

“Borrow Vessels & Shut the Door” (2 Kings 4: 3-4)
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In our recitation this morning from the work *Heaven & Hell*, we attested to the fact that all that the angels have they recognize to be a gift from the Lord. Likewise, in our reading from the Second Book of Kings, we saw that a poor widow was able to save her two sons because of a gift from the Lord, the gift of miraculously generated oil that was able to be sold, releasing her sons from the grim prospect of slavery.

This story of the widow’s oil and the role played in the miracle by the prophet Elisha is a picture of how the Lord prepares us for angelic life, how gathered goodness and truth, in the form of remains and conscience, can be formed into a new will and a new understanding, opening up within us a continually renewed and replenished store of love for the Lord and love for our neighbor; an incredible gift that the Lord wants each one of us to take into our lives and receive as our own, even as we recognize, just like the angels, that that gift has nothing of our own in it, but is the Lord’s work in us.

Of course, in the story, there is a little paradox in the way that the gift of multiplied oil is received... in order for the gift to be given by the Lord, it was necessary (at Elisha’s instruction) for the widow and her sons to borrow as many vessels as possible from her neighbors, from the people in her community. In the end, the ownership of the oil was hers (she sold it, also at Elisha’s instruction, and used the proceeds to pay off her debt and to live on what was left over); but without collecting pots and jars and jugs and basins and bowls that belonged not to her but to those she lived among, the miracle would not have occurred. So there’s a distinction to be observed: the miracle involved something that was a gift (the abundant supply of oil) along with things that were borrowed (her neighbors’ vessels).

And there’s another detail which makes another important distinction in this story: after the borrowed vessels had been collected, Elisha told the widow that she should go into her house and shut the door behind her and behind her sons. The first part of this miracle took place in public, as she and her sons went house to house in her community, knocking on doors, calling out to her neighbors and asking to borrow pots and jars. But then, afterward, there was a private element to the miracle, with just the widow and her two sons, behind a closed door. It was a miracle that took place partly in public, and partly in private. It was miracle that resulted in a gift from the Lord contained in what was borrowed from others.



Before going further in examining how these elements of this miraculous occurrence portray the miracle the Lord wants to work in each one of our lives, it might be useful to consider for a bit the term “borrowed states.”

The term “borrowed states” appears nowhere in the Heavenly Doctrine. If you search for it, you will not find it. But still, it is a historically documented part of the doctrinal vocabulary of our church. In several articles in *New Church Life* magazine, as well as in other publications, with examples going back well into the last century, we find it used to describe states of life that are good, but temporary and fleeting, that a person has not made truly their own. One example is the teaching of the Heavenly Doctrine about the love that children, in their ignorant innocence, have for the people in their life (see e.g. AC 10110:4). In a number of places in New Church literature, this innocent, childlike love is called by New Church authors, a “borrowed state” because the child hasn’t rationally chosen it for him- or herself.

Another example is the thrilling feeling of the first love marriage, of which we read in the Heavenly Doctrine, “Who does not [at that time] acknowledge and give assent to the [thought] that this love is the fundamental love of all loves?” But of course, that passage continues immediately after: “But who does

not also know that after this happy time, these glad feelings gradually wane and disappear, until at last they are hardly felt,” (CL 58) and so, again, a number of New Church authors have used the term “borrowed state” to refer to that uplifting but seemingly transient state of the first love in marriage.

There does seem to be a use in speaking and writing this way. There’s no promise that those wonderful states from early in life or early in marriage will become permanent; we might have them for a time but we haven’t done the spiritual work to make them genuinely our own, so in that sense we could see them as “borrowed.”

But could there also be a use in thinking of these states, not as borrowed but as gifts, ‘gift states’ as it were, freely given by the Lord? In borrowing there’s the idea that something will be given, but only temporarily, and that after a time it will have to be given back. On the other hand, once we’ve had those early childhood or early married states, we don’t have to give them back. They’re real, they’re a gift from the Lord; they’re part of our life and even if we no longer have everyday as-of-self experience of them, and even if we haven’t genuinely made them our own, they are still stored up in us by the Lord, stored up as remains for use later in our spiritual life. Remains, we’re told in the Heavenly Doctrine, “are all the states of the affection of good and truth with which a person, from earliest infancy even to the end of life, is gifted by the Lord.” (AC 1906)

The neighbors’ borrowed vessels are not an image in our story of remains of good and truth gifted by the Lord. Where we might instead see remains portrayed is in the widow’s small flask of oil. It wasn’t much; it was all that was left over from whatever she had had in better days. When Elisha asked her what she had in her house, she first said she had nothing, only mentioning the oil as an afterthought. And yet, just as remains gifted and stored up by the Lord are the key to our own spiritual transformation, those few drops oil in that little jar were enough to transform the condition of the widow’s life and the lives of her sons.

Still though, borrowing is part of the story. So what in our lives is portrayed by the borrowing of vessels in the story of the widow, her sons and Elisha? What is it that is shared with us by our neighbors, by the communities that we live and work in that brings us to the heavenly life the Lord is preparing us for?

The third lesson this morning (DLW 332 & 333) described the uses that support and build up our rational and spiritual lives. What’s useful to our spiritual life, we’re taught, is everything in the Word, and that’s pretty much it. There is more to it: sermons and books are mentioned, as is of course pursuing a life in accordance with what we have learned, but in the end the material out of which our spiritual life is formed is all from one and only one source: the Lord’s Word.

The uses that contribute to our rational development, on the other hand, are said to be innumerable “because of their multitude.” Anything that relates to the conduct of natural life, anything that relates to economic life, that relates to civil life, that relates moral life, any of those things would go on that long list of elements useful for perfecting our rational faculty. And we learn these things from seemingly everywhere: from parents and teachers, from reading books, from self-reflection and (most notably for our purposes today) “from dealings with others.” Our rationality develops by living (or at least trying to live) a civil and moral life in communities with other people. It’s a trial and error process. We try ideas out and use them if they’re useful or don’t if they aren’t. We develop habits but we might also change our mind, sometimes in significant ways. We’re going to find people who have ideas we agree with and then there will be those that don’t seem to have much to offer to us... but who might surprise us with something useful from time to time. Everything that’s known in the world about how to live in society has the potential to contribute to the upbuilding of our rational lives.

And so when Elisha, the man of God, told the widow to “[go], borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few,” we ourselves might hear a message from the Lord to us that is the same but on a different level, as we read in *Heaven & Hell*, “to receive the life of heaven a person must needs live in the world and engage in its business and employments, and by means of a moral and civil life there receive the spiritual life. In no other way can spiritual life be formed in a person, or his or her spirit prepared for heaven.” (HH 528)

We must needs live in and be engaged in this world, where we’re borrowing knowledge and ideas, borrowing methods and best practices, borrowing attitudes and opinions, borrowing insights, borrowing all of these things from others all the time. “In no other way can spiritual life be formed in a person.” Historical faith, an idea that is taught in the Heavenly Doctrine, would be a good example. Historical faith is called, in different places, “tradition from others” (*Five Memorable Relations* 8), “a thing believed to be so because [a learned person] has said so,” (SE 5945), “the dictate of one person passed on to another.” (*Faith* 1) Historical faith is a faith we’ve borrowed from others, and yet the teaching is that there must a borrowed, historical faith in what the Word teaches before it can become a saving faith that we have truly made our own. (see AE 815:4&9)



All of this so far only considers the public phase of the miracle of the widow’s oil, when the widow and her sons went door to door in their community, borrowing vessels that were necessary for the miracle to take place. There was also, though, the private phase, when the widow and her sons went into their house and shut the door, and only then did the oil begin to miraculously flow.

There is no direct reference in the Heavenly Doctrine to these verses in the fourth chapter of the Second Book of Kings where the miracle is described. We do have, though, a very clear discussion of the spiritual meaning of “shutting the door” in the internal sense of the story of Lot in Genesis 19. Two angels had come into Lot’s house in Sodom but then the men of Sodom came and threatened Lot and the angels. Lot tried to bargain with the men outside his front door but when the men pressed in on him, the angels inside reached out, pulled Lot into the house to safety and shut the door.

Arcana Coelestia 2380 discusses the spiritual meaning of shutting the door in this context. It says, in part, that “[in] the other life access is precluded [the “door is shut” as it were] by the good being separated from the evil, so that [the good] cannot be infested by the spheres of the persuasions of falsity and of the cupidities of evil; for the exhalation from hell cannot penetrate to heaven.” So in the other world, the door is shut because heaven is always safe from the exhalations of hell. But we don’t live in heaven; we live here in the world... what does “shutting the door” mean for us?

The answer given in the passage is simple: the door is shut for us when we have a conscience. Having conscience is defined here as being “unwilling to depart in any degree from what is just and fair, and good and true.” The New Century Edition version of the same passage puts it this way. “Anyone who has a conscience... refuses to deviate one bit from what is just and fair, good and true.”

Notice that conscience is defined here on two levels. Conscience is a strict allegiance both to justice and fairness, which exist in the civil, moral and rational world we live in and also a strict allegiance to goodness and truth, which are spiritual. It’s not enough to just borrow ideas about life from the world around us and just kind of let them stack up at the door. We need to take them inside and subject them to the scrutiny of our conscientious sense of what is just and fair and good and true.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that if we are rational, we have a perception of what is just and fair in public life. But the teaching goes on to say that in this natural-world-level perception, “one person differs

from another,” and the teaching also makes the crucial point that having a natural perception of justice and fairness does not in any way guarantee that we will have a spiritual perception of goodness and truth. We might say as an illustration that as the widow went from house to house to borrow vessels from her neighbors, she may have been assessing the quality of usefulness each container would have for her purpose. But she really wouldn’t know which actually were the best, which were good and true, until she had gone into the house and shut the door behind her and her sons and started pouring out the oil.

So in our own lives, how do we “go in and shut the door”? We will conclude our consideration with brief reference to two more “shutting the door” examples from the Lord’s Word.

One example is our lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. Earlier we all said the Lord’s prayer together and we did that because those were the instructions the Lord gave when He taught us those words, “In this manner pray...” But three verses earlier, the Lord gave more instruction on prayer: “when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” A worldly perception of justice and fairness makes up part of our conscience, but a true conscience has within it a spiritual perception of good and truth and that can only come from the Word—prayerful reading, prayerful hearing, prayerful consideration of the Lord’s Word and a prayerful effort to do according to what it says.

One more door-shutting episode: Almost at the end of the work *Conjugal Love*, Swedenborg reported hearing voice from heaven that said this: “Go into your chamber, shut the door, and attend to the work begun on the Apocalypse; and pursue this in two years to a conclusion.” The Lord had called Swedenborg to write and publish books that would reveal teachings for a new spiritual era on earth... and those books weren’t going to write and publish themselves; the Lord needed Swedenborg to go into his room, shut the door and get down to work. In a similar way, the sinful evils in our life aren’t going to shun themselves. Spiritually, we need to go into our conscience and shut the door and examine ourselves in whatever light we have there and get down to the work of shunning those sinful evils and living a new life.



A borrowed vessel many of us here and across the United States might be putting to use today is the honoring and celebration of mothers and motherhood. There actually is some interesting moral and civil history in its establishment in our country, culminating in an act of the U.S. Congress on May 8th, 1914, designating the second Sunday in May as Mothers’ Day. Whatever your observance may include, maybe remember the widowed mother in Second Kings chapter four who heard the word of the Lord as delivered by the prophet Elisha and in following that word, saved her two sons. “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few. And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour it into all those vessels.”