

The Purpose and Value of Life in This World

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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Throughout the literal sense of the Word we find dramatic examples of people seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling certain things, or doing things in such a way that they would be seen, heard, felt, tasted or smelled. Of course every one of these incidents has an important spiritual meaning, or spiritual sense. Seeing, for example, corresponds to understanding, and hearing to obedience. But the power of the natural senses, and so the importance of the natural life in general, is also a critical feature of these stories.

Our topic today is that natural life: why our sensory experience in this world is so important as a foundation for our spiritual lives, why we should value and appreciate it, and how we can take full advantage of it in appropriate ways even when things may seem bleak or threatening.

The lessons in 1 Kings 3 and Matthew 6 are similar in that they stress and illustrate the principle that when we turn to the Lord first of all and ask Him for heavenly things He also provides for us on the material plane – maybe not everything we *want*, but everything we *need* to live a heavenly life *even in this world*. Our third lesson, then, gives us some preliminary ideas about why we have to be born into this world in the first place, rather than just being born into heaven – thus why angels were *not* created as a race separate from the human race, but all began life as we do on earth.

To summarize and condense a LOT of information, it goes like this: in creating life, or rather forms of life, God always acts from the highest, most refined principles of love and wisdom directly down into the lowest, most inert physical substances so that what He creates can exist in a fixed, stable form having a unique identity defined by time and space. We might compare this to our own creations, which begin as abstract wishes or ideas which are then expressed in some physical embodiment, like a shoe or a pencil or a refrigerator. But once these things have been created they can then take on a life of their own, or at any rate they can be *used* in a variety of ways.

So with human life the Lord creates the material “stuff” out of which our bodies and brains can be built, and He provides the genetic code to bring it all together into the human form, but once all that is done He then gives us the faculties of will and understanding so that we can act as if of ourselves, making decisions that determine what KIND of person we will be, and specifically how we will respond to HIM. But here’s the thing: just as our bodies are made of material stuff so our minds require a material environment within which to operate. Without confronting the hard, fixed, limited physical world outside of ourselves we would never have to make any choices or face any consequences and we would never grow or change. In fact we would never develop the unique personality that sets us apart from other people; in a way we would all just be extensions of the Lord’s own love and wisdom.

But when we DO confront the hard, fixed, limited physical world outside of ourselves, each one of us from a different perspective, the organic substances of our minds are affected in such a way that unique memories are formed, and these memories, like habits, become a permanent part of us, defining us, differentiating us from others, and establishing a plane of consciousness that will serve us forever in the life after death. Of course those memories, that foundation, once laid can never be changed, so the life after death simply continues based on the decisions we make here.

For example, in our own lives we face daily choices, every one of which has visible and invisible consequences that can play out to all eternity. What books we read, what films we watch, what music or conversations we listen to: all these impressions (and that's exactly what they are, impressions) are stored away in our memory banks, whether we realize it or not, and they all enter with some affection, either good or bad, so that they contribute to our character. In addition, what we say or do, either by ourselves or in the company of others, also *creates* impressions that we carry with us forever, even if we are not consciously aware of them. Of course we can't control the affection or feelings with which *other* people receive our words and actions, but a little rational thought and our own experience can be pretty good predictors.

In what we call the ancient church thousands of years ago people therefore took great care to try to evaluate the states of those around them – not to judge them as in any way inferior, but to identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to be useful to them. In a pejorative sense today we would call this “labeling,” bias or discrimination. But to those people it was part of the process of being supportive. We do the same thing today when we provide “handicapped access” or “affirmative action” legislation for specific minorities. The point is, if we can see where a person or group has some specific need and we can accommodate or provide for that need, then we all benefit, because they get a good experience from us, and we get a good experience for ourselves by helping. These actions build the foundation for eternal life.

We have to be careful, though, because most people don't like to be told what to do, and contrary to the appearance at times, most people don't like to be dependent on others. Furthermore life is not primarily about the blessings of this world; the blessings of this world are intended to provide for *eternal life*. So when we think of helping ourselves and others have a good experience of life we need to learn to think as the people of the ancient church did, and use the time and resources we have been given to enhance the qualities of love and wisdom among us, not just the qualities of physical health, food, clothing and shelter.

That said, one of the things that we gain through our lives in this world is perspective. As mentioned earlier, we learn to prioritize. And the longer we live, the more hours of experience we log, so to speak, the more refined that perspective can get. Anyone facing a personal crisis one day – whether self-inflicted or imposed by others – might not have the faintest idea that a resolution of that crisis is right around the corner in the form of something new and unexpected, typically provided by another human being whose loves and talents have been cultivated without any special awareness that this is the person to be helped. We need time to get this. But as time goes by, over many years, we can appreciate more and more how every natural experience prepares us in some way for greater understanding, greater enlightenment, and greater fulfillment.

An illustration of this from a book called “The Rational Optimist” is how just about every prediction of doom and gloom for this planet over the last several hundred years, from the overpopulation crisis to the food and energy resource threat and global warming has been met – unexpectedly – by new scientific discoveries that have extended the viability of life as we know it despite the exponential growth of the population. One can quibble over the details but the fact is that we produce so much *more* food and energy than we need right now that the glut has actually forced prices down, and the only reason for deprivation anywhere in these matters is political.

In other technical fields the refinements of applied science, including miniaturization and the ability to do more with less are illustrated by the hand-held devices just about everyone carries around these days, each one of which has more computing power than the original Eniac ma-

chine that filled a whole room just 70 years ago. Again, in an interview that aired on PBS a few weeks ago an immigrant professor at the Stanford School of Medicine explained how he has developed a functional microscope that is made primarily of folded *paper* and that will sell for less than ONE DOLLAR, enabling people even in the poorest and most remote areas of the planet to analyze and treat horrible diseases right there in the field.

What's the point? Well, obviously the planet itself is not producing new elements, but *people* are discovering new ways to employ them, and with the increase of the population there is a corresponding increase in the number of creative minds applying themselves to our problems. It is exactly the same in spiritual things: the more people there are using the resources of this world to apply the principles of love and wisdom, the better prepared we will be for eternal life. Just so, the more time we have to practice these things the more confirmed and effective we will be – which is why human longevity continues to be extended in this world, and why heaven itself is never full or complete but always expanding.

Each person who contributes in any way to the welfare of the human race benefits from the feeling of usefulness and purpose that enriches his or her spirit, and anyone who actually gets help in some tangible, appreciable way can enjoy the blessings of spiritual life in the thought and affection embodied in it. So both givers and receivers build up reservoirs of experience in this world that fix and establish their trajectories forever.

But now, let's consider some of the hard cases that sometimes make all of us wonder about the value of this worldly life. As you know, there are people with profound disabilities often found in nursing homes or special care facilities. There are convicted felons who will spend the rest of their earthly days in frightening prisons. There are people who have been horribly abused – not to mention those who hurt *themselves* by being abusive! And so there are people who suffer from acute pain, confusion, depression, mental illness or, dare we say it? – plain, old fashioned sin. What is the value and purpose of life on earth for these people?

If we only think materially about these cases we won't get much satisfaction. We might even be inclined to favor euthanasia. But if we think spiritually a new perspective comes into focus.

First of all, we need the experience of life in this world to provide the sensory input that allows each one of us to develop a unique perspective based on a unique set of circumstances. Whether we are rich or poor, healthy or sick, whole or disabled, the sense impressions we take in create a bank of memories that will serve us to all eternity – not that the memories define us, but what we do with them does.

Secondly, as challenging as they are, our disabilities can help us recognize the *spiritual* value of life in the world by limiting and directing our attention to specific challenges and to the people whose love and wisdom can help us deal with them. As for facing disabilities in others, the value for us is to inspire understanding, compassion and material consideration, which often means spending time or money unselfishly, a choice and a discipline we all need to learn.

Something similar applies when we suffer from abuse, persecution, crime, sickness, deprivation, and so on – not to make light of *any* of this, but if we have a heart and can let go of our resentment or anger about it we can learn to be compassionate toward others who have suffered similar things, and even to become advocates for them in the public forum. In the end no one is as effec-

tive at helping someone in distress as another person who has suffered a similar thing and come through it. So we can USE our bad experiences to help others overcome theirs.

In the case of people who have done terrible things (and who of us hasn't, if only inwardly?), the purpose and value of life in this world is obviously for amendment, i.e., reformation and regeneration, before it's too late. While it's true that a person who dies prematurely, whether by accident or execution, surely will have his or her freedom restored in the spiritual world so that a proper choice can be made between heaven and hell, that tragic death still curtails the benefits to be gained by living a new, better life in this world, gaining new natural knowledge and experience with a new attitude that could enhance the spiritual life forever.

Our doctrines do say that capital punishment is necessary, in that fear of the loss of life is one factor that can help to maintain order in the world. But that fear doesn't really effect reform, and execution certainly doesn't, it just keeps the prudent or the timid under control. As for suicide being a way to end misery of any kind, that is just a cruel hoax perpetrated by evil spirits, since the same misery that prompted the act will still be present in the person's mind on waking up in the spiritual world and will have to be dealt with there just as if the person were still here, but without the benefit of new sensory experiences to confirm and consolidate the change. Besides, death by suicide can bring untold grief to whole families and communities, so it really is inspired by ruthless and sadistic spirits.

We began this morning with a short summary of how the Lord operates – from first principles *THROUGH* what we call “ultimates,” i.e., the physical elements of the earth, *TO* intermediates, namely the human minds that are invested with the freedom and rationality to be conjoined with Him in eternal life. Then we spent some time reflecting on the importance of sensory experience in building the foundation for eternal life – unique, individual human life drawn from unique, individual earthly experiences. Now in conclusion some of you may be wondering about all the little children in this world who die without the benefit of long years of sensory experience.

Well, you know, the Lord is merciful. We are cruel, but He is merciful. The Writings tell us that little children who die make up a full third of all those who now enter heaven. Why? – because they have not yet had the opportunity to confirm themselves in any real evil. Still, lacking the experience others gain by a longer life they have not really confirmed themselves in good, either, so they have a kind of innocence about them that depends much more on others for knowledge, insight and wisdom than would be the case otherwise. Of course they are happy and they feel perfectly free, but that's because they're not so invested in themselves as others are, and they're quite content to be led by others. But the Lord's gift of life is intended to be received as if it were our own so that we can feel His blessings as outcomes of our own decisions. So premature death, however you define it, has to be seen as something permitted, and certainly not ideal.

In summary, life in this world, whether pleasant or troubled, can be described in one word, and that word is opportunity. Naturally, materially, we are often bound and limited, but spiritually everything we experience can be used for our benefit. Let us use it wisely, and support one another to the best of our ability as we do.

Amen.