

# The New Jerusalem

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## Bible Reading

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. And I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride dressed and ready to meet her husband.

And I heard a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: “Now at last God’s home is with humankind! He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them, and will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain, for the old order has passed away.”

Then the one sitting on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new!” (*Revelation 21:1–5*)

## Reading from Swedenborg

I will now describe the way light flows into the three levels of life in the human mind:

The vessels within us that receive warmth and light, or love and wisdom—which are threefold, having three levels—are transparent from birth, and let spiritual light through the way clear glass lets physical light through. This is why we can be lifted up all the way to the third level in wisdom.

But these vessels are opened only as far as spiritual warmth joins together with spiritual light—or love with wisdom. Through this union, the transparent vessels of our second level are opened.

This is analogous to what the light of the world’s sun does for plants on earth. Winter light is just as bright as summer light, but it opens neither seeds nor trees. But when the warmth of spring joins with the light, then it opens things up. The analogy holds because spiritual light corresponds to physical light, and spiritual warmth to physical warmth. (*Divine Love and Wisdom #245*)

## Sermon

In a small work titled *The Last Judgment*, #73, Emanuel Swedenborg wrote:

The state of the world from now on will be exactly as it has been. This is because the immense change that has taken place in the spiritual world does not force any change on the outward form of the physical world. . . . Outwardly, the churches will be divided the way they have been. They will still go on teaching their doctrines, and there will be similar religious practices among non-Christians. But from

now on people in the church will have more freedom of thought in matters of faith—that is, in the spiritual issues that relate to heaven—because spiritual freedom has been restored to them.

How do we reconcile this statement with the words from our text, “Behold, I am making all things new”? J. H. Spalding once wrote:

The true spiritual church of the Lord is indestructible; but as embodied in men upon earth, a church may pass away. . . . One cause is the abandonment by it of the life or practice of religion for mere doctrine. When charity or the life of religion perishes, the church inevitably perishes too, for the church has no other use than to initiate and develop the life of charity.

This thought leads naturally into what I want to talk about this morning, namely, finding God in our everyday life. To do this, let us first concentrate on some of the assertions found in our Bible reading. “Now at last God’s home is with humankind! He will dwell with them, and they will be his people.”

Do you have the same mixed reactions I have to these astonishing words? First, there is an incredible sense of awe at the idea of living in the same house with God! Doesn’t that stir in you a euphoric feeling of almost unbearable dimensions? How much sheer joy can one handle? Is it not almost beyond belief that God himself—the living embodiment of pure love—would share living quarters with the likes of you and me? That is my first reaction.

My second reaction is one of almost sheer terror. Do you mean to say that I have to have God around all the time? Really—I can’t handle that! Sunday morning for an hour, maybe! But moment after moment; day after day; day in, day out; night and day; breakfast, lunch, dinner; the perfect, loving God around all the time? Shades of Big Brother, the Gestapo, Orwell’s *1984*! Oh, no!

Is there something wrong with my values (and yours, if you share my fears) that I have this second set of reactions? A basic premise of the New Church is supposed to be that in this church, God really will be around all the time. Furthermore, that this is good. Maybe the problem is that some of us haven’t yet fully realized that the God we are talking about not only is the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ, but has already made his promised second coming!

A contemporary Japanese Christian, Shusaku Endo, in his book *A Life of Jesus*, also struggled with this image. He wrote:

The carpenter who grew up in the back country of a weak nation was in his brief career an otherworldly sort of teacher whom in the end not even his own disciples could appreciate. Not until after his death were they able to grasp what kind of person he really was. For all I know there may well be an analogy here between their inability to understand Jesus during his lifetime and our own inability to understand the whole mystery of human life. For Jesus represents all humanity. . . . His whole life embraced the simplicity of living only for love, and because he lived for love alone, in the eyes of his disciples he seemed to be ineffectual. His death was required before the disciples could raise the veil and see what lay hidden behind the [seeming] weakness.

One recent writer likened the Christian way of life to that of being an artist or a poet. In his book *Finding God in Everyday Life*, Kevin Coughlin writes, “It is not hyperbole . . . to say that we are all artists and poets. Even the most unimaginative and uncreative person among us makes his or her own world.”

This writer then comments that just to make one's own world is a profoundly artistic activity. Further, like a poet, each of us struggles to find the precise words that most accurately describe what we see and feel. This is basically the work of a poet.

But as we all know, an artist with great talent may be attracted only to the sordid, the bizarre, the cruel, or the ugly. And a gifted poet may expend his or her talent on works of little or no redeeming value. Thus, the analogy holds true only as we exercise our artistic and poetic talents consciously, in the presence of the Lord as a living member of our household.

When the risen and glorified Christ is present in our homes, we are gifted with the power to transform our everyday lives; to find the extraordinary in the ordinary; to see as transparent what formerly had seemed opaque; to be wary of what William Blake called "single vision." When something is experienced in Christ's way, we see through it to deeper meanings. This is to see what Swedenborg called the "inner sense," not only in the written Word, but also in all the little details of our everyday life. Or put another way, this is to find God in our everyday life. This is what I believe is involved in the deeper meaning of the descent of the holy city New Jerusalem.

Evelyn Underhill has a charming and relevant story in her book *Practical Mysticism*, involving two hypothetical characters called "Eyes" and "No-Eyes."

No-Eyes has fixed his attention on the fact that he is obliged to take a walk. For him the chief factor of existence is his own movement along the road—a movement that he intends to accomplish as efficiently and comfortably as he can. He asks not to know what may be on either side of the hedges. He ignores the caress of the wind until it threatens to remove his hat. He trudges along, steadily, diligently, avoiding the muddy pools but oblivious of the light that they reflect.

Eyes takes the walk too; and for him it is a perpetual revelation of beauty and wonder. The sunlight inebriates him, the winds delight him, the very effort of the journey is a joy. Magic presences throng the roadside, or cry salutations to him from the hidden fields. The rich world through which he moves lies in the foreground of his consciousness, and it gives up new secrets to him at every step.

No-Eyes, when told of the adventures of Eyes, usually refuses to believe that both have gone on the same road. He fancies that his companion has been floating about in the air, or beset by agreeable hallucinations. We shall never persuade him to look for himself.

Eyes experienced life as transparent; No-Eyes saw life only as opaque. One is reminded of John the Evangelist's rather strange words about the holy city: "The street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass." Now of course, you and I know that gold—beautiful as it is—is opaque, not transparent. Or is it?

What are some other examples of finding God in our everyday life? Take, for example, our bodies. Our bodies can just be there, sort of containers of our souls—unimportant, not taken care of very well, something we hardly notice even though others may. Or our bodies can be experienced as who and what we really are: as potentially overwhelmingly beautiful (as is so obvious in the bodies of little children); miraculous in their workings; something to be taken care of as very precious; our connection not only with the earth, but with the whole universe. In other words, as a marvelous gift from God, to be cherished.

Or how about food—our daily bread? It can be just something to keep us going, a hassle to buy, a drudgery to prepare. After all, most of it is processed, and filled with chemicals, dyes, and preservatives. It can be taken for granted; opaque. On the other hand, our daily bread as something transparent could be a reminder of our connection with God; a source of real enjoyment and satisfaction; a constituent of what we are. As we share it, food can become an expression of love and friendship—and as we say grace, a reason to give thanks to God.

How about meeting a stranger for the first time? It can be routine, a superficial experience, a “downer,” a chance to trot out a few seconds later that tired old excuse about how hard we find it to remember names. Or we could view it as an event filled with good possibilities; a new opportunity to see beyond ourselves; a chance to learn more of God’s creative genius; a context for a fresh appreciation of the image of God in another person previously unknown to us.

Of course, everything can’t be transparent all the time. Some things are appropriately opaque: they are not our business. Still, if our lives are to be richer, more satisfying, more full of meaning, then we probably all need more moments of transparency. Is it asking too much that we challenge ourselves to work seriously with the Lord in trying to make “all things new”—even if on the surface the newness may not be apparent to many?

“The old order of things has passed away. The one sitting on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” Amen.

## **Prayer**

Infinite Creator and Ruler of the universe, when we contemplate your presence with us every day, and even every moment, we are inclined to turn away and close our eyes, to shut out an awareness that seems too great and wonderful for us. Yet you have called us to open our eyes and see the transparent newness all around us! Call us today, O God, to lift up our heads, open our eyes, and see the wonders of your creation. And open our hearts to accept from you the wonderful gift of your divine love, fully realizing that we are created to live in the image of your own glorious being. Amen.

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