

# How Would You Summarize Your Experience of Life?

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton  
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If we were able to have a show of hands in this space, I wonder how many of you enjoy taking walks outdoors – around Bryn Athyn, along the Pennypack trail, around the neighborhood where you live, or anywhere else in nature.

And living close to the Jersey shore, I wonder how many of you have walked the beaches of Cape May or Wildwood; Ocean or Atlantic City; Long Beach Island, or other popular shore destinations – feeling the sqwoonch sqwoonch of the sand beneath your feet, listening to the persistent, rolling surf, drinking in the penetrating sunshine or seeing it in streaks through broken clouds after a warm summer rain, feeling the spray from the surf or the light breeze that sneaks up on you from the south.

Walking the beach in summertime, my wife and I often pass by public swimming areas, with little children playing and splashing at water's edge, sometimes bouncing up and down with excitement as though on a trampoline. As waves fan out across the beach, they envelop chubby little legs knee to thigh high, and sometimes sweep the kid's legs out from under them. Their soft, rounded features, glistening wet in the sunshine, bespeak the innocence of their little spirits. Their lives are just getting started. They've got all of life ahead of them.

Just think how *much* those kids have to go through to get to where you and I are today – at 30, 40, 50 years old, or even 70 or 90 – all the joys and sorrows, highs and lows, victories and defeats. If we assume a common life trajectory in the United States of America, they've got all of their childhood and grade school to go through, all of their teen years and high school, then on into college (or not), and then on into the workforce and a career and/or family life, with all of the emotional, physical, and relationship experiences thrown in along the way. There's so much that they have to experience, and they have no idea how *much* it will be, or *what* it will be, or *how* it will unfold.

When I see those little bouncing bundles of innocence playing and splashing on the beach, at one and the same moment I'm happy for them and everything in life they'll enjoy. But I also feel a little fearful and sad in the mix, as I anticipate the challenges and heartaches they're bound to encounter as well.

And I wonder: When they get toward the middle or end of their lifetimes on this earth – where you and I are now – and as they look back over their lifetimes, how will they summarize their experience of life? How have *you* summarized your own experience at moments along the way – including times of happiness, success, and achievement, and also times of sadness, disappointment, and loss? And how will you summarize your life toward the *end* of your time on earth? What kind of life will it have been?

One of the challenges we face as human beings is that the hard, difficult, painful experiences can stand out more loudly than the positive ones, especially if they happen often or over an extended period of time. The hard and challenging things in life can make our lives feel like the destruction left behind after a tornado, as compared to a mountain top experience, with a light breeze blowing up from the valley.

What are some of the sad, difficult, challenging experiences that you can remember growing up, through the course of your lifetime and relationships so far – beginning when you were a little child, coming up through grade school and high school, then on into college (or not) and beyond?

One of the things we have to help us in challenging times is the teachings of Scripture, which say that the Lord is in charge and caring for us every moment. Jesus said, “The very hairs of your head are all numbered.” And again, “In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.”

The theology of the New Church echoes these baseline teachings and builds on them, offering additional, detailed words of comfort and assurance. Like these ones:

Scarcely anyone believes that the Lord has the kind of concern for us that He has, a constant concern lasting from the very beginning of our existence to the final moment of our lives, and forever after that. (*Secrets of Heaven* 5992)

In another place we’re taught,

Those who trust in the Divine know that all things are moving toward an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens to them at any time, it contributes to that state. They are quite sure that all things work for their good, their blessedness, and their happiness forever.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 8478.3, 2892)

We’re also taught that...

Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving what is good from Him; for whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness. (*Secrets of Heaven* 8480:2)

And finally, there’s this one:

When the Lord is with us, He leads us, and makes provision so that whatever happens, whether sad or joyful, may bring us what is good. This is Divine Providence. (*Secrets of Heaven* 6303)

There are also teachings which say that the Lord controls all the bad stuff in life. For example, we’re told that...

The Lord does only what is good. He does nothing bad to anyone. (*Secrets of Heaven* 8227.1)

In another place it says...

All evils are controlled in such a way that not a single one of them is allowed to happen to a person that does not lead to what is good. (*Spiritual Experiences* 1088)

Again we're told...

The Lord doesn't allow the hells to evoke evils in excess of, or different from, those which can be turned into good appropriate for the person involved. (*Secrets of Heaven* 6663)

And finally, there's this:

The Lord's Divine Providence consists in allowing only such things as are conducive to the goal of human salvation. It banishes and expels anything that is incompatible with that good. (*Divine Providence* 296.7-8)

One teaching says that the Lord leads us to our final home in heaven, "sometimes by winding pathways" (*Heaven and Hell* 519). One of my wife's favorites says that the Lord, acting within His providence, is like a person standing in a tower and watching us from above, as we wander and try to find our way through thick forests to a place of exit. And watching from that tower, He leads us, without our knowing it, to that place. Here's what it says:

The Lord's providence is, from our perspective, like walking in a thick forest, the way out of which we do not know. From the Lord's perspective it is different. From His perspective, providence is like a person who stands in a tower, sees our wanderings, and leads us, without our knowing it, to the place of exit. (*Spiritual Experiences* 4393)

Our theology draws its own conclusion from all of these teachings, saying, "We can never be led better than we are" (*Spiritual Experiences* 3114) and that we are *safe* in the Lord. Here's one teaching which says that:

People who are governed by love of the Lord and love of the neighbor are those who are joined most closely to the Lord. Because of this, no evil can touch them. They are safe among all kinds of evil, even when in the midst of the hells. Love of the Lord and love of the neighbor hold such safety in them. (*Secrets of Heaven* 6370)

In another place it says...

The most all-embracing reality is that the Lord has united His Humanity to His Divinity. As a result of this, we are able to dwell in peace and safety. (*Secrets of Heaven* 10730:3)

Another passage says that the Lord's name, "Jesus," means "Savior," "Salvation," and also "Safety" – we are *safe* in the Lord. And finally, in the book of Psalms it says...

I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4:8)

Once there was a man from the New Church who spoke in a public setting on the Lord's providence. Among other things he said,

"I can tell you that I myself have had a good life – a wonderful life. Everything I've most wanted or hoped for has happened. Everything I've truly needed has been provided. I've enjoyed good physical and emotional health, and meaningful relationships along the way. Compared to many others on this planet I have absolutely nothing to complain about.

"Yet, despite these things, the teachings we're talking about – that the Lord is in charge, that He sees to it that everything works out in the end, and that He controls all the bad stuff in life, are teachings I've personally wrestled with. When we look around us and see all of the human suffering and starvation that go on in the world; when we consider some of the horrible crimes and atrocities that are perpetrated on individuals and on humanity; and when you consider some of the horrible forms of disease, sickness, emotional and intractable physical pain that people can suffer...for years...right up to the end of their life on earth; it can leave any one of us wondering, are these comforting, reassuring teachings we're given in the Bible and in the theology of the New Church really true? How can an all-merciful, loving God allow such awful, horrible things to happen in our world, and to people we love and care about?"

From myself, I remember practicing as a Physical Therapist, going on orthopedic rounds with doctors in a hospital where I worked. A woman was brought in to the emergency room with acute low back pain from a herniated disc in her spine. I have never witnessed pain like that in my life. She was in so much pain it literally made me cry as I watched.

I knew of another, elderly woman with multiple sclerosis. She experienced ongoing, painful muscle spasming as a result of her disease that they weren't able to control with medication. It was bad enough that she would wake up at night crying out in pain. Think of it: unless modern medicine was able to bring her condition under control, she might have experienced this for the rest of her life.

I knew a third woman in a small group setting 15 years ago discussing this topic. As we talked, she became so distraught over the human pain and suffering that go on in our world that on her way home, and for the first time in her life, she doubted the existence of God.

And I know one man who suffered from a lifelong emotional illness – manic depression – the effects of which were so bad that he lost his belief in God and be-

came an atheist. He couldn't believe that a loving God would allow him or anyone else to experience what he experienced throughout his entire adult life.

So at times, any one of us may wonder, are these things that the Lord says about Himself and His Divine Providence really true? If so, *how* is it so?

Think about Joseph in the land of Egypt. He was sold into slavery at age 17 into a far distant land, presumably never to see his family again. He was thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit. And after the dreams that he interpreted for the butler and baker came true, it was another *two years* before the butler remembered Joseph in prison and recommended him to Pharaoh. Do you think that young man in prison didn't struggle and wonder at times, and have his doubts about God's care and providence? True enough, after things started looking up for Joseph, and he came into power, he forgave his brothers, saying, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about as it is this day." Do you think it didn't take time for him to get to that place of realization, forgiveness, and renewed belief in his God?

One of the empathic things our theology says about the Lord and the angels is that they *understand*. They *understand* what you and I go through. They've been there themselves. Angels were people on earth at one time. How many of them do you think went through the very same things you or I go through? In fact, the Lord Himself went through torture and the most painful form of execution known to humankind at the time. He allowed Himself to suffer these things! Why did he do that?!

The point is, the Lord and angels understand our situation – whatever it may be. When we are sick, and hurting, and in pain, and we *rail* against the Lord, they understand. And they don't hold it against us. They know that as human beings we are limited. We are limited in how much we can take before we slip, and crack, and start to go under (*Secrets of Heaven* 8165). This is especially true, we're told, when physical pain is involved (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 196). They also know how hard it is for us to guess at or anticipate what good the Lord could possibly bring out of challenges we face *while we're going through them*. Most often, we can't see any of it till *after* the pain and suffering have passed us by. When Moses wanted to see Jehovah, Jehovah put him in the cleft of a rock, held His hand over it, and then passed by. Moses wasn't able to see the Lord from the front, but he *was* able to see Him from behind. It can be the same way for us: often we can't see the workings of the Lord's providence till *after* they have occurred.

Which makes me think: If you, or I, or anyone on earth who has experienced real pain, heartache, and sorrow, could project themselves forward into heaven 1,000 years from now, what would their perspective be on challenging things they experienced during their lifetime on earth? What would *your* perspective be – 1,000 years from now – on things you yourself have experienced or are going through even now?

And how many of us have heard the occasional story of someone who suffered great hardship in this world, and who came out the other side saying, "It was the

best thing that could've happened to me"? What do people *mean* when they say that? Why are they saying it?

Is there one hardship you went through in your growing up years which, looking back, you realize benefited you in some way? I remember a relationship break-up that I personally went through to when I was 25 years old. It was the greatest loss I've ever experienced. It took me two full years to recover from it. And yet that experience of loss made me more sensitively aware of when *other* people are hurting than I had been before. It has benefitted me ever since.

Melody Beattie – a well-known authoress – onetime wrote, "Everything from our past has prepared and propelled us to this moment; today prepares us for tomorrow; and it all works out for good. Nothing is wasted." (*Codependent No More*, p. 215)

So when Ellen and I take a long, beautiful walk on Long Beach Island or any other shore destination, and I see those little children playing and splashing at water's edge, I wonder: when they get to the other end of their lifetimes on this earth, how will they summarize their experience of it? Will they be able to say, "It's been a *good* life"; "It's been a good run"; or will they say something different?

This week, take some time – individually, or together as couples or with friends, or even with your children if you have them – to think over your life, remembering the standout moments and experiences – good, bad, or anything in-between. If you're by yourself, get out in nature, or take a day trip to the shore for a reflective walk on the beach. How would you summarize your experience of life so far; and how will you summarize it at the end of your lifetime on this earth?

Amen.

## Readings

Genesis 50:15, 18-21

Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. Are not five sparrows sold for a copper coin, and not one of them is forgotten by God. But the very hairs on your head are all numbered. Do not fear: You are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12:4, 6-7)

Again He said, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Within the realm of human experience, there are things that are temporal and things that are eternal. Temporal things are all those that are proper to nature and proper, therefore, to humankind. The attributes proper to nature are chiefly ones of space and time, both of which have a limit or termination. Another way to say this is that temporal things are those that fade in time, or ones that come to an end with a person's life in the world. Eternal things in contrast are all those things that are proper to the Lord, and that from Him are as though proper to humankind. The attributes proper to the Lord are all infinite and eternal, thus independent of time, and consequently without limit and without end. Another way to say this is that eternal things are things that do not fade or come to an end in time, thus not with life in the world. These things have to do with love and wisdom. (*Divine Providence* 219:1, 215:1)

The Lord's Divine providence is the uniting of temporal and eternal things. (*Divine Providence* 220:1)