

Cycles of Regeneration

2 February 2025

A Sermon by Stephen D. Cole

“As long as all the days of the earth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:22)

The first spiritual age had ended and a great flood had devastated the earth. But Noah and his family had been spared, and the Lord then promises that the cycles of life will continue indefinitely. Sometimes we appreciate the changes that come with these cycles: a new day dawning, the springtime thawing the cold of winter. But at other times the relentless changes in life can weary us. After enduring frigid weeks of winter, we may long for the warming breezes of spring. But once the springtime has broken out into full bloom, we might feel that we would want it to go on forever. Isn't heaven said to be a perpetual spring?

But the Lord's promise of the recurring times of day and the returning seasons is not a threat or a punishment, but rather a gift and a blessing. One might suppose that life would be happiest if, having reached some satisfactory state of affairs, one could just remain in that state indefinitely. But, as they say, be careful what you wish for. The opening chapter of the work *Conjugal Love* tells of various ideas that people have of what would make them happy to eternity and yet how quickly people become frustrated or even sickened trying out these ideas for even a limited time. Life without its ups and downs, its challenges and variations would likewise actually bore us and deaden our senses.

The Lord wants heaven for us. And the only to get there is to change. Of course, most people are not content to remain as they are any given point in life. Most people want to find ways to improve both their natural and spiritual condition. The real issue is whether or not they are prepared to do the things that will truly lead to improvement. Regeneration, rebirth, being born again – however you say it, it means change. And New Church teachings are clear that genuine spiritual change happens through temptations.

Temptations are spiritual testing. They often involve the choice between doing something we know that we ought not or refraining from doing it. But the real crux of the temptation is not that we find the strength in ourselves to resist, but rather that we recognize that we are, in fact, powerless of ourselves and can overcome only with the Lord's help. This is why temptations do not always take the form of an obvious battle between good and evil, why they can manifest in feelings of being hopeless, deserted, or overwhelmed. We are challenged to find a way to acknowledge the Lord's power, while yet acting as if from ourselves.

Human life, human freedom is a paradox. The Lord created this paradox in the Garden of Eden when He planted two trees: the Tree of Life which is the reality that all power, all life comes from the Lord, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which gives us the appearance of self-life and self-direction. We establish a genuine spiritual life by finding the balance in the midst of the paradox – going about our daily lives as if the latter were true, while cultivating the recognition that the former is the actual reality. But we can't do this by a gradual, incremental thought process. It can come about only through a life of meeting challenges and obstacles. And even this is not just gradual and incremental.

Temptations do not proceed at a steady, constant pace. They build to a crescendo and, at least eventually, recede to relative peace and consolation. Or, to put it another way, and to hark back to the text, they come in cycles. This the doctrines teach, and this experience testifies. But it is one thing to know that it is so and another to see why it must be so. One answer is obvious: if spiritual temptation went on without cessation we would weary and give up entirely. But the essential reason that the Lord provides these cycles is to ensure and strengthen our freedom.

The strength of our spiritual freedom builds up in the same way as our physical strength. We need periods during which it is challenged and period of rest and recovery. If we are aware of how the process of strengthening our bodies works, we can pace ourselves and try to take advantage of the cycles. But even if we are not reflecting on process, our bodies fall into certain rhythms.

One of the most basic cycles of life, alluded to in the last pair in the text, is the cycle of day and night. And every 24 hours or so, whether we are thinking about it or not, our bodies obey their circadian rhythms. At some point after we awaken, we gradually, some of us more quickly than others, reach our peak vitality and energy for the day. And, although our energy levels may go up and down during the day, we gradually run out of steam. Then, either grudgingly or gladly, we seek the renewal of sleep. Most people appreciate the opportunity to sleep. But we might stop to wonder why the Lord designed us so that we are healthiest if we spend, on average, about a third of our time sleeping. Wouldn't life be more efficient if we didn't need so much sleep, or didn't even need sleep at all?

We need sleep not only as a time of renewal for our bodies, but also, more importantly, for our minds and spirits. The need for this regular pattern of sleeping and waking can serve, if we reflect on it, to remind ourselves of the daily bread, the manna, as it were. that we get from the Lord every morning. Each day we are offered this reminder that, ultimately, we must turn everything over to the Lord – not that we become passive or slacken our hands. Indeed, the paradox returns. Just as giving our sleep cycles their proper due gives us more energy when they are completed, so our increasing recognition, acknowledgement, and confession of the Lord's power and guidance brings an increasing energy and self-life going forward.

Thinking about what is accomplished during the night portion of the daily cycle, we can see that "day and night" in the text is not a way of speaking about the good parts of life and the bad parts. Both portions of the cycle are essential to our growth and development, physical as well as mental.

When we read, unreflectively, that "He makes His sun to rise on the wicked and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust," (Matt. 5:45) we might suppose that this is like the aphorism that into every life a little rain must fall" – that bad things happen to good people as well as bad people. But if you stop to think about it, you realize that both the sun and the rain are blessings – going too long without either gets unpleasant – both are essential to healthy life on most places on the earth.

Let us then take this perspective to the pairings of cold and heat and summer and winter. When it is cold and we feel that winter has been going on for too long, we may be in the mind-set "cold is bad and heat is good. But from what has been said so far and, for that matter, most people's common sense should tell us that cold and heat, summer and winter, are all part of a healthy process. A heating pad may sooth an injury, but a cold pack may also be salutary. Best of all, often, is alternating the hot and cold treatments. So it is with the cycles of life in nature. The bursting life of spring and summer needs the dormant cold of fall and winter. And so it is with a healthy and balanced human life.

There is still one pair in the text that has not yet been mentioned: seedtime and harvest. But in this the point is even more obvious – there is no harvest with seedtime. Preparing the ground and planting the seeds may involve a great deal of labor, and it is labor without immediate, obvious rewards. Reaping the produce comes only after a period of patient waiting. And even the period of patient waiting is a time of weeding and watering. Farmers and gardeners know the routine, know that getting the desired results at harvesttime requires a lengthy and elaborate process over the preceding months with no immediate benefit of flowers or food. But because they have the end in view they can take satisfaction and even pleasure in the labors necessary to further the end. Unfortunately, the goal of our spiritual cycles is generally not so clear and tangible in prospect. Sometimes we may feel that we are strugglingly along, day after day in an endless spiritual winter, a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. We know that the Lord has promised that a spring will follow.

There are four pairs of terms in the text. Did we not know that every least detail in the Word bears a spiritual meaning, we might suppose that one pair of terms might suffice to make the point, that seedtime and harvest, in fact make the point most obviously: the Lord promises that life will go on, that life will come in cycles, and that each part of the cycle will have some essential role to play.

The secret in the text is that it constitutes a series of nested doublets at three levels. At the most basic level each pair of words has one term that relates to truth or faith, while the other term relates to good or charity. This is, perhaps, no surprise to those well-schooled in New Church teachings, nor, perhaps, would be the significance of the pair: the seed being truth or faith that grows at length into the fruit, the works of charity.

The second level up is more subtle. In a sense, it is still a good/truth pair, but now it has to do with the pairing of will and understanding. At the highest level the contrast is between the spiritual process of those who are yet to be generated with the process with those in a regenerate state. Taking all the layers together: the first two pairs, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, reflect faith and charity in the regenerating person – the progress from faith to charity in the will and in the understanding. In the second two pairs we have charity and faith in the will and understanding of the regenerate person – note that the order of the terms is now reversed: the terms relating to charity, summer and day, take the first place, and the terms relating to faith, winter and night, follow.

There are at two important take-aways from this: first that even after we are born again, we continue to grow, to progress, to improve to eternity and still in a cyclical fashion. But, second, the cycle has changed. Before regeneration, we struggle to learn the truth, to have faith, and then apply it in a life of charity. After regeneration, from states of charity we move into new states of insight as to the truth of faith. The first sort of cycles include stages of spiritual strife and temptation. The second sort of cycles may include times of spiritual fatigue or obscurity, but never the pain of temptation.

So, in one sense, even when we get to heaven we will still undergo changes of state corresponding to times of day or seasons of the years, but these will not involve the kinds extremes of cold and dark that we experience in both our natural and spiritual lives while we live on earth. Heaven is sometimes said to be like perpetual spring. But other passages qualify this. Heaven would not really be heavenly without the variety of some seasonal cycles. But these are said to be like those of more temperate regions on earth.

The cycles of life, both natural and spiritual, are a gift from the Lord. They are essential to our freedom, our growth, and our development. Let us try to appreciate the value of each stage of the cycles, and look forward with hope to the more fruitful and hopeful parts thereof.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 8:20-22; Luke 21:25-34; *Arcana Coelestia* 935:2

Genesis 8: 20 And Noah built an altar to Jehovah, and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered up burnt offerings on the altar.

21 And Jehovah smelled a restful smell; and Jehovah said in His heart, I will not again curse the ground any more on account of man; for what the heart of man forms is evil from his youth; and I will not add to smite any more all that is living, as I have done.

22 As long as all the days of the earth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease.

Luke 21:25 And there shall be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and on the earth anguish of nations in perplexity, the sea and the waves resounding;

26 men whose souls go out from fear and the expectation of those things that are coming upon the inhabited and; for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.

27 And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and much glory.

28 But when these things begin to come to pass, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near.

29 And He told a parable to them: See the fig tree and all the trees!

30 When they already shoot forth, seeing it you know of yourselves that summer is already near.

31 So also you, when you see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is near.

32 Amen I say to you that this generation shall not pass away until all things come to pass.

33 Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.

34 But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be heavy with feasting and drunkenness and anxieties of this life, and that day come upon you unawares.

35 For as a snare shall it come upon all who sit upon the face of all the earth.

Arcana Coelestia 935:2 The alternations with those who are to be regenerated are likened to cold and heat, but the alternations with those who have been regenerated are likened to summer and winter.

That in the former case one who is to be regenerated is treated of, and in the present case one who has been regenerated, is evident from this, that in the one case cold is named first, and heat second; whereas in the other case summer is first named, and winter second. The reason is that one who is being regenerated begins from cold, that is, from no faith and charity; but when he has been regenerated, he begins from charity.