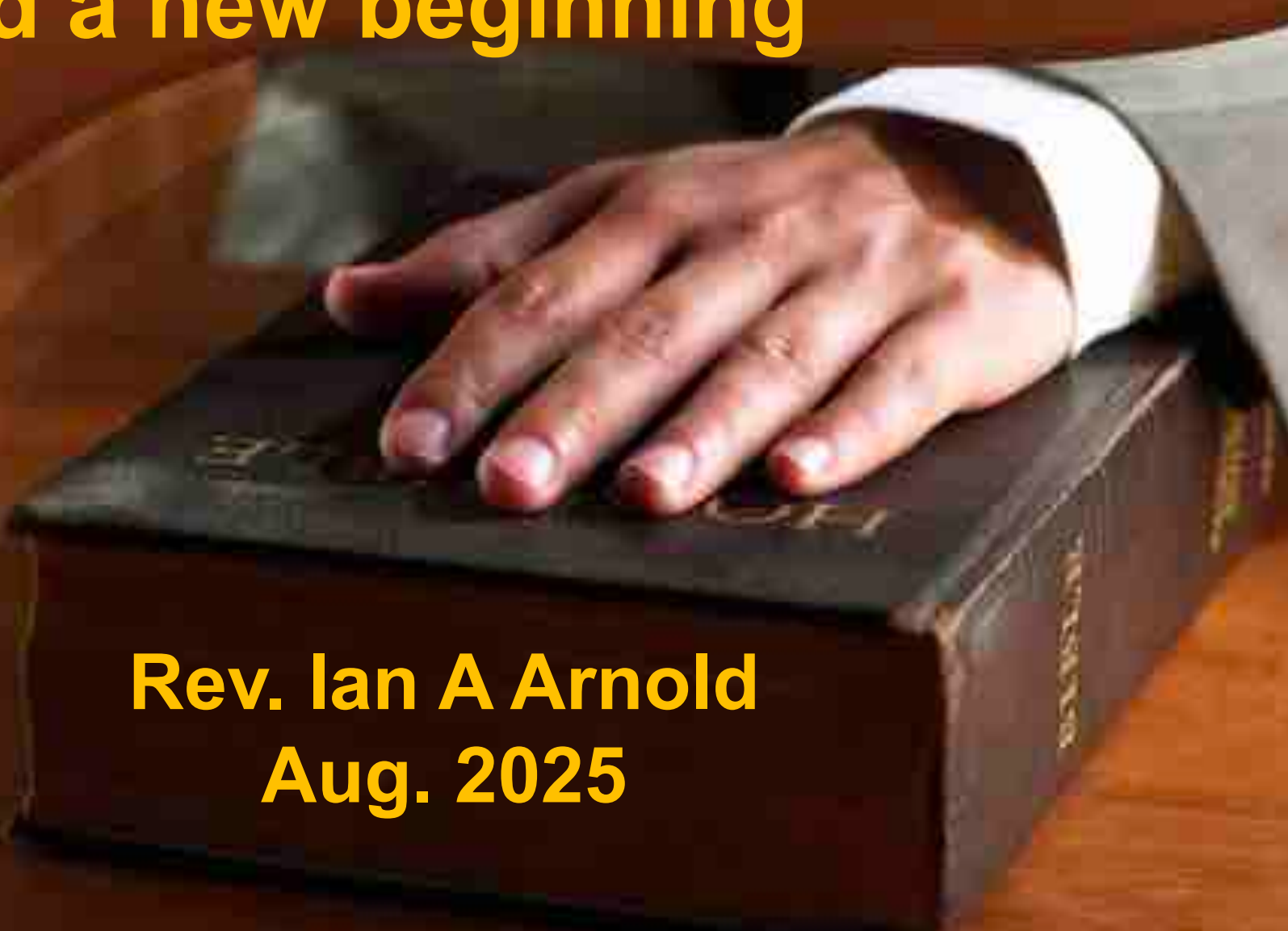


Re-building, restoration and a new beginning

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a white shirt cuff, resting on the cover of a dark brown leather-bound Bible. The Bible is placed on a wooden surface. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the leather and the skin of the hand.

Rev. Ian A Arnold
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Please read **Haggai Chapter 2:9** first:

“The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former’, says the LORD of hosts. ‘And in this place I will give peace, says the LORD of hosts.’ ”



Introduction

Have you ever had to clean up, and start again, after some devastating natural disaster has affected your district? Maybe even your home? For example, torrential rain causing flooding, a landslide, an earthquake or raging fires? We hear about such events fairly continuously taking place in different parts of the world. It seems that most countries have to respond to the challenges of such disasters from time to time.

If it hasn't affect you personally, can you imagine the heart-ache and feelings of discouragement of people whose home has, perhaps, been destroyed, swept away by a flood, burnt down by a raging fire or buried under a landslide? The sense of catastrophe must, at least for some people, be almost overwhelming.



The greatest catastrophe of all for Old Testament Jews

In the year 597 B.C., and after a three-month siege, Jerusalem was overrun by the army of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The precious furnishings of Solomon's temple were looted and taken to Babylon, along with many thousands of the leading citizens of Judah. Judah, in fact, became a kind of colony of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar installed a "puppet" king to rule over a relatively small number of people and demanded that a tribute be paid into the Babylonian treasury each year.

Insanely, and against the advice of people such as the prophet Jeremiah, and only eight years later, the puppet king of Judah thinking he had the support of Egypt, revolted against Babylon and refused to send any more tribute. Again, the Babylonian army marched against Judah and after a thirty-month siege destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the Temple.



For the Jews of those days it was an unimaginable catastrophe. **They had always believed that they had a special relationship with God and that He would protect them and save the Temple.** After all, and for the Jews, God actually had His dwelling-place within the Temple, in the “Holy of Holies” where the ark of the covenant was placed and into which no one was permitted to enter except the High Priest, just once a year.

Just forty years later, the Babylonian empire, itself, was conquered by the Persians under their king, Cyrus the Great. And in 538 B.C he issued an edict which permitted the exiles from Judah to start returning to their homeland. Not everyone who had been in captivity in Babylon returned, but most did.



What faced the returned exiles?

What faced the returned exiles was heart-breaking ruin and devastation. Their principal focus, on returning, was to be the re-building of the Temple. They made a start, but several things caused the re-building to stall. One was the failure of the early crops they planted. Another was the way people prioritized the re-building of their own homes. Then there was resistance from non-Jews (Nehemiah 4:1-5). And in the midst of all this was their discouragement at **how big a task re-building the Temple would be.**

In response, the Lord chastised them. “Consider your ways”, He said. “Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified’, says the LORD. ‘You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and



The re-built Temple

Despite these things, and notwithstanding a time of inaction, the re-built Temple was completed in 516 B.C., twenty-two years after the return from the exile. But it was a shadow of what the former Temple, built by king Solomon, had been. And the LORD acknowledged this to be so through Haggai the prophet. “Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory?” (He asked). “And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing?.....**The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former**, says the LORD of hosts, and in this place I will give peace, says the Lord of hosts.” (Chapter 2:4 & 9)

This is a puzzling promise because the glory of the re-built temple, externally, was never greater than the former.



Rebuilding, restoration and a new beginning

It is not just on **an external, natural, worldly level** that catastrophes happen; that what has been precious is lost to us; and that the challenge of rebuilding what has been reduced to ruins arises.

Like a kernel within a nut **there is food for our mind and soul** here in this story of the destruction of the first temple and the building of the second temple. As it is, and needs to be, with all of the histories, stories, prophecies, inter-actions of people, miracles and parables in the Bible, we need to ask, “What is within this story that is relevant to our lives today?”

The temple means the church, both collectively and individually.

Collectively, and over the course of the untold centuries of the history of the human race, the Church has been reduced to ruin, and this has been **followed by restoration and a new beginning.**



By the time of the Lord's coming on earth the Jewish Church had without question been reduced to ruins. We know this from what He – Jesus – said. There will have been exceptions, but the great majority of the leaders of the Jewish Church had become **obsessed with power and prestige**. And it was because they saw in Jesus a threat to their power and prestige that they resolved from the early months of His ministry to bring Him into disrepute and, finally, to have Him killed. They mocked His power and tried to persuade the people that His power – such as could not be denied – came from Beelzebub, the prince of the demons.” (Matthew 12:24). And they were successful in turning an adoring crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, into a howling mob, clamoring for



It gives us much to think about that those people - the scribes and Pharisees - who so manipulated the people were the very people who knew the Old Testament best of all and **should, therefore, have been able to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah.** But they failed to do so.

The teaching in the Doctrines of the New Church is that all what was done to Jesus was an acting out - or “a representation” - of what had been done to Divine Truth by the leaders of the Jewish Church. **Divine Truth had been mistreated** to the point that finally, and externally, there was no life left within it. This marked **the end of the Jewish Church as the all-important connection between heaven and earth; between angels and people on earth.**

Quoting from what Swedenborg wrote: “By the house of God (the temple) is meant the Church. By the former temple is meant the Church which was before the Lord’s Coming (**the Jewish Church**). By the latter temple is meant the Church after His coming (**the Christian Church**). And by the glory of the latter house is meant **the Divine truth, renewed and made more powerful to guide people to heavenly life.** (See “Apocalypse Explained”



The same thing happened again with regard to the Christian Church, as it once was. It is not disputed by anyone that **into the 1500's the Christian Church had descended into self-aggrandizement and love of worldly power.** This is what triggered the Protestant reformation, one of the central features of which was that the Bible was restored to people, to read and think about what they read, themselves. Over the centuries beforehand it had become a totally closed book which only priests had access to.

And so, with the Word set free once more, the foundations were laid for the dawning of a new Christianity. It was one step **at a time. First the Word made available to people again and then the revelation of its relevance and spiritual meaning given in the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.**



And this revelation, so focused as it is on **the uniqueness of the Word**, bringing home to us the treasure house of spiritual riches and guidance that it is, is **so important**. Otherwise the Word is vulnerable, first, to the evidence of **science** which, even to this day, shakes and unsettles people's confidence in it;

Secondly, the Word is vulnerable to the widespread scepticism of people when it comes to believing **miracles**;

Thirdly, the Word is, in its literal, outer sense, is vulnerable to **the apparent irrelevance** of much we find there, mainly in the Old Testament;

And,

fourthly, by an increasing unwillingness to **accept objective truth** as compared to subjective truth.



The Word is always central when it comes to the effectiveness of churches.

In the Jewish Church the Word was overlaid by man-made interpretations and rules, such as the washing of hands, which Jesus took issue about. (Matthew 15:20). There are, as He said, **so much more important issues to focus on**. In the Christian Church, which followed, people's access to the Word was denied, even to the point of attracting execution if this rule was broken. It was this which finally caused the ruin of that old style Christianity.



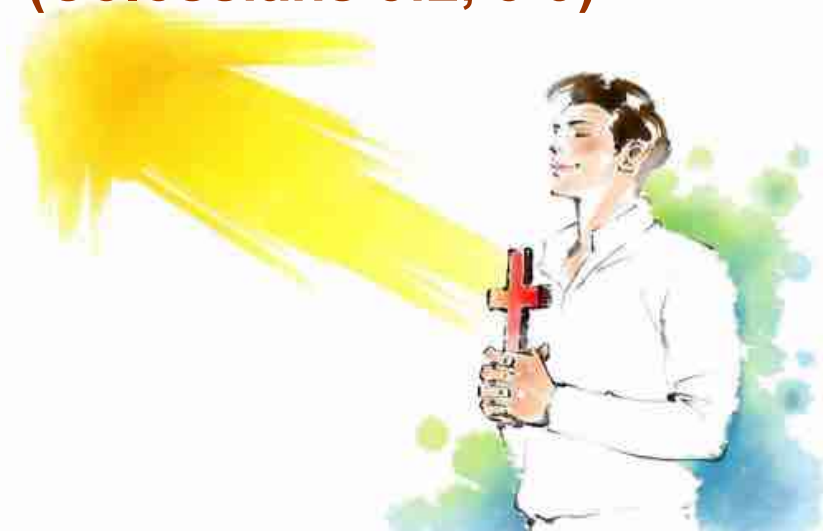
You are the temple of God

You will remember for sure, that the apostle Paul famously wrote, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17)

The apostle wasn't, however, talking about we as people. What is clear is that he had in mind **our love for the Lord and commitment to what is good and true and just and fair. Just think of the time he urged us to be rid of the opposites of these things to make room for what is of God to become established in our hearts and minds.**



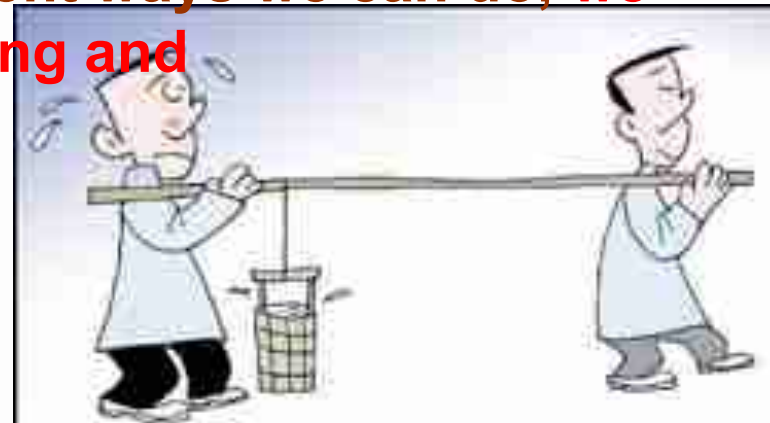
“Set your mind on thing above”, he wrote, “not on things of the earth....Therefore put to death your members which are of the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you also once walked when you lived in them. But now you must put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.” (Colossians 3:2, 5-9)



Reduced to ruins

None of us continually and consistently lives up to our high Christian ideals. Again, it was the apostle Paul who held up to us the reality that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

The temple within us, which looks so good one day can come crashing down the next. It may be that we say, or do, something which up to this point we never thought ourselves capable of doing. It is like the Babylonian army comes sweeping in, ransacks Jerusalem and reduces the temple to rubble. It could be that we lash out unkindly at another person or that, in the thousand different ways we can do, **we give in to what is self-serving and from the lower part of our natures.**



At this point, and having given in to Babylon – or, as is meant – **having been swept away by assertive love of self** – we go into exile and soon start grieving what we have lost. In our thoughts we turn back to what we once had, the peace of mind, the good relationship we had with someone we have deeply offended and the sharing we once enjoyed. This state is captured in the haunting words of Psalm 137, the first few verses of which read, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song. And those who plundered us required of us mirth., saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ ” (verses 1-3)



The truth is **we are never happy in those times of exile and cannot be.** We feel full of regret, wish we had waited before we spoke, or had applied the Golden Rule, to do unto others what we would have them do to us. (Matthew 7:12)



Rebuilding and a new beginning

The connection we have with God, meant by the temple, though this connection is laid waste by an invasion of “the Babylonians”, (for example, our total impatience with someone) can be rebuilt. In all likelihood **it can seem a daunting task**. As well, we are easily discouraged and voices whisper to us trying to block us in our rebuilding of that relationship. We need never doubt this and it is one of the main reasons why this story from centuries ago is included in the Bible.

The Lord always wanted this story to be a message of encouragement to you and me and to people everywhere whose foolish, sinful, behaviour, brings the temple crashing down. It will require repentance, prayer and a new self-discipline. But it can be



And this is what is remarkable. There are two promises which the Lord makes to us here:

Firstly, **that the glory of the rebuilt temple will be greater than the former temple.**

Sin, followed by genuine repentance, **teaches us things about ourselves** we might not otherwise acknowledge. Hopefully a new humility grows in us, knowing now what we are capable of.

As well, the aftermath of sin brings home to us **how important our connection with the Lord is** and how bereft and in exile we feel when that connection has been broken. And, in time, we experience the assurance of His forgiveness. It is not that the rebuilt temple is more glorious on the outside; but this re-built dwelling place of the Lord is emphatically more glorious on the inside.



Secondly, the Lord promises us that “in this place”; in the rebuilt temple; He will give us peace. It will be **a new sense of peace**. It will be the peace that comes from the inclinations of our old self resisted and overcome. It will be the peace that comes of **evil spirits (the devil) no longer able to cause us mischief** and put a wedge between us and the Lord and those around us.

Conclusion

We should never see ourselves as stuck with episodes of sin we have committed in the past or allow ourselves to be defined by those sins. This is what evil spirits – the devil – want us to feel, that we are a bad, shameful, person. It is a really helpful teaching of the New Church, **that evil spirits enjoy awakening old memories we would much rather forget**. At times, even, it can be one of the worst types



In the New Church we worship the Lord Who is the God of **new beginnings**. And I commend to you the encouragement of this following teaching given in the Doctrines of the New Church:

“Every smallest fraction of a person’s life entails a chain of consequences extending to eternity. Indeed everyone is like a new beginning to those that follow, and so every single moment of the life of a person’s understanding and will is a new beginning.” (“Arcana Coelestia” 3854:3).

In His amazing work with us **the Lord is always focused on new beginnings**. The past holds no interest for Him. As you and I reflect on situations that have arisen and which we wish we had handled differently or not said or done, the last thing the Lord wants us to do is to **wallow in shame and regret**. Rather, His intense endeavour is to get us to make a new beginning. We need to repent, of course, and having asked the Lord for



And another teaching from the Doctrines of the New Church reads: “As the Lord changed completely His human state into a Divine one, so does the Lord, when He is regenerating us, **changes our old self with a new self**”. (Arcana Caelestia 3296).

Instead of the old Temple, a new Temple replaces it into which the Lord is so much more able to enter, **bringing splendour to our lives and peace in our hearts.**

Amen



Readings :

Haggai Chapter 2:verses 1-9

John Chapter 2: verses 13 to 22



Arcamna Caelestia 3212:3

“When a person is being regenerated he (or she) becomes completely different from before and is made new. Once he has been regenerated therefore he is called one who has been born again and created anew. At that point a person’s face and speech remain the same, but not so his mind. **Once he is regenerate his mind is opened towards heaven, and love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbour, together with faith, reside in it. It is his mind that makes him a person who is different and new. Change of state cannot be discerned in a person’s body, only in his spirit. The body is merely the covering for his spirit. When he lays aside the body **his spirit is seen, and in a form altogether different** if he has been regenerated. In this case it is visible form of love and charity that possesses beauty beyond description.”**



THE END

