

## **“Go Forward”**

by the Rev. Geoffrey S. Childs

*And the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the Children of Israel to go forward” (Exodus 14:15).*

At one time or another nearly everyone is held in spiritual captivity. Such captivity means to be spiritually bound by evil loves. Then, like the Children of Israel, we are slaves in a foreign land, and the pharaoh of this land is our ruling evil love. This pharaoh may be a sense of personal superiority—of pride. Pride, beyond any other human emotion, is the hardest monarch, for we will often let this quality rule before our friends, our church, and our family.

In the New Church we often hear the terms “love of dominion” and “love of one’s own intelligence” which are used in the Heavenly Doctrine. Yet we seldom associate these loves with ourselves. When we search our hearts, we ask, “When have I tried to dominate?” or “Where have I shown a love of my own intelligence?”. Often we cannot find these qualities in ourselves. The reason is not that they are absent, but that they are subtly hidden, covered over so that we are unable to discover them. And yet, we *can* discover them if we know that love of dominion and love of our own intelligence express themselves in pride. We tend to treat our arrogance tenderly—giving it a protected corner in our lives. When we are tired or discouraged, we let it flare up and rule at the slightest provocation—whenever we feel someone is trying to impose upon us or take advantage of us. Hot temper flares, and at the time we see no wrong in this. However, as long as we let our sense of superiority stand unchallenged, we are in Egypt, ruled by Pharaoh. We are in a hidden bondage.

Such bondage is not always visible to others. For we may act honorably and morally, and even delude ourselves into thinking that we are moral and spiritual. But secretly there is a quality that delights in what flatters us above all else. We take hidden pleasure when our friends do as we want them to do and are happy when our personal ideas triumph over the ideas of others. These are the pleasures of self-love—represented by the fleshpots of Egypt.

Yet we are not left helpless before the powers of self-worship. For if the Lord deserted us in Egypt we would perish. It is because the Lord wishes everyone to enter heaven that He raises up a new leader in the Egypt of our spirits—Moses who represents the Word in our hearts, the Divine truth of the Lord. It was the miracles Moses performed that struck fear into Pharaoh’s heart. These miracles represent the Lord’s awakening of childhood affections for revealed truth. Our pride is awesomely challenged by these innocent affections, just as Pharaoh was challenged by Moses’ miracles.

But to be touched by these early affections for the Word is not enough. Pharaoh would not let the people go, though miracle after miracle was done. We can leave captivity only if we apply—that is, live—the truth. And to live the truth means to put truth before conceit, before our personal selfish ambition.

It is when we heed the Lord’s Word, and through self-compulsion do what is unselfish, that we begin to leave Egypt. This reality is portrayed in the final miracle done by the Lord in Egypt: the destruction of all the firstborn of the Egyptians. Here firstborn represents putting self first. This hidden smugness lives within us all, until we actually begin to put Divine truth before ourselves. Then a major change occurs: the firstborn of Egypt die—pride’s complete belief in the primacy of self dies before the power of love—the love of truth. This seems like an impossibility, but the Lord leads up to this major change, step by step, state by state.

The triumph of heavenly love is a beautiful and wonderful thing. Yet our remaining arrogance disdains it, and will try to test this new heavenly state, to destroy it if possible. Thus “the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt,” was hardened, “and he pursued the children of Israel” (Exodus 14:8). Evil loves will not leave us alone; even though we have rejected them once, still they will follow us. And there is only one way their strength can be shattered—in temptations. It is true that heavenly loves are implanted in us when we put truth before self. But though implanted, these loves are not able to become deeply rooted until they are tested and proved. So, “the Egyptians pursued them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and overtook them camping by the sea” (Exodus 14:9).

“And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid” (Exodus 14:10). After the Lord has established a heavenly love, Pharaoh—our evil ruling love—draws near. He comes to wipe out this challenge to his rule. When we see the power that our former sense of superiority had over us, we are “very afraid.” We fear that heavenly love will be destroyed by the Pharaoh of our lower self. It is then that we come into the confusion, bewilderment, and fear of temptation.

In this spiritual struggle we try to fight our over-weening self-love for the sake of the new heavenly love—a love that we find so much higher and more worthy than the evil loves of hell. But as we see the great urgency of our self-love, we begin to lose any hope of victory. Thus, “the children of Israel cried out to the Lord. Then they said to Moses, ‘Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?’” (Exodus 14:10-11). So we may think, “Wouldn’t it be better to have never fought our sense of superiority at all than to have to face its full power? Isn’t it better to make our spiritual grave in self-worship rather than to flee our selfishness only to be beaten by it in temptation?”

The Heavenly Doctrine has a thought-provoking teaching about the words of the fleeing Israelites:

*that these words are words of despair is evident. Moreover, those who are in despair, which is the last of temptation, think such things, and then they are as it were on the slope, and are as it were sinking down toward hell. But at this time such thought does no harm whatever, nor do the angels pay any attention to it, for every person’s power is limited, and when the temptation arrives at the furthest limit of his power, the person cannot sustain anything more, but sinks down. But then, when he is on the downhill course, he is raised by the Lord and thus liberated from despair (Arcana Coelestia 8165).*

Moses’ answer to the cry of his people was: “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today.... The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:13,14). In the beginning of temptation, we trust in our own goodness and try to fight our evils from our own strength. Yet we cannot conquer from our own strength alone, for of ourselves we are really nothing. Until we realize that we must turn to the Lord for strength, our despair in temptation becomes deeper and deeper. Finally, we find ourselves on the slope, giving up, sinking downward into evil. It is then that we may stop trying to conquer from ourselves and come to see that only the Lord can conquer evils. The Lord says, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.”

Immediately after Moses had spoken these words of encouragement to the Israelites, the Lord Himself spoke directly to Moses. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward’” (Exodus 14:15). Apparently Moses had been secretly praying for release from any struggle. Instead, we are to set forward and endure the temptation to its finish. For the Lord establishes

heavenly affections only when we fight for them throughout the entire duration of a spiritual struggle. If we turn aside or pray to get away from the battle, we are also turning away from establishing heavenly loves. Thus we read, “If temptations were intermitted [or cut off] before they had been fully carried through, [people] would not be prepared for heaven, and thus could not be saved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8179). Therefore, the Heavenly Doctrine makes the following statement: “The prayers [for early release] by those who are in temptations are little heard” (*ibid.*). The Lord said, “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward.” And this they did—they marched forward across the opened sea.

We are taught that “They who are liberated from temptations...come into obscurity before they come into clearness, because the falsities and evils that are injected by the hells adhere to them a while, and are not dissipated except successively” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8199). In the story the Israelites actually won their victory when they ceased to fear Pharaoh and his army and instead put their complete trust in the Lord and His servant Moses. Once we have a willingness to be led by the Lord in temptation, to fight *from the Lord* and not from ourselves, the victory is essentially won. But still, the joy and light of victory aren’t given immediately. The children of Israel crossed through the Red Sea at night—in a state of obscurity. After the essential victory in temptation, our evils still surround us; they are like a wall of water ready to crash in upon us.

But the Lord leads, creating a dry path for us to walk upon, pushing back the evils that would otherwise flood in. Even then the hells, who never cease trying, follow after us to do battle. When the Egyptians saw the people of Israel escaping through the sea, they pursued with a lust to destroy them. But when the Israelites had crossed,

*Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained (Exodus 14:27-28).*

Our state of obscurity is dissipated. This is denoted by “morning” in the Word. It was in the morning that the children of Israel saw evidence of the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. When we have struggled with pride in temptation, and the Lord has conquered, then, in the spiritual morning that follows, we can see our dead self for what it is. It is this rejection of arrogance that is pictured in the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. “So the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Thus Israel saw the great work which the Lord had done in Egypt; so the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and His servant Moses” (Exodus 14:30-31).

So, quietly but surely, the promise of salvation, the great joy of salvation, comes into the human heart. This is a joy sent by the Lord. It is the feeling and fulfillment promised by the sacrament of the holy supper. It is the joy expressed by the sweeping songs of Moses and the Israelites. “Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and spoke, saying: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him’” (Exodus 15:1-2).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 14; *Arcana Coelestia* 8179