

Build houses, plant gardens...

Jeremiah 29:5

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

Have you ever wondered why the Lord fills this world of ours with so much beauty?

Do the mountains and hills, the oceans and lakes, the animals and birds, the fields and forests, the trees and flowers exist simply for our...

- personal enjoyment and pleasure?

Does all this natural beauty in the world exist simply...

- to calm our anxious minds?

- to serve as an "escape," a "refuge" when life gets tough?

It surely does...

But is it possible that the beauty...

and wonder

and majesty...

of the Lord's creation

...serves other purposes too?

Today, I'd like to offer an important *spiritual* reason why the Lord bathes us in all this natural beauty...

It's because He wants us to experience beauty

- not just on a physical, material level

but *deep inside our spirit too!*

The Lord wants our inner and outer "landscapes" to match...

- to be in sync...

because, truth be told, they don't always match!

We can be in beautiful surroundings,

literal paradises,

and still be grumpy
ungrateful
or restless in spirit...

This is why the Lord wants us to create our own "weather system"

so that our spirit can be more peaceful,
content,
focused,

...even when it's a "cloudy" day...

...even when our external circumstances are difficult and
unhappy...

This was the Lord's instruction to the Israelites after they had been taken captive
by the Babylonians:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away
captive...

Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit...

And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away
captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

Jeremiah 29: 4-7

The Lord was telling the Israelites that they could still find peace and happiness...
despite their unhappy circumstances

- *despite* being held captive by an enemy nation!

Their instructions were to...

- build houses and plant gardens

We're taught that to "build houses" and "plant gardens" means to

"...fill the interiors of our mind with the goods of heaven and the church..." (AE 617:12)

There's a powerful, spiritual lesson here.

To "build houses" and "plant gardens" is an invitation from the Lord to create our own internal landscape...

- a "landscape" or environment which isn't dependent on whether or not it's "sunny" outside...

- which isn't dependent on whether or not...
we're getting our way
or reaching all our goals.

We've been talking about the beauty, wonder and majesty of the Lord's creation and how this has been given to us to enjoy, take pleasure in...

It's also something that we don't have to work for...

- it's just there, all around us
- a smorgasbord of visual and auditory delights...

- the rising sun, the roar of the sea, the wind on our face, the smell of rain, the exquisite scent of blossoms and flowers, the taste of ripe fruit...

- the Lord gives us all these natural delights for free, gratis

Think of the seasons of the year, of Spring right now...

We don't do anything to "earn" Spring - each year this new life just arrives

- bursts forth
- with all its promise of new growth and vitality

But the joy, delight and beauty of our inner landscape is something that we must consciously, deliberately, work on, day by day.

It doesn't just miraculously "burst forth" in our spirit

It needs to be cultivated

- the soil of our mind needs to be prepared for what the Lord is offering us

So, let's explore this spiritual phenomenon a little deeper.

In our lesson today we read that *"the Word is like a garden"* (TC 259).

The Word is likened to a garden because "gardens" represent...

"spiritual intelligence" (AC 1588) and only the Word or Divine truths can make us *truly* intelligent!

This explains why the Sacred Scriptures begin and end with the image of a garden...

In the book of Genesis, we're introduced to the Garden of Eden,

a paradise, a picture of heaven in which people live in mutual love and harmony, whose inner and outer landscapes match!

Then in the very last chapter of the last book in the Sacred Scriptures, the book of Revelation, this garden of paradise re-appears,

this time in the midst of the Holy City New Jerusalem.

And then, to underscore this point, we're reminded of the fact that the Lord chose to rise on Easter morning from the midst of a garden!

So gardens represent spiritual intelligence and it is the Word which promises to give us this type of intelligence...

In sharp contrast, the world, despite all its sophistication and technological advancement, cannot make us *spiritually* intelligent...

The teachings of our church use this term, "spiritual intelligence," in a specialized way...Let me highlight some of the points:

First, spiritual "intelligence" has nothing to do with one's IQ or education

- it has to do with seeing the "ratio" between what is natural and what is spiritual
- it's what helps us unravel the contradictions between our inner and outer lives, our inner and outer landscapes
- it's what leads to wisdom, the wisdom of life

Second, we can think of spiritual intelligence as being a *clarity of mind* that helps us cultivate our internal landscape...

...a *clarity of mind* that brings beauty
and order
and symmetry into our lives

This brings us back to the correspondence of gardens...

Thirds, the *spiritual intelligence* we get from using the truths of the Lord's Word

is what enables us,
empowers us,

to "weed out" the evils and falsities that make our spirit harsh and unforgiving...

to "weed out" the anger, the resentment, the stubbornness we discover deep within our hearts...

a mindset that chokes our ability to be loving, kind and useful (SE 5174)

And so, to summarize, the *spiritual intelligence* we get from going to the Word and using its teachings is what enables us to have our own weather system...

- to be "sunny in spirit" even when it's cloudy outside
- to be "unruffled in spirit" whether or not get what we want (AC 8478)

This is why we're encouraged to think of the Lord's Word like a garden... We connect with the Lord, not as "book," but by closing our eyes and strolling through its pages into beautiful vistas,

into a beautiful garden...

We notice the orderly structure of the garden

- the carefully manicured lawns
- the flower and vegetable beds
- the ponds, lakes, streams, fruit trees, ornamental trees
- the woodland wildlife

And as we absorb these breathtaking sights, sounds, tastes and smells our hearts and minds are filled with an inner peace and calm.

We're encouraged to think of the Lord in His Word this way because...

our spiritual and mental environment,

**whether happy or sad,
beautiful or ugly...**

is determined, to a large degree, by our choices.

Like the ancient Israelites,

we can learn to live within the restraints, the restrictions, of our "captivity,"

by accepting the fact that our hereditary tendencies toward evil will hold us hostage (and get the better of us sometimes),

but that we can still...

"build houses and plant gardens," that is,

fill our minds with the good thoughts and feelings of heaven that are available to us anytime we turn to the Lord in His Word (AE 617:12).

This is one of the deeper reasons why the Lord has filled our world with so much beauty and majesty.

These visual displays are a taste of heaven.

**A visual reminder, a promise, that we can experience that outer beauty
- that outer peace and calm...**

inside our spirit too

We're taught that those who've cultivated their spiritual intelligence by going to the Lord in His Word as their primary source of inspiration, in the next life,

"...[see] gardens of inexpressible beauty..." (AC 1069).

They,

"...view paradisaical gardens whose magnificence and beauty surpass everything the human mind can imagine" (AC 1588).

"... appear to themselves, when they go out, to walk amongst cultivated hills, and also in gardens..." (AC 9841).

Let us continue our quest to create our own "weather system"

...where our inner and outer "landscapes" match...
 ...where we remain cheerful and optimistic even when it's a "cloudy day..."
 ...where we discover the real beauty,

**the *true, lasting* beauty of turning our lives over to the Lord
 of rejecting all that's ugly and unkind and selfish
 so that we may live lives of service to the Lord and our neighbor**

This is the paradise into which Lord invites us.

Let this teaching from the book, *Heaven and Hell*, the one you heard this morning, be your inspiration for staying true to the Lord in His Word:

In the next life, people who have loved the Divine truths of the Word from a deep affection for the truth, live in the light and are constantly bathed in the light of heaven there.

They know nothing of the kind of darkness we have at night in the world.

They live in a springtime climate.

Their scenery offers them views of vineyards and fields ripe for harvest.

Everything in their homes gleam as if they are made of precious stones.

Looking through their windows is like looking through pure crystal.

These are their visual pleasures.

And because they have loved learning and have developed a rational ability to [think in the Lord's light] they also have intelligence.

As a result, they live in gardens where you can see flower beds and lawns beautifully marked off, surrounded by rows of trees with arbors and walks.

The trees and flowers change from day to day.

They enjoy these pleasure in heaven because gardens, flower beds, lawns and trees correspond to the intelligence that people receive when they love the truths of the Lord's Word.

Heaven and Hell 489

Amen.