

Abundance and Famine, Part 2: Persevere

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

24 November, 2024

Children's Talk: Rising from the Water

Today we are going to see a baptism. I will ask some people a few questions, and then I will put water on their heads. The questions I ask will be about the most important parts of being a Christian, according to the New Church. The questions are basically: Do you believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ? Do you believe that you can learn about the Lord from the Word and the Teachings of the New Church? Do you agree to do what the Lord tells you to do? Those are some good and important questions for all of us to think about!

But why will I put water on them afterwards? Water has always been used in baptism. Here is a description of the Lord, and notice what happens right after He was baptized:

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
(Matthew 3:16-17)

Jesus went down into the water, and actually all the way under the water, to be baptized; and then, of course, He came up out of the water.

Water is good for us. What are some of the good things we can do with water? We can drink it, bathe, wash dishes, clean the house, water the garden, swim, play in it. Water can also be dangerous. What makes water dangerous? There can be floods, it can be too deep for us to stand in, especially if you don't know how to swim. If someone goes too deeply into the water, a lifeguard will jump in to pull them up and out of the water.

The same thing happens if we are having a hard time with life. Define overwhelming. The Lord reaches out to save us; He pulls us up and out of those dark, hard things that we are scared of and hurt by.

So that's why we use water in baptism: it's a reminder that life is sometimes really hard and overwhelming, but the Lord can lift us up and save us from all that.

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27 August, 2024

Last week we talked about preparing for the hard times or temptations that are coming our way. When times are good and we really feel and know the Lord's blessings, we can intentionally hold onto those things, so that we can fall back on them when we no longer feel and know the Lord's blessings at all. What won't work though is if we think that by focusing on all the good things the Lord has given us we can somehow avoid the hard times. No amount of preparation can do that. So this week we are going to look at how we can endure when life seems bleak and impossibly challenging.

Offenses Must Come

As we look at the story of Joseph we see that indeed, the preparation that the Egyptians did of storing up grain during the time of abundance did not stave off the coming famine; nor did it prevent them from feeling the harsh effects of the famine:

Then the seven years of plenty which were in the land of Egypt ended, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. The famine was in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do." The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands. (Genesis 41:53-57)

We might think that because of their preparation, they wouldn't even notice there was a famine on; that they might just carry on as usual, consuming what had been stored up. But that is not the case. They felt the hunger; their preparation did not stop them from noticing the effects of the famine. It seems almost unfair that even seven years of preparation could not change that.

We feel, I imagine, a similar sense of unfairness when we do everything right, and yet still face hard times. Think back to what we talked about last week: you've consciously focused on what is good about your life, you've remembered your blessings, you've taken the time to appreciate and express gratitude for them, you've done your best to live in integrity based on what you know to be right, and done what you can to show love and charity to others, you've put effort into building up good relationships and community, you've consistently developed spiritual habits like reading the Word, praying to the Lord, going to Church, reflecting on your spiritual life, and so on.

And yet one day you find that none of that was enough. Somehow, you can still end up in a pretty hard, dark place. There are several ways this happens. One is that circumstances conspire against us. A tragedy occurs. Someone hurts us deeply. We make mistakes that break a relationship. We come down with health issues. We end up in financial distress. On the other hand, there may be nothing that has gone wrong outwardly. We suddenly become beset with doubts for no apparent reason. Our self-esteem implodes. We are tortured by guilt or shame although we have done nothing wrong. We cringe at our own incompetence. Life takes on a bleak or hopeless tinge. Regardless of whether the struggle and hardship come from outward circumstances or from within ourselves, the real struggle always has to do with our inner, spiritual lives and our relationship with the Lord. This is where what are called temptations take place. Although we use the word "temptation" narrowly in English, to refer just to times when we are enticed to do something we know we shouldn't, the word is much more broad than that, covering every spiritual struggle we face, whether we are being enticed to act a certain way or not.

It's worth thinking about what these experiences are like. One of the defining features that the Teachings of the New Church identify is that they involve doubt, especially doubt over something that we love dearly, and that when taken to an extreme that doubt becomes despair. Have you had times like these in your life? Have you seen others go through them? Are you maybe going through one right now?

Why God Permits It

Why would a loving God even allow us to go through such harsh challenges? There's a reason that they are inevitable, and actually all the more inevitable if we are to grow and be saved from selfishness and sin.

But be it known that without temptation no one is regenerated, and that many temptations follow on, one after another. The reason is that regeneration takes place to the end that the life of the old man may die, and the new heavenly life be insinuated, which shows that there must needs be a fight, for the life of the old man resists, and is not willing to be extinguished, and the life of the new man cannot enter except where the life of the old man has been extinguished. Hence it is evident that there is a fight on both sides, and this fight is a fiery one, because it is for life. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8403)

What we experience as these intense struggles, as these times of doubt and despair, is actually a battle taking place over our soul. Hell stirs up every false belief you have thought and every evil deed you have ever done, and attempts to tear you down to nothing. And yet at the same time the Lord and His angels fight to defend you from within, using all the true ideas you have ever been exposed to and every experience of love and goodness that you have ever had (*Secrets of Heaven* §5036). Without that struggle taking place, we would be stuck with our old selves, our selfishness and evil. And so temptations are an inevitable and useful part of spiritual growth.

A crucial note on where spiritual struggle, or temptations, come from: they are inevitable, and they are a necessary part of the Lord saving us from evil and hell, and so the Lord does use them for a good purpose; but the Lord does *not* lead us into temptation. The source is hell, not the Lord. As Jesus said, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!" (Luke 17:1).

Persevering through the Famine

Although offenses must come, the Lord prepares us to persevere through them. The Egyptians felt the harsh effects of the famine, it's true, in spite of their preparation; but because of that preparation, they could survive and endure through those seven years. It's interesting that although there was grain stored up, they still had to put in effort to access it; in fact, they had to buy it from Joseph. They bought it first with money; when that ran out, with their livestock; and at last when that ran out with their own bodies, as servants to the pharaoh, and their land. It may seem harsh to have sold food at such a high price to people who were starving; but spiritually it represents that we need to put in our own effort to make the Lord's goodness our own. It won't work to just sit back and wait for the Lord to fix things.

The effort we put in will have a lot to do with that preparation we talked about last week. As we look at these, we have to remember that for the most part, they won't make the problem go away or fix all the issues. Many struggles have to run their course. What these do is allow us to persevere and to endure. So what are the specific tangible things that we can do?

- Remember what is good about life: go back to look at the things you wrote down about what was good, about what you like about yourself or that you value in other people. Those things are still true.

- Keep living according to what you know to be right: if you have established firm habits of honesty, integrity, kindness, and love, keep going through the motions. You cared enough once to establish the habits; it's worth sticking to them even if you forget the point.
- Rely on relationships: When struggling, for some people, all they want to do is get away from people. Lean into those relationships! Fight to keep in contact with the people and the communities that matter.
- Continue your spiritual habits: read the Word, pray, attend church, reflect on spiritual things, be part of a church community. Prayer and church do not make the problems go away; they help you to endure, to just keep going for a little longer.

A lot has to do with surviving, enduring, doing the best you can, riding it out, relying on the Lord, and going back to Him again, and again, and again. In the moment, many of these activities won't feel like they make any difference at all, but that does not mean they aren't working. In time, when you have come through and are able to look back, you may see the difference they have made.

What Comes After

In time, we will come out the other side, and when we do we might wonder what has changed. Bearing in mind, as before mentioned, that the Lord does not cause temptations, we also learn in the Teachings of the New Church that the Lord brings some good out of all situations, including evil ones. There will be some good that remains with us, and it is worth consciously noticing that good. It may not be enough to make the challenges feel that they were worth it, or compensate for the pain of the evil done to us; but they may make it easier to believe that our endurance

and perseverance were worth it, that in the end it was good that we carried on as best we could and did not give up.

One way to get at the good that can come though temptations is to ask yourself, “How am I a different person?”

- New perspectives on the world, others, yourself
- More confirmed in who you want to be
- Greater love, understanding, and empathy for others
- Greater reliance on the Lord

But the last thing I want to mention is not so much something that is different about you, but about life. During temptations the Lord may seem absent; or even non-existent. There is no hope. And yet although that is the feeling within temptation, there is the promise that following temptations there will be comfort. It is this hope of comfort and relief that we will end on.

As long as temptation lasts, a person assumes that the Lord is not present, for he is being harassed by evil genii, so harassed in fact that sometimes he has so great a feeling of hopelessness as scarcely to believe in the existence of any God at all. Yet at such times the Lord is more present than that person can possibly believe. But once temptation subsides he receives comfort, and for the first time believes that the Lord is present. (*Secrets of Heaven* §840)