

SHIFT Sermon Series: WEEK ONE
By Rev. Malcolm Smith

“IF ALL IS WELL, WHY AM I LIKE THIS?”

Our story begins with a pregnant woman (Rebekah) anticipating the birth of her first child. She had had difficulty getting pregnant and so must have been excited to have things finally be working out. But then she experiences a strange struggle within her and asks, “If all is well, why am I like this?” (Genesis 25:22).

What do you want to SHIFT in your life? What do you want to commit to working on for the next 7 weeks?
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When we take a new step in our spiritual lives (perhaps by beginning a program like this one) we are anticipating the birth of something new in our spiritual lives. Maybe we want are hoping for more of a sense of purpose in our lives. Maybe we’re hoping for a shift in our relationships with our family or co-workers. Maybe we’re hoping to let go of something negative in our lives that we’ve felt bad about for a long time. But, often, soon after we make a commitment to try to make a positive change in our lives, our excitement turns to confusion and maybe even fear. We feel conflicted about what we should do and we think, “If I’m trying to do the right thing and make progress then why is it so hard?”

ASKING THE LORD FOR HELP

When Rebekah experienced the struggling within her, she went and asked the Lord what was going on within her. We also need help in understanding what goes on within us and this program is one way of going to the Lord to learn about exactly that.

The Lord explained to Rebekah, "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Rebekah thought that she was having just one baby but, when the Lord explained that actually she was having twins, then the struggling that she was experiencing within her made sense. In a similar way, if we want to understand what’s going on within us, the first step is realizing that what we’re experiencing is the result of the interaction of two very different forces—our will and our intellect—Esau and Jacob.

ESAU AND JACOB

Esau is the firstborn and is red and hairy. He’s a hunter who spends his time outside. He feels things strongly and acts without thinking. He represents what’s called in the New Church “the will”—the part of us that loves and feels and motivates us. Jacob, on the other hand, is more smooth and calculating. He’s a thinker who tends to stay inside. He represents what’s called “the intellect”—the part of us that knows things, that thinks, that has theories about the way things work and what we should do. Both can be positive. Esau can be our most unselfish motivations that the Lord plants deep within us—the part of us that just wants to serve others. Jacob can be a clear sight of what the truth is and how to follow it.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMINOLOGY

The teachings of the New Church use lots of different terms to describe what Jacob and Esau are. Often Jacob is spoken of as being truth and Esau as being good. Specifically they are often called “truth of the natural” or “good of the natural.” “The natural” refers to the level of our minds where we do our day-to-day thinking. Isaac and Abraham—the generations that came before—represent the higher levels of our minds. (Maybe we should use a chart to explain this. Some explanation like this seems necessary to be able to use quotations from the Writings that use this sort of terminology.)

And both can be negative. Esau can be the part of us that wants to act without thinking, to do what feels right whether or not it’s actually right. And Jacob can be the part of us that just wants to figure out the best way to get what we want, and focus on how we can use what we know to our own advantage.

WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT?

Jacob and Esau wrestle within us for importance or primacy. Which should we listen to? Which should we act on? A woman wants to improve her relationship

with her mother. Esau within her longs to be more connected to her mother. But Jacob reminds her of all their past interactions and makes her question whether it’s actually healthy for her to be trying to reconnect with her at this point in her life. Maybe she needs to be working on establishing herself on her own more first. Esau tells her to just try something—give her a call, send her an email. Jacob reminds her that her mom doesn’t tend to communicate well over the phone and certainly not in email. Esau tells her she should drop everything and buy a plane ticket to go try to patch things up with her in person. Jacob points out that she doesn’t have the money for that and she has responsibilities to her husband and children. And on and on they wrestle.

Which should she go with? Is it better to go with what you feel or what you think? Should you “follow your heart” or “use your head”? “Go with your gut” or “think it through”? People have all sorts of different opinions on this topic. “A good heart is better than all the heads in the world” (Robert Bulwer-Lytton). “Good intentions cause most of the world’s great evils” (Dennis Praeger).

And this isn’t just an interesting philosophical puzzle; it fundamentally affects the decisions we make. And the struggle can rip us apart inside. Reread Esau’s reaction to finding out that Jacob stole his blessing to reconnect with the intense feelings this struggle can involve (Genesis 26:34-41).

Do you tend more towards a “follow your heart” approach to life or a “use your head” approach? Can you think of times when your approach has or has not worked for you?

JACOB MUST LEAD FOR A WHILE

The way the New Church explains this tricky question is in keeping with how the story works and the prophecies that are given about Jacob and Esau.

When Rebekah first consults the Lord she is told that “One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). This is repeated in the

blessing that Jacob receives: “Let peoples serve you, And nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, And let your mother's sons bow down to you” (Genesis 27:29). And this is indeed what happens in the early part of the story with Jacob getting Esau’s birthright and his blessing.

And yet, even though the blessing that Esau eventually gets doesn’t seem as good as Jacob’s and says “And you shall serve your brother,” it ends by saying “And it shall come to pass, when you become restless, That you shall break his yoke from your neck” (Genesis 27:40). This prophecy also comes true at the end of the story when Jacob humbles himself before Esau and Esau takes the lead.

The New Church teaches that ultimately Esau is meant to lead—we are meant to be led by good loves from the Lord. But that’s not where we start. When we start our lives we have a lot of learning to do before we can intuitively follow our hearts and trust that they will lead us in the right way. And so Jacob must usurp Esau’s place for a time (Jacob means usurper or supplanter).

Think of a young man who has a deep love for helping people heal. If he were to grab a scalpel and start cutting people open at 19 years old with no schooling or training, just his love for healing, he would cause an awful lot of harm. If he’s a good person he’ll long for the necessary knowledge to accomplish his goals. This is Esau longing for the Jacob’s red stew. And for him to get the stew he has to give up his birthright, just as the young man has to put aside his desire to heal to go to school for a long time before he can finally act on his love and have it accomplish good.

It’s the same way in our spiritual lives. We have some good Esau inclinations within us from the Lord but we can’t just act on them without causing harm to ourselves and to others. And so we must spend a lot of our lives learning what the right thing to do is and trying to act from principle rather than just our basic instincts before we can eventually be entirely led by our purified hearts.

LEAVING ESAU BEHIND

In the story and in this program we will now go with Jacob away from Esau,

In the absence of matters of doctrine the good of life does indeed exist, but it is not as yet... truly spiritual, except in the sense that it has the potentiality to become so.... [T]hose who are being regenerated first of all do good as matters of doctrine direct them, for they do not of themselves know what good is. They learn to do good from matters of doctrine concerning love and charity; from these they know who the Lord is, who the neighbor is, what love is, and what charity is, and so what good is. ... It is like someone who is by nature inclined to commit adultery, steal, and murder but who learns from the Ten Commandments that such practices belong to hell and so refrains from them. In this state he is influenced by the Commandments, for he fears hell and learns from those Commandments and similarly from much else in the Word how he ought to conduct his life. In his case when he does what is good he does it from the Commandments. But when good exists with him he starts to loathe adultery, theft, and murder to which he was previously inclined. In this state he no longer does what is good from the Commandments but from the good which by now resides with him. In the first state the truth he learns directs him to good, but in the second state good is the source of truth taught by him. (Secrets of Heaven 3310:2-3)

away from the land of Canaan to a different place where he can gradually acquire what he needs to eventually return. As a result we will be focusing on learning—learning lots of truths about ourselves and the process of spiritual growth. But the final goal is that we return to Canaan to use what we've learned and have Esau, as the Lord's love within us, lead.