

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 18 October

Children's Talk: Joy and Sadness Together

We have been talking about the stages of life, by looking at the story of Moses. We began when he was a child, safely tucked away in a basket, and cared for by the princess who found him. Then we talked about how as a young man Moses had some hard choices to make. As an adult, Moses then was asked to take on difficult responsibilities and to lead his people into freedom. He did these things, leading them for many years through the wilderness, performing miracles to keep them safe. And at last they came to their goal: all along they were working their way towards a beautiful and amazing land that the Lord wanted to give them. But there something quite sad happened to Moses.

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And Jehovah showed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the South, and the plain of the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then Jehovah said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

So Moses the servant of Jehovah died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Jehovah. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour diminished. (Deuteronomy 34:1-7)

So Moses, as an old man, died before he could ever actually finish this great mission that he had been given. That is really sad. And yet, when he died, he was still strong; the Lord was still with him; he got to at least see the land that his people would live in; and the Lord himself carefully guided him into the next life. That's a very happy way to end life.

And this is the strange thing that I want to talk about: the bizarre mix of sadness and happiness when an old person dies. I remember when I was young and one of my grandparents died, I didn't quite understand why everyone was so sad. Old people are expected to die. Wouldn't they just wake up in heaven? That's true of course. But I didn't realize the sadness of still missing someone, even if they're in a better place. The sadness of not getting to chat with them or call them on the phone. The bits and pieces of life that they won't be there for. I bet some of us also have the opposite: how can someone be happy that an old person has died?

So which one is right? Should we be happy when someone has lived a long life and died at an old age? Or are we supposed to be sad because they are not here anymore? This is a bit of a trick question. We can actually feel both sad and happy about the exact same thing. It's ok to feel both at the same time. Or to feel one some days and the other on other days. We see this with Moses: happiness, because he did get to see the land, and he did have the Lord with him; but also sadness, because he didn't get to actually see the people go in to live there. They would have to do that on their own.

At the end of the day, when someone has gotten old, and lived a good long life, they are meant to die. Or rather their body is. Their spirit carries on living in the other world. We can celebrate the life they lived, the time we had with them, and

enjoy picturing them in heaven. And we can also be sad that we can't chat with them the same way, or have them be part of the things we do. Both happiness and sadness can live alongside each other when someone at last passes away.

Stages of Life, Part 4: Old Age

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

18 October, 2020

We have been looking at all the stages of life. We began with the innocence of childhood; the awakening independence of the teenage years; the challenges of adulthood; and now at last we come to the culmination of it all in old age. As with every stage of life there is a huge variety of experience. Old age brings both blessings and challenges, and some people seem to get more of one than the other. While we cannot look at all the details of these experiences, we can see some underlying spiritual realities. Among these is the reality that old age is a time of reflection, of slowing down, of moving away from the physical world and preparing to enter into the spiritual one. It's also an important stage of life. As I was preparing this sermon, a question I had was why do we grow old at all? It seems like adulthood is when we've made it; why don't we continue on in the vigour of youth and then pass away in our sleep? I hope to show that there is real benefit in going through old age; it is not merely a time of wasting away to nothing or waiting around for death. It is a real part of our spiritual journeys.

We will use the story of Moses to explore this topic, as we have done with the previous sermons in this series. We'll skip over most of Moses' adult life and go right to the end, but I'll give a brief summary: after being called by the Lord from the burning bush, Moses went to Pharaoh and called down plagues upon the Egyptians until they let the Children of Israel go. Moses led them through the Red Sea and out to Mt. Sinai, where they received the Ten Commandments. Moses then led them through years in the wilderness, interceding for them when they were starving and dying of thirst, and when they turned away from the Lord. After forty years of wanderings, Moses led them to the very edge of the Promised Land, at the River Jordan. Here, Moses revealed that he would not go with them into the land, but would die there, in sight of their final destination. It would be given to Joshua to lead them in.

At the very last moment of his life, Moses was given a sight of the land that had been promised, the land he would never actually set foot in, and then he died:

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And Jehovah showed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the South, and the plain of the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Then Jehovah said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

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I think this description of Moses surveying a land he could not reach sums up one aspect of old age: a broad perspective, gained from years of experience, but at a time in life when it is hard to do anything about it. It reminds me of a conversation I

had with someone as their last kids were leaving home: the mom had dedicated her whole life to her children, and had in some sense perfected being a mom. And now, just as her insights and skills were at their greatest development, the last kids were leaving and she would no longer be able to apply her wisdom, at least not in the same way. Now this person was by no means elderly; but it is a trend that often affects the elderly: storehouses of knowledge and wisdom, with a body too frail or a life too sedentary to do much of anything about it. Hence some of the frustration of age.

Let's talk about that perspective first though; what we might call the blessing of old age. Moses, from a mountain top outside the land, was shown its full extent, from Gilead to Dan. The Teachings of the New Church explain that the Land of Canaan represents the Lord's Kingdom, or the Church; and so to have a view of the whole thing would mean to have a grasp of the full range of the Lord's truth and goodness. Getting to this viewpoint is not a matter of study. It is a matter of undergoing temptation and struggle and at last coming to some clarity. It is something that can only be achieved through living, living fully and spiritually. And so of course, it is also a viewpoint that can only be obtained after a lifetime of work.

This fits with the stereotype, of course, that old people are wise. But I wonder how many of you older folks listening are thinking, "if only that were so!" I've known older people who actually feel less wise today than they did thirty years ago! Old age has a way of breaking people down and humbling them. Decisions that they once would have made for themselves are taken over by children and doctors. Things that were once a breeze now take the help of a carer. What was once a sharp memory fades, the complexities of life can be overwhelming in a new and unfamiliar world. All these factors do indeed seem to make old age a less wise time than the full maturity of adulthood.

And yet this appearance is only because we have warped what it means to be wise. We think it means having the answers and applying them with competence. That's not really wisdom though. Wisdom is much simpler than that. The Teachings of the New Church define wisdom this way:

Genuine wisdom consists in a person seeing from the light of heaven that what he knows, understands and perceives is so little in comparison to what he does not know, understand, or perceive, as to be like a drop in the ocean, and so scarcely anything. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §875)

Another passage, which draws a connection between age and wisdom, adds an acknowledgment of the Lord's wisdom; stating how much of true innocence there is in his wisdom is dependent on

...how far he believes that left to himself he has no wisdom at all, but that whatever wisdom he has is derived from the Lord, and also on how far he loves this to be so. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10225)

This realization is almost unavoidable in old age. I'm sure there are some people who cling to the notion that they have all the answers as they age; but most people are rather forced to confront their own insignificance.

We might call this both the blessing and curse of old age. Some people do seem to gracefully withdraw from their previous activities and find peace in simply trusting the Lord. They put off an almost childlike trust that all will be well and that the

Lord will guide us. They have learned from experience that our own prudence pales in comparison to the Lord's providence. Countless failures and disappointments have taught them that the Lord always brings us through in the end, and that His plans for us are greater than our own. Yet getting to that point is excruciating for some. It means confronting beliefs that you have had about yourself built up over decades. It means being content in feeling less useful than at a younger age. It means trusting the Lord's Providence when to all appearances the Lord is altogether absent. I doubt there is a more humbling experience in life than to grow old.

This side of old age paints a pessimistic image of old age, one that is perhaps reflected in the image of Moses, after decades of working towards a goal, having it snatched from his grasp within sight of reaching it. And yet, perhaps this image is not as negative as it first appears. Let's look back again at how the Word describes Moses' last moments, after being shown the full extent of the Promised Land:

So Moses the servant of Jehovah died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Jehovah. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour diminished. (Deuteronomy 34:5-7)

On the surface, a simple death; as far as the literal sense of the Word is concerned, the end of his life. But of course, death is not just an ending, it is also a beginning. And in this, I think, although Moses did not get to enter the Promised Land, his fate was not as bleak as it seems. The Teachings of the New Church describe the death of the body as being, in fact, resurrection into new life:

The person who, while living in the body, is desirous of heaven thinks of death and of sickness previous to it as nothing else than resurrection to life. For when he thinks about heaven he detaches himself from thought of the body, especially when he is sick and approaching death. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6221)

To the extent that old age forces us to slow down, to pull back, to perhaps feel less useful in this world, it also forces our minds to reflect on preparation for the next life and things to come.

Again, this is not necessarily easy. I can imagine that Moses was deeply disappointed to not accomplish the task set before him in this world of leading his people into the Promised Land. But this apparent failure did not mean his life was a failure, or that he was going the wrong way. In fact, as we read, even at death his eyes were not dim nor had his natural vigour diminished. Spiritually, he was stronger and more successful than ever, in spite of the appearance of lessening and failing. For those of you who are elderly and feel the pain of your body and mind apparently failing, perhaps there is hope for you in knowing that spiritually you may still be growing, and in fact growing through the very act of realizing your own weaknesses in this world. Spiritually, you are preparing to rise up into the strength of the next life.

As for the rest of us, we can find ways to honour the stage of life that is old age, with this understanding that it is just as full and complete a state as any other. Old age is not some limbo between life and death, a waiting room for heaven. I know that as a younger person old people once seemed like caricatures, more defined by their age than their own personalities. But as I got older, and especially as a minister I've gotten the chance to minister to the elderly, I have found that they are every bit

as much on a spiritual journey, with twists and turns, up and downs, as the rest of us. We must find ways to make space for this stage of life, to honour those who are going through it. We should welcome the full scope of human life, from infancy, to childhood, to teenagers, to adults, young and old, and to old age. If we do, it will be as is prophesied in Zechariah:

Thus says Jehovah of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each one with his staff in his hand, because of great age. The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. (Zechariah 8:4-5)

Amen.