

The Places in Between

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

1 February 2025

Children's Talk: Comings and Goings

Today our topic is going out and coming in. The idea of going out and coming in has to do with times when we are beginning something new and things are changing. These are times when we are especially vulnerable, and so it is important that we have the Lord's care over us when things are changing. In Psalm 121 it says,

Jehovah shall preserve you from all evil;
He shall preserve your soul.
Jehovah shall preserve your going out and your coming in
From this time forth, and even forevermore. (Psalm 121:7-8)

We can see that going out of one place and coming into another is dangerous if we look at the animal kingdom. Animals like wildebeest have to be on guard when they migrate from one grazing area to another, and especially when they cross over from one side of a river to the other side.

This is also true of sheep: the shepherd watching over them needs to be extra careful when he is taking them out from the safety of their pen and when they are returning. But why do the sheep have to leave their pen at all? If it is dangerous, why not stay inside? The reason is that they need to go out to find food. There is not enough food in just the pen. So they risk the danger to get what they need, and trust that the shepherd will take care of them.

This is a lot like us. We like to stay where it is safe. We don't like to change, to try new things, and so on. I'm sure you have felt this as you get used to a new way of doing school or learning; as you have to do things differently at home; as you see the world change around you; as you move on to new grades and new responsibilities with age. There are dangers in all these changes, but we still need to face these dangers if we are to grow, just like a sheep needs to leave the safety of its pen to find food.

Luckily, the Lord is like our shepherd, who will protect us through changes. He compares us to sheep, and Himself to the shepherd. He says,

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. (John 10:2-4)

We can trust that the Lord will lead us through all changes, no matter how scary they are. He can protect us from all the dangers of change even while He leads us to the good things that change will bring.

So when we face changes, when we have to leave behind what is comfortable, pray to the Lord, and trust that He will protect you, and remember that change is how the Lord leads us to good things. *Amen.*

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We read in Psalm 121 that “Jehovah shall preserve your going out and your coming in; From this time forth, and even forevermore” (Psalm 121:8). This concept of going out and coming in is repeated elsewhere in the Word too. It is an important one because it covers basically everything: from the time you leave your house in the morning to the time you get back home, may the Lord be with you. More than just encompassing everything though, it touches on the idea of transition. In many contexts it is in transitioning, moving from one thing to another, that we are at our most vulnerable. I remember as a child getting anxious before long trips. But then also getting anxious before the trip home. It feels safer to stay put than to move. We find at Kainon School that our biggest incidents of misbehaviour happen during the transition from one class to another, or in the transition to and from break. The world of nature displays this in the many dangers facing wildebeest in their great migrations; they are especially vulnerable in crossing over from one side of a river to the other. Spiritually we also encounter this reality, and that will be our focus this morning: the challenge that comes in transitioning from one stage of life to the next; the space in-between going out of one way of life and coming into a new one.

Perhaps the most prominent transition in the Word is that of the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into abundance in the Promised Land. The Children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years, and had no hope of better prospects. But at last Jehovah heard their cry, and promised them that He would lead them to freedom and give them their own land, overflowing with abundance (Exodus 3:7-8). That’s a beautiful promise: you’ll go out from a virtual hell on earth and come into a heavenly paradise. The trouble is that it was not that

simple. Even accounting for the plagues and the difficulty in leaving Egypt, there then lay forty years of wandering in the wilderness before they could actually taste the fruits the Lord had promised.

If being a slave in Egypt stands for us when we are in a selfish or evil state, and the Promised Land stands for us when we have overcome and act from perfect selflessness, then the Wilderness in-between stands for the challenge of getting from point A to point B. This is the challenge we face with every transition: between where we are now, or rather, who we are now, and who we want to become, lies a vast expanse of painful growth. The Teachings of the New Church explain that we start life, and every stage of life, mired in selfishness, essentially a state of damnation if we don't change. The goal is to regenerate, or be reborn as a person who loves others and loves the Lord. But we cannot simply go from one to the other. We must pass first through a stage called reformation, during which we have our eye on the right goal, but are still mired in all our selfish motives (*Divine Providence* §83).

The transition begins with seeing somewhere in your life that you are falling short of the Lord's ideals. Shine the light of the Lord's commandments on your life and see what shows up. It's not a coincidence that one of the first things that happened after leaving Egypt for the Children of Israel was that they were given the Ten Commandments; which directly preceded forty years of misery. The more we know about the Lord's commandments, and especially the more we apply them to our lives, the more miserable we can become too. It highlights all the ways we are not good enough. It introduces the stress of measuring up all the time. It opens us up to failure. This is the vulnerability of transition. We can be perfectly comfortable in ignorance, and content in the areas of goodness we have mastered. But the place in between is super uncomfortable. So much so we sometimes avoid it like the plague.

So think for a moment about something in your life that you want to change or do differently. Especially think of something that has moral weight to it. Perhaps there is a specific teaching from the Lord that you want to do better at applying. It might be something you've never noticed before, or something you've worked on for decades. Then think what stands in the way of you changing. What fears come up? What worries? What self-doubts? What stresses will it stir up? Will it rob you of a useful coping mechanism? Will it reduce your enjoyment in life? Will it bring you into greater conflict with family members? No matter how amazing the end goal will be, getting there almost always takes a bumpy transition. That is the price we pay for growth.

The worst thing we can do when we start to feel this wobbly uncertainty creep in is to rush back to the safety of familiar yet lesser things. That is exactly what the Children of Israel do in the wilderness, time and time again. Just one example should give you a good feel for their attitude:

And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has Jehovah brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." (Numbers 14:2-4)

They were so desperate they longed to go back to Egypt, where at least they had enough food to eat. We experience something uncomfortably similar: in the midst of transitioning out of a certain habit, have you ever wished you had never heard of the Lord or His teachings? Wouldn't life be so much easier without the obligation of being a New Church person? In fact, the quickest and easiest way to get rid of a temptation is by simply giving in. The false dilemma we seem to be presented with is either A, try to change, become miserable, and fail, or B, give up, embrace your failings, and at least enjoy life.

It's very hard to remember the third option, which is of course getting to a point when you are stable and content, and have seen enough growth that you actually enjoy the new you. When we lose sight of that goal it's impossible to face transitions or changes. It's a bit like getting out of bed on a cold morning: bed is warm and cozy; and you vaguely know that a warm shower followed by a warm coffee is waiting for you. But as soon as the blankets loosen the slightest bit and the first blast of cold touches skin all thought of what's on the other side dissipates and the choice to remain where it's nice seems obvious.

Except that in our case it is not a matter of suffering a little cold to get to the warmth, it is a matter of restructuring our hearts and minds from the ground up. Imagine someone who struggles to keep commitments. He makes promises he then ignores and lets deadlines slip by without a peep. He is comfortable in this way of life. But then he comes to realize it is really a poor way of treating people. He sees the Lord's call to integrity, and commits to it. And now, the next time a deadline goes by and he simply ignores it, instead of blissfully going about life, he is inundated with guilt. It hurts. He sees first-hand how his wife, kids, friends, or coworkers feel let down. With these pangs of conscience there is a great temptation to give in, to go back to Egypt as it were: to simply embrace that he does not keep commitments, and be ok with that, and so avoid the hurt of trying to become better and falling short. And so he retreats back into a miserable but content life of evil.

There is no real happiness in this choice. It is merely an illusion, but an attractive one. And if we are to claw our way out of the unhappiness of passively letting evil slide, we must be able to face change. The only way to do that is by having things torn down, unsettled, flipped over, discarded, and replaced. I wish there were another way, but there is not. As Jehovah told the Children of Israel, their

time spent between Egypt and the Promise Land was not wasted, but was in fact a necessary part of getting to their destination:

And you shall remember that Jehovah your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of Jehovah. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. (Deuteronomy 8:2-4)

This process that the Lord describes as being for their own good was not easy. In fact, in other places the Lord directly states that one reason for the forty years in the wilderness was so that the older generation could die off and a new generation arise that would heed the Lord before going into the Promised Land.

Likewise, our temptations are for our own good, and require a kind of death of the older generation and the birth of a new one. There is not a shortcut to jump right from happily sinning to joyfully doing good. The Teaching of the New Church put it quite bluntly:

People uninformed about human regeneration suppose that a person can be regenerated without temptation, and some that he has been regenerated after he has undergone a single temptation. But let it be known that no one can be regenerated without temptation, and that he suffers very many temptations, following one after another. The reason for this is that regeneration takes place to the end that the life of the old man may die and a new, heavenly life may be instilled. From this one may recognize that conflict is altogether inevitable; for the life of the old man stands its ground and refuses to be snuffed out, and the life of the new man cannot enter except where the life of the old has been snuffed out. From this it is evident that fierce conflict takes place between mutually hostile sides, since each is fighting for its life. (Secrets of Heaven §8403:2)

The goal is the death of our old selves, and the birth of a completely new self. That is bound to be painful and anxiety inducing.

The key is perhaps to keep our eye on the final destination even as we slog through the periods of transition. After all, even though it took forty years, the

Children of Israel were eventually brought into the Promised Land to experience the blessings of a heavenly life. They did arrive, and we read of their finally eating and tasting the produce of the land, and the end of the manna in the wilderness that they had grown sick of (Joshua 5:10-12). When we are tempted to turn back from transition, we should remember that heaven is promised to those who do the work of repentance. I don't mean heaven as a place or a reward. I mean heaven as a way of life that comes as naturally as eating and sleeping. Even if it seems impossibly distant at the moment, there does come a time when you come into that way of life in which you barely remember your past flaws; in which you are successful at keeping your commitments; in which there is no fear or uncertainty because you are so firm in your devotion to what is right; in which you truly are satisfied with who you have become; in which you feel fulfilled because you have lived up to your potential. The Lord does not just preserve our going out from evil; He also preserves our coming into goodness, and preserves us in that state from this time forward, and even forevermore.