

# The Pursuit of Truth

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

30 November 2025

## Children's Talk: Travelling

1. Travelling is moving from one place to another
  - a. Sometimes for fun
  - b. Sometimes because we have to
  - c. Sometimes from good to bad, other times from bad to good
2. Abraham was called by the Lord.
  - a. Now the LORD had said to Abram:  
"Get out of your country,  
From your family  
And from your father's house,  
To a land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)
  - b. From Ur to Haran with parents
  - c. From Haran to Canaan, to Shechem, the terebinth tree of Moreh
  - d. To the Mt. East of Bethel, West of Ai
  - e. Further South
  - f. To Egypt to escape famine
  - g. Back to between Bethel and Ai
  - h. Terebinth Trees of Mamre in Hebron
3. He left many places
  - a. Some he went back to, but he was different when he got back.
4. Our journey
  - a. The Lord tells us he wants us to go on a journey
  - b. It is a journey to heaven
  - c. Along the way many things change
  - d. Even if the things around us stay the same, we change
  - e. Things we once hated maybe we start to like
  - f. Things that were confusing become easy to understand

g. Things that were hard to do become easier

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What is something that you know is true? How do you know that it's true?

That's not an easy question to answer fully. You might start by saying you know something is true if it makes rational sense. But I'm sure we have all had the experience of something making perfect sense; and yet being completely wrong about it. We could say the same thing about personal experience. I remember when I was younger noticing other people my age or younger having tantrums, and how unsettling it felt. I *knew* that it was better to hold back all my feelings and not let them out in such an uncontrolled way. It made sense to me, and it fit with my experience of life. And yet I have to admit, I was wrong. Shoving down any messy feeling and not acknowledging or expressing it in any way shape or form was not actually the right way to live. Things we *know* to be true today might not be true tomorrow. So how do we pursue truth?

## 1. Pursue Truth

The story we are going to explore today at first glance seems to have little to do with the pursuit of truth. It's about a man who takes refuge in a foreign land with his wife, and to protect himself from the jealous locals, claims she is his sister rather than his wife. When the locals find out they are indignant at being lied to. The spiritual sense though has everything to do with pursuing truth, and the worth of that pursuit even when the outcome is different from what we expect.

There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines, in Gerar. Then Jehovah appeared to him and said: "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you." (Genesis 26:1-2)

In the Word a famine stands for an absence or lack of truth. We find ourselves in these famines when we realize that we need to figure out what is the right thing to do. That lack is what prompts us to seek a certain kind of truth. I say certain kind, because many of us like learning for learnings sake. But this is specifically talking about those times when we hunger for a truth, or a true idea, a right answer, that can be applied specifically to our situation, that can help us navigate a challenge, that will guide us in living a good life. Trying to understand the teachings of the church rationally in this way is what Isaac going to live among the Philistines stands for.

Take the example of a young man who is engaged. As the wedding approaches he and his fiancé start to have conflict about how to involve the various family members in the wedding. So he tries to figure out the right thing to do and how to approach things. He looks to the Word and holds on to the teaching from the Lord about loving another as oneself. When there is conflict about family involvement, he pauses and reminds himself that he wants to love her and her family at least as much as he would love his own family, if not more. He didn't know how to handle things at first (the absence of truth) and so he went looking for truth that he could apply to his situation.

## **2. The Truth is Beyond Our Reach**

Then we come to the strange part of the Bible story, regarding Isaac's wife Rebekah.

And the men of the place asked about his wife. And he said, "She is my sister"; for he was afraid to say, "She is my wife, (lest the men of the place kill me for Rebekah, because she is beautiful to behold)." (Genesis 26:6-7)

What's going on here? Well in the literal sense Isaac is afraid that the men of Gerar would want to marry Rebekah for her beauty and would kill him to get to her. So to protect himself he instead says she is his sister, and so by extension would be

unattached and available to marry, keeping himself safe. Where does this fit in with our search for truth?

Rebekah stands for Divine Truth from the Lord, united to Goodness, represented by her marriage to Isaac. Since she was already married, she was not available to anyone else; and this represents the fact that Divine Truth is actually completely and totally inaccessible to us: only the Lord has the Truth itself. Here is how the Teachings of the New Church describe the situation:

If Divine truths themselves were to be opened, they would not be received by those who are in the doctrinal things of faith, because they surpass all their rational apprehension, thus all their belief, and consequently nothing of good from the Lord could flow in. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3387)

If the Lord just presented the pure, raw, unfiltered Truth itself to us, it would be rejected. Not only that, since we would reject the truth, we would lose the good that comes along with it, since good only exists when there is some amount of truth to give it shape and direction. Relating this to our story, if the men of the city saw that Rebekah was already taken, they would kill her husband; and if we really got how inaccessible truth is to us, we would give up on even trying to find it, and goodness would die within us. Hence the lie from Isaac that she was only his sister. The Lord implies that we can actually comprehend the truth, and gives us that the sense that we all have that we really could, if we just applied our minds, find out what is the right answer for any given situation. That's enough to motivate us to search for the truth, even though we never actually complete that search. There is a bit of a bait and switch going on: we pursue truth thinking we can actually find it; but then find out that the real truth is beyond our comprehension.

### **3. True... Enough**

This is part of the Lord's plan. He needs us to pursue truth even though we won't actually fully understand it. And so He gives us something that we can

understand, something called an appearance of truth or apparent truth. Now that does not mean the same thing as fake or false. There is some truth to the things we know. These apparent truths are a kind of stepping stone to get us closer to the full truth:

In order therefore that a person may nevertheless have truths, and thereby have spiritual life, appearances of truth are given to everyone according to his apprehension; which appearances are acknowledged as truths, because they are such that Divine things can be in them. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3387)

In order to get us at least closer to what is really true, the Lord uses things that are partly or apparently true, even if in some sense they are incomplete or vague.

An example given in the Teachings of the New Church is that of the sun rising and setting: we talk as if the Earth stays still and the sun circles around it. But of course, that is incorrect: the Earth rotates and orbits the sun. But even though we know the “real” truth, it is still useful to talk in terms of the apparent truth. Or the sky being blue: it is in one sense, but it’s actually light refracting or splitting apart in a certain way. It’s not blue in the same way that a plate might be blue. Yet it is very useful to talk and think of the sky as blue because that’s what our senses tell us.

Another example is taken from the Word: The Lord told His disciples that they would be rulers in His Kingdom, and sit on thrones judging. There is a truth to this, but their take on it was that they would get to be in charge of other people, when the real or deeper truth is that ruling in heaven means to serve, and that all power in heaven is from the Lord alone, not from self. If the Lord had started with that, it would have been inconceivable that that would be worth pursuing and so they would never have even begun the pursuit of truth. By starting with an apparent truth, they could be led to the deeper truth.

Or to take something from daily life, we talk about people making us angry or hurting our feelings. Yet many times they have not forced us to be angry or attacked

our feelings; they have simply done what they have done innocently, and we reacted with anger or hurt. Yet expressing ourselves initially as having been made to be angry or having someone have hurt our feelings, is incredibly useful as a starting point for resolving what's going on.

All of these appearances, that the sun orbits the earth, that the sky is blue, that good people get to rule in heaven, and that people *make* us angry, help get us closer to the truth of things. They are an approximation that helps us interact with the reality of things.

#### **4. Truth Found and Lost**

Appearances are useful, but there will always come a time when we have to realize that what we have *is* just an appearance, it isn't the full reality. We have to be willing to move past the apparent truth when it is no longer useful. It can be painful when we realize that something that felt very true and foundational was in fact off base. That's represented in the indignation of Abimelech when he realized that Rebekah was in fact Isaac's wife:

Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, "Quite obviously she is your wife; so how could you say, 'She is my sister'?"  
Isaac said to him, "Because I said, 'Lest I die on account of her.'"  
And Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might soon have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt on us."  
(Genesis 26:9-10)

There is indignation when we realize that what we thought was true is actually only a piece of the truth, or a reflection of something deeper that is true. As with Abimelech we may have some indignation at having been strung along. Underneath that indignation is embarrassment, sheepishness, and hurt pride, as well as fear. But in spite of that we need to humbly be willing to adjust what we know to be true.

Let's go back to our young man who found some truth that helped in his relationship. It made a big difference to think about loving others as himself when



blending families and there is smooth sailing through the wedding and into the early days of marriage. He feels like he has this whole marriage thing down. Then the holidays come around and, since her family lives in town, he starts making plans with her mom about how they will do Christmas day together. He knows his wife will love it that he's taking initiative. He casually mentions this to his wife one day. And everything goes pear shaped: she feels left out, undermined, and it's not what she wants anyway. It turns out that that he did not actually have it all figured out and that there were depths and nuances to loving another as himself that he had not realized. And so he is forced to once again go back and look for a deeper truth, or further truth. And in the process he is deeply humbled. He has to admit things he was wrong about and that he wasn't so much better than everyone else at this as he thought.

## **5. Always Pursuing, Never Arriving**

The important thing to remember is that this is not just a temporary process until we arrive at the truth itself. We never get there. And yet the sense that we do is useful, as it carries us along closer and closer to the actual truth of things. But the one thing that we can never do is claim for ourselves the absolute truth and so stop looking further. Only the Lord has the full and complete truth. This is represented in the prohibition issued by King Abimelech when he discovers that Rebekah is married to Isaac:

So Abimelech charged all his people, saying, "He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (Genesis 26:11)

If we ever think we have arrived at the truth itself and so stop looking to the Lord to learn more, then we have halted our spiritual growth and are heading towards spiritual death. We must remain open and humble to having our understanding expanded.

One last time, let's go back to our young newlywed. He and his wife go through a rough patch figuring out the holidays. But they do develop deeper understanding of one another, forgiveness is asked and given, and he's wiser and better for it. He now knows a thing or two about how marriage *actually* works, not just his naïve, rose-coloured view of it from earlier. Except, of course, that those married for longer can look at where he's at and quietly know that he still has a lot to learn. And so on and so forth. It's not that when he thought he had things figure out before he was wrong, and this time he is right. The cycle does not actually have an end: he will never have fully grasped the truth of what it means to love his wife as himself. He could remain married to eternity in heaven, and still there would be more of the truth to be discovered. The point is not to arrive at "the Truth;" the point is to get closer and closer to the truth to eternity.

Show me Your ways, O Jehovah;  
Teach me Your paths.  
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,  
For You are the God of my salvation;  
On You I wait all the day.  
(Psalm 25:4-5)