
- Or it could all be part of the process that we need to go through.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §5376:2
 - ...as [people who are being regenerated] draw nearer to the point when their regeneration is actually carried out they are seemingly deprived of those truths [they know].
- If we are feeling lacking in wisdom, it could be that we are in need of a lot of work and/or it could be that we are right on track with process that the Lord is taking us through.

Not Feeling Useful

- Something I've heard from a lot of New Church old people is how hard it is to not feel useful anymore.
- A man may have spent over forty years of our lives trying his best to do his job honestly, justly, and faithfully.
 - What does he do with all that time now that he's retired?
- Or maybe a woman used to serve people and show our love for them by cooking for them.
 - What does she do now that her hands aren't strong or steady enough to do that anymore?
- This is a really hard aspect of growing old – feeling feeble and useless and feeling like a burden rather than a help to have around.

Shun Evils

- It's great when we can see that we did something of use to somebody else.
 - But the Lord said that "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21).
 - Especially as we age, we may have to let go of being able to say, "See here this useful thing I did!" and instead trust that, if we're working for the Lord's kingdom within ourselves, He will be able to use us to serve other people, whether we can see it or not.
- Along these lines, throughout our lives the Lord tells us that the first thing of charity is to shun evils as sins against Him (*True Christianity* §435).
 - This is something we can try to do, even when our body is not in a very good state.
 - There are still plenty of spiritual battles to fight in old age, in fact they may be the hardest we've ever had to face.
 - And, if we are doing our best to fight them, we can rest assured that we are being useful.

Make Space for Others to Be Useful

- Another way of thinking about it is that part of our use may be to make space for others to be useful.
- Moses made way for Joshua to take over leadership of the children of Israel.
 - Moses could have been bitter and resentful and done everything in his power to sabotage Joshua's taking over leadership but instead Moses laid his hands on Joshua and Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom" as a result.
 - Moses didn't get to go into the promised land but the next generation did and Moses could find satisfaction in knowing that he got to contribute to their success.
- And imagine how different it would have been for Moses' spiritual development if Moses never got old.
 - He could have kept on being the leader of the Children of Israel for hundreds and hundreds of years.
 - And he might have just found more and more reasons to think that he was better than everyone else..
- Instead Moses had to let go of control and hand over leadership to Joshua.
 - He had to realize that the use he had served could be served by someone else and that it was more important that the use be served well than that he keep on being the one in the role.

Realize You Will Have More Opportunities in the Future

- Let's also look at this feeling of uselessness within a larger timeframe.
 - Let's think about the lifetime of Nancy New-Church-Woman.
 - She's eighty-three now and has to use a walker and can't remember things as well as she used to and she feels kind of useless these days.
 - But she was useful in obvious ways for almost all of her lifetime.
 - When she was a baby, nobody begrudged her the fact that she needed help.
 - Maybe she wasn't useful in an obvious sense but we can all agree that babies provide a definite use to the world.
 - And then she grew up and was useful in many different ways for a long time.
 - And now, for the past ten years or so she's entered into a period of less obvious usefulness.
 - But, even if that period of relative inactivity lasted for thirty years, in the big picture, it's still nothing because, once she's done with this period, she's got an eternity in heaven to be useful in obvious ways again.
 - We can be confident that the Lord her God would not want Nancy to be beating up on herself mentally for not being able to be as useful as she would like to be at eighty-three.
 - She'll get to be useful again soon in the Lord's heavenly kingdom of uses.

Learning to Let Love In

- One last thought on this topic of feeling useless.
- It seems like a rather important step in the process of getting ready for heaven is learning how to be a gracious recipient of love and care.
- Some of us – perhaps, most of us – are MUCH more comfortable being the person *offering* support than being the person *receiving* support.
 - Receiving support can feel uncomfortable – especially if someone is helping us do something that we used to be able to do for ourselves.
 - But, at some point, the process of getting old and dying is likely to mean that we will need people around us to help us, even to the point of helping us with our physical needs.
 - This is another way in which getting old is a kind of return to the stage of infancy.
 - And it's another way in which our Lord is helping us get ready for heaven.
- We talk a lot in the New Church about heaven being a kingdom of uses and that's true but heaven is not just about *being* useful: it's also about other people being useful to us.
 - Imagine the ridiculousness of a heaven filled with angels who wanted to help others but who were fiercely independent and not willing to receive any help from anyone else.
 - Everyone would be frustrated and it wouldn't be heaven.
 - Let's work on having the humility to let other people help us.

We Can Still Follow the Lord

- We read in our lesson that the Lord said to Peter, “[W]hen you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish” (John 21:18).
 - We know from the teachings of the New Church that, at a deeper level, this symbolized what was going to happen to faith in the progression of the Christian Church (*Secrets of Heaven* §9212:8).
 - But it’s also a description of how all of us who have the privilege of growing old will have to deal with letting go of control and having other people take charge of our lives.
 - It’s significant, though, what the Lord said to Peter after this: we read, “And when He had spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me’” (John 21:19).
 - Even if we gradually have less control over our lives in old age, we still can be working on following the Lord.

Conclusion

- In Psalm 71 the Psalmist says,
 - 17 O God, You have taught me from my youth;
And to this day I declare Your wondrous works.
 - 18 Now also when I am old and grayheaded,
O God, do not forsake me,
Until I declare Your strength to this generation,
Your power to everyone who is to come.
- If we’re willing to raise our minds, we can see glimpses of the Lord’s providence throughout Moses’ life, throughout our lives, and throughout the lives of others.
- From earliest infancy, through adulthood and old age the Lord cares for us with unceasing love and mercy until one day, like Moses, we leave this natural world behind and wake up in the spiritual world where, even more clearly, we will be able to see His providence in our lives.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.