

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 5 September

Children's Talk: Is Anyone Paying Attention?

What does it feel like when no one pays any attention to you? It does not feel good, does it? And what ways to people try to get attention? Sometimes we do unhelpful things to get attention.

What about the Lord? Sometimes it seems like the Lord is not paying any attention at all. There is a story about this in the Word. There was a time when many people in Israel worshipped a false god called Baal. Only a few people still worshipped the Lord. So Elijah, one of the prophets, suggested a contest to see whether the Lord or Baal was paying attention to their followers. The contest was to see which God would send fire down to burn an offering. The prophets of Baal tried first:

So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made.

And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:26-29)

They did everything they could to get Baal's attention. They even hurt themselves dreadfully trying to get his attention. But there was no voice: no one answered, no one paid attention.

We feel that way too sometimes I think. Life is hard, so we beg the Lord for help. And when He doesn't answer we start to feel so sorry for ourselves that we might even do things that hurt us to get attention. Some people break the rules to get attention. Some people break things. Some people yell and shout. But none of that actually gets what we want: not just attention, but love. Is anyone out there still loving us?

The answer is that of course the Lord still loves you! He never forgets about you, no matter how lonely or ignored you feel. The Lord showed Elijah that He was still paying attention in the story:

And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "Jehovah God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O Jehovah, hear me, that this people may know that You are Jehovah God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again."

Then the fire of Jehovah fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "Jehovah, He is God! Jehovah, He is God!" (1 Kings 18:36-39)

When Elijah called on the Lord, and specifically mentioned turning their hearts to the Lord, He sent down fire, and all the people believed in Him again.

In the Word, fire stands for love. And when we turn to the Lord, and do what He teaches, He sends down His love into our hearts. He does not forget us, or ignore us, or pay no attention to us.

So when you want attention, ask the Lord for love. Instead of doing something hurtful to get attention, do something loving. Keep the Lord's teachings. Treat people with kindness. It may not happen right away, but the Lord sees you, and He pays attention, and He will fill your heart with love.

So He Gives His Beloved Sleep

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

5 September, 2021

The Word is written in such a way that every word and concept has a deeper spiritual meaning. These meanings are threaded through the entirety of the Word, tying together disparate and varied stories into one story with one message today we will follow one of these threads by exploring sleep and wakefulness. In this theme we learn about the need to be vigilant and awake spiritually, as well as the need to rest and sleep in the Lord.

The Teachings of the New Church frequently indicate that sleep in the Word represents obscurity. This makes sense: in a state of sleep our conscious minds shut off; our senses are dulled; and we become oblivious to our surroundings. Given these facts we might think that sleep represents something bad or dangerous in our spiritual lives. If we are spiritual “asleep” then surely we will be vulnerable to evil. This is the case, but there’s actually a kind of obscurity or obliviousness that the Lord creates for our own well-being. We see one instance of this in the very first reference to sleep in the Word, when God decided that Adam needed a suitable partner. We read that,

Jehovah God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. (Genesis 2:21)

Certainly it was good for Adam to be asleep when this spiritual/surgical procedure took place. This is how God often works: He transforms and molds us in countless ways, behind the scenes, while we sleep, as it were. Were we conscious of this constant shaping we would be indignant and hurt at just how much the Lord shapes what we take to be our own personal domain. No one likes to think that someone is messing with their mind, even if that someone is the Lord. So be grateful that we are so spiritually unaware. It allows the Lord to function without disturbing our peace of mind.

That does not mean however that we should be spiritually asleep in all ways and at all times. The Lord teaches us that we must constantly be on guard against evil. The Psalms and Prophets speak of the watchmen that keep vigil during the night. And Jesus Himself told parables about the need to watch. In one, the parable of the Ten Virgins, He ended with the warning,

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

And when Jesus faced His final hours in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, He rebuked His disciples with the words,

What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Matthew 26:40-41)

Watchfulness is a spiritual practice that we must engage in if we are to be ready for temptation and for growth.

But what is it actually to be spiritually asleep? What would it mean to be spiritually awake or vigilant? It would be tempting to think that all it takes is becoming aware. In other words, learning spiritual truth. But the teachings of the New Church indicate it takes more than that to wake up spiritually:

To be watchful has precisely this symbolic meaning in the Word, for a person who learns truths and lives according to them is like someone who awakens from sleep and becomes alert. By contrast, a person who lacks truths, but who is engaged simply in worship, is like someone who is asleep and dreaming.

Natural life, regarded in itself or apart from spiritual life, is really no more than a state of sleep, whereas natural life that contains spiritual life is a state of alertness. This alertness, moreover, is obtained only through truths - truths which appear in their own light and in their own clarity when a person lives in accordance with them. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §158)

To be spiritually awake takes not just learning but also living truth. It is in living truth that our minds awaken to spiritual reality and we see ourselves and the world around us as it really is.

Take for instance a person who cares only for himself. His attitude towards life is that he is looking out for number one. No one can expect to rely on anyone else in this harsh world. If anyone gets in his way he simply brushes them aside. Their suffering is there problem, not his. From this point of view he is completely asleep to spiritual reality. Just as sleep shuts off the senses and dulls the mind, his selfish focus shuts off his ability to empathize with anyone else and dulls his perception of what truly matters in life. Let's say that he hits some trouble in life and starts to open up to the possibility of something more to life than selfishness. He starts to study Christianity and learn about the Lord's teachings. At this point, he might consider that he has "woken up" and in one sense he has. But as long as the ideas remain purely intellectual, he is still asleep. It's perhaps like someone having a very realistic dream, but who is not yet actually engaging with the waking world. But then let's say he starts to put into practice what he has learned. He observes his own selfish tendencies and resists them. He pays attention to how his actions affect others and adjusts them accordingly. As he lives the truth he will truly wake up spiritually. He will become aware of his own inner spiritual world of love and wisdom, of goodness and truth, of empathy and insight. Outwardly he will begin to recognize the power of goodness in action, the depth of spiritual connection with others, the presence of the Lord in all things. Having begun to live the truth, he will be truly awake and alive to spiritual reality. He will be like Joseph, who upon waking from sleep declared, "Surely Jehovah is in this place, and I did not know it" (Genesis 28:16)

From that wakeful point of view real vigilance is possible. I think we often feel that when we become more spiritually aware that suddenly life becomes a greater challenge. We notice all the little ways hell has and continues to creep into our lives and all the temptations in which we falter. But rather than seeing this as a burden perhaps we can realize it is truly an opportunity. Those evils were there all along, and they caused suffering all along. What has changed is that now you are in a position of vigilance, in which you can fight back and overcome. When we are spiritually asleep we are like a city with no night watchmen, that is secretly being infiltrated and sabotaged by an enemy. When we wake up, we are like that same city with guards crying the alarm. Certainly the alarm throws us into greater turmoil, but it

is a chance to fight back, overcome, and then enjoy the safety of a healthy spiritual life.

Another hard aspect of spiritual vigilance is that it can become exhausting. Constant focus takes away our energy and saps us of motivation. This is especially true when we feel that we have to do all the work on our own. In other words, when it would appear that we are keeping watch while the Lord sleeps. It certainly does feel this way sometimes, and this feeling is reflected in the Word. The Psalmist cries out, in Psalm 44,

Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. (Psalm 44:23)

A similar sentiment is shown in the story of Jesus calming the waves:

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" (Mark 4:37-41)

When the disciples needed Him desperately, Jesus slept. As if He did not care that they were on the verge of drowning. When we are doing our part to make things work in life, or to make the world a better place, and there is no sign of the Lord, we can become indignant as well. Does He not care that we are perishing? Is He asleep while we toil away?

The message of the story is not, of course, that sometimes the Lord sleeps and leaves us on our own. Quite the opposite: Jesus rebuke, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" makes it clear that they were never in any danger at all. Even asleep in the stern Jesus still held full power over the storm. The same is true for us, that when the Lord seems completely and totally absent, even then He is watching over us. It is at these times that perhaps we need to remember our own sleep, the type of sleep we began with: our awareness to what the Lord is accomplishing behind the scenes is dull and limited. We are in fact the ones who sleep while the Lord works beyond our comprehension. As the Psalmist declares,

He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, He who keeps Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep. (Psalm 121:3-4)

The Lord does not slumber or sleep. His care for us is infinite and eternal, never ceasing day or night. Whether we are awake to spiritual reality, or are ourselves asleep at the wheel, He continues to guide us.

The last image of sleep that I want to touch on is a result of this constant presence of the Lord. Sleep is most possible and pleasant when we are at peace and trusting. The image that comes to mind is a child, having had a nightmare, watched over by their mom or dad until they have fallen soundly asleep again. When we truly believe that the Lord watches over us we can let go of some of our anxiety.

We do not have to do it all, we do not need to keep working away day and night, our vigil is not eternal. We need times of letting go and simply trusting that the Lord is in charge.

I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to cease from the land; and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. (Ezekiel 34:25)

I lay down and slept;
I awoke, for the Jehovah sustained me.
I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people
Who have set themselves against me all around. (Psalm 3:5-6)

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

It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows;
For so He gives His beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:2)

Evil spirits have a strong and burning desire to harass and attack man when he is asleep, but at that time man is especially protected by the Lord, for love does not sleep. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1983)