

Orientated towards the Lord, Part 2

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

12 July 2026

Children's Talk:

I want to start by thinking about the difference between having all the parts versus fitting them together. I have here a puzzle, and all the pieces are here. But that does not at all mean that the puzzle is complete! The whole point is to fit them together. Every piece needs to be put in its proper place for the puzzle to be complete. And without things in the right place we can't actually see what the picture is.

When the twelve tribe of Israel came into the land of Canaan, the Lord said that they could not just live anywhere. Every tribe had a place for it, and they would let the Lord choose that place:

And you shall divide the land by lot as an inheritance among your families; to the larger you shall give a larger inheritance, and to the smaller you shall give a smaller inheritance; there everyone's inheritance shall be whatever falls to him by lot. You shall inherit according to the tribes of your fathers. (Number 33:54)

Every tribe was given just what it needed: big tribes got lots of land and small tribes got less land. But they all had enough, and they were each in exactly the right spot for themselves.

The same thing happens for us but in a very different way. The Lord does not tell us exactly where we need to live. But He does have a place and a job for each and every one of us. We each have a place:

Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know." (John 14:1-4)

How do we find our place? Following the Lord. We don't need to force it; by following Him, He is helping us find the place He has prepared for us.

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Last week we looked at the arrangement of the tribes of Israel around the Tabernacle, each tribe in its proper place. We specifically looked at the orientation to the four directions: east, south, west, and north. In these we can see represented the four broad priorities that should guide our spiritual life: first, love to and from the Lord, next living wisely according to His commandments, then our own lesser wants and desires, and lastly mere information. There is far greater detail given in this story than just that though. The placement of each tribe means something, and even the names of the leaders and the numbers of their armies signify some spiritual component of our lives. The point of describing these components as to their specific arrangement is to convey not only that we ought to *have* these components but so that we can order them in the way that will be most useful. When our lives are brought into this heavenly order, then we have strength against hell (*Secrets of Heaven* §4326).

We're not going to go into each of those details today; instead I want to zoom in on just one of the encampments and its specific tribes, namely the southern one, led by the tribe of Reuben, and the camp that came second in the overall order. As we discussed last week, at a broad level, the south, being a place of greater light from the sun (in the northern hemisphere), represents truth and understanding, in other words, practicing one's faith, doing the right thing, and keeping the Lord's commandments. But there are many parts to that single concept. Here is the detail that represents those parts:

On the south side shall be the standard of the forces with Reuben according to their armies, and the leader of the children of Reuben shall be Elizur the son of Shedeur. And his army was numbered at forty-six thousand five hundred.

Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Simeon, and the leader of the children of Simeon shall be Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai. And his army was numbered at fifty-nine thousand three hundred. Then comes the tribe of Gad, and the leader of the children of Gad shall be Eliasaph the son of Reuel. And his army was numbered at forty-five thousand six hundred and fifty. All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Reuben, one hundred and fifty-one thousand four hundred and fifty—they shall be the second to break camp. (Numbers 2:10-16)

There's not an obvious connection in these details to wisdom and faith, but when we look more closely and understand the spiritual meaning, it becomes a clearer picture of how we need to do things in order to wisely live our faith.

Let's start with the main tribe in the south, the tribe of Reuben. As with all the tribes, this one is named after, and in fact descended from, one of Jacob's sons. If we look back at Reuben's birth we find that his name has to do with seeing:

When Jehovah **saw** that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name **Reuben** (*literally "see, a son!"*); for she said, "Jehovah has surely **seen** my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me." (Genesis 29:32)

In the Word, seeing has to do with faith (see 2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith is spiritual sight, particularly the spiritual seeing of truth. Reuben therefore represents faith in the understanding, faith that we can see in our minds eye, faith that we get and understand. You might think it goes without saying that we should probably understand what we believe, but we shouldn't take that for granted. There are many things a person can claim to believe without understanding it; and before we can practice truth we need to be able to know what it actually is that we are trying to put into practice:

That faith in the understanding, or the understanding of truth, comes before faith in the will, or the willing of truth, must be evident to everyone; for when anything is unknown to man (such as heavenly good), he must first know that it exists, and understand what it is, before he can will it. (*Secrets of Heaven* §3861)

So within the realm of wisdom and faith, the south, the first thing is to make sure we understand what is true. If we don't even understand it to begin with, there is no way we will be able to will it and do it. Even though this kind of understanding is by no means the most important thing, it does have to come early in the process; and since this important first step is represented by Reuben, Reuben was the firstborn child of Jacob, and praised for his strength:

Reuben, you are my firstborn,
My might and the beginning of my strength,
The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. (Genesis 49:3)

Simple, basic understanding of truth leads being able to will and do important spiritual work. It needs to come first if we want to reach the more important parts of spiritual life.

The intention to then carry out what we understand is what is represented by the next tribe in the south, the tribe of Simeon. His birth and naming has to do with hearing, which is what Simeon literally means:

Then she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because Jehovah has **heard** that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also." And she called his name **Simeon** (*literally "heard"*). (Genesis 29:33)

Metaphorically and spiritually hearing is related to seeing, and in English we even use them similarly: "I see what you mean" and "I hear you" both indicate some level of understanding. Seeing and hearing are also both ways that we are given information. But they are also distinct, as perhaps seen in the phrase, "why didn't you listen to me?" That doesn't mean, "why didn't you technically hear the words that I said;" it means, "why didn't you *do* what I said?" Hearing therefore in the Word represents not just understanding, but obeying what is understood. This is the next necessary step after understanding truth: to obey it.

You might think, “aha, we’ve talked about understanding truth and faith, meant by Reuben, and so now we must be talking about love and charity and use!” But remember, we are still in the south, still talking about the constituent parts of wisdom of life. Yes, we have moved from knowing and understanding things to willing and intending them; but it is still *faith* that motivates this step. The point here is *faith* in the will, intending to live faith, but still having to engage in self-compulsion rather than relying on some innate, good, loving motivation. It is living faith out of obedience, not yet out of love.

This is a really useful example of why the order and arrangement of these things matters. Obedience comes first; loving to obey comes second. One way it is put in the Teachings of the New Church is that action comes first, willingness follows (*Secrets of Heaven* §4353). If we try to reverse the order, we end up failing to act until we are somehow stirred by the right emotion. There’s a parallel here with being on a new diet or a exercise plan: you will almost certainly fail if your attitude is, “I’ll eat healthy when I enjoy it and I’ll work out when I feel like it.” Spiritually speaking, more often than not, we have to say, “I don’t actually want to do this at all, but I’ll do it anyway;” and then over time, as the habit is formed and we experience how much better it makes life, we actually will want to do it regularly. We have to spend time forcing ourselves to do the right thing before we come to feel the benefits: the love and joy of doing the right thing.

That leaves Gad, the final tribe. His name, meaning “a troop,” as in a troop of soldiers, is less obviously significant than Reuben or Simeon, but it too carries a spiritual significance.

When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpah her maid and gave her to Jacob as wife. And Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “A **troop** comes!” So she called his name **Gad** (*literally* “a **troop**”). (Genesis 30:9-11)

In the spiritual sense Gad stands for the result of first understanding and then obeying the truth: good works that are practiced in life. The multitude of children, and blessings, that Leah named Gad after are like the multitude of good that flows forth when we obey the Lord. There is a strong parallel with Jesus' teaching about the seed that fell on good ground:

But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." (Matthew 13:23)

When we hear, understand, and obey the Lord's words, we can then pour out good things into the world, good that can bear fruit and multiply. Now as with the previous two tribes and their meaning, it is not just this idea in isolation that matters; its placement after the previous two is incredibly important. Doing good works without first understanding any truth can actually cause more harm than good. The Teachings of the New Church give the example of a person who knows that everyone is the neighbour, and so treats everyone exactly the same without giving it any further thought. Even if he finds out that he is inadvertently aiding and abetting evil-doers, he defends himself by saying that everyone is the neighbour, what more is there to know? And he is in fact right; but since he has not really seen and understood any nuance in that truth, his works ending up causing harm. Doing good works for reasons other than obedience to what is right also easily becomes self-serving and merit-seeking. If you do the right thing not because you are supposed to but because it gets you what you want anyway, it is a brittle faith. As soon as the incentives shift, the good works will dry up.

In sum, last week the section on wisdom was just one of four; it was a quarter of the sermon; but today we have now gone into the specifics and it turns out the one section had far more detail than we could possibly touch on in one sermon. Having

gone into that deeper dive, I want to simply gesture at the scope of what we have left unexplored. We could go deeper into the names and number of each tribe, and explore in even greater depth the constituent parts of each of the three topics for today, namely understanding faith, obeying truth, and doing good works. On the other hand we could broaden out and look at an entirely different grouping of tribes, on the east, west, or north and focus on the constituent parts of heavenly love, or worldly wants, or mere knowledge and information, and how all these fit together as part of a balanced spiritual life. The fact that there is so much detail in this one story is not just because the Lord put a of hidden meaning into it. It's because the arrangement of our spiritual lives is an eternally ongoing process, with infinite growth and regrowth in every area. The point is not to simply gather together all the good qualities in ourselves; it is to find out how they fit together over and over again so that we can enter the order of heaven.