



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Answers and Questions

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Readings

Jeremiah 6:13-17

*For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.*

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.*

*They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush.*

*Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the Lord.*

*Thus says the Lord:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.*

*But they said, "We will not walk in it."
Also I raised up sentinels for you:
"Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!"
But they said, "We will not give heed."¹*

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Luke 11:5-13

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!²

² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* §280

“Since innocence is being led by the Lord and not by ourselves, all the people who are in heaven are in innocence, since all the people who are there love to be led by the Lord, they know that to be led by oneself is to be led by one’s self-centeredness, and self-centeredness is loving oneself. People who are in love with themselves are not willing to be led by anyone else.

This is why angels are in heaven to the extent that they are in innocence; that is, to the extent that they are absorbed in divine good and divine truth, for being absorbed in these is being in heaven. Consequently, the heavens are differentiated according to their innocence. People who are in the outmost or first heaven are in innocence of the first or outmost level. People who are in the intermediate or second heaven are in innocence of the second or intermediate level. People who are in the inmost or third heaven, though, are in innocence of the third or inmost level; so they are the very innocent of heaven, since they above all others want to be led by the Lord the way infants are led by their father.

This is why they accept divine truth directly into their intent and do it, making it a matter of life, whether they receive it directly from the Lord or indirectly through the Word and sermons. This is why they have so much more wisdom than angels of the lower heavens. Because this is the nature of these angels, they are closest to the Lord, who is the source of their innocence, and they are also distanced from their self-centeredness so much that they seem to live in the Lord.

In outward form they look simple—even like infants or little children in the eyes of angels of the lower heavens. They look like people who do not know very much, even though they are the wisest of angels. They are in fact aware that they have no trace of wisdom on their own and that to be wise is to admit this and to admit that what they do know is nothing compared to what they do not know. Knowing, recognizing, and perceiving this is what they call the first step toward wisdom.”³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Trans. George F. Dole. New Century Edition. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010. Print.

If we could interview all the people who have accepted the teachings of our church and ask them what prompted that acceptance, I suspect that one of the commonest responses would be something like "They answered my questions." The first goal of the Lord's providence, we are told, is that we should act in freedom according to reason (Divine Providence 71ff.); and while it is clear that our reason can mislead us if we want it to, it is an ability we are given by the Lord for use. To use Jeremiah's image, if we use our reason to ask where the good way is so that we can walk in it, we will find rest for our souls.

Sometimes, though, our human nature leads us to look for shortcuts, and we skip from the first part of the process to the end without really taking the middle part seriously. That is, rather than using our reason to ask where the good way is so that we can walk in it, we ask our reason where we can find rest. We want to find answers that will relieve us of the task of asking more questions; and if we manage to convince ourselves that we have succeeded, that we "have all the answers," then we stop walking. After all, why should we move? We have arrived.

People who share this kind of faith tend to gather in groups or churches that are closely-knit and that look on the "outside world" with suspicion. It is hard to maintain the belief that I have all the answers if no one else in the world agrees with me, so I have a profound need of a supportive community. I have a particular need for the approval of people I respect, so I welcome a relatively authoritarian structure—a catechism that I can learn, for example, and a clergy that will assure me that I am right if I believe what that catechism says.

Further, the conviction that "we are right" is virtually inseparable from the conviction that "they are wrong." If we were to ask an angel, "Do you have all the answers?", I have no doubt what the answer would be. We are assured time and time again that angelic wisdom far exceeds our own, but that is not the point. The point is that the more we learn, the more clearly we see how much more there is to learn. The best answers to our questions are not the ones that close off further inquiry but the ones that open new doors for us. The very essence of angelic wisdom is the realization that "what they do know is nothing compared to what they do not know" (Heaven and Hell 280).

This is not as arcane or unlikely a principle as it might at first seem. I gather, for example, that around the beginning of the twentieth century college students were being advised not to go into the field of chemistry because there was nothing new to be discovered in it. All the answers had been found. The image was of a field in which there was a finite number of facts to be mastered, and that once that mastery was attained, that was it. In retrospect, this opinion looks just as arrogant and absurd as it actually is.

Its theological equivalent is even more arrogant and absurd, because the "field" of theology is far more vast than the field of chemistry. Ultimately, that is, we might say that the subject of theology is the divine mind, which includes absolutely everything there is or was or ever will be. There have actually been quite a few people over the centuries who believe that they have had experiences of the divine mind, and their reports are very much alike. First of all, that mind is beautiful beyond all comparison, and second, they cannot retain any of it in their own normal consciousness. They were taken completely out of themselves, so to speak, and when they returned to themselves, they returned to their own limitations. They wound up quite sure that all the answers are there, and equally sure that they did not have access to them. The heart of the matter, the reason for this "wisdom of not knowing," may be found in §787 of *True Christianity*:

"The reason this new church is the crown of all the churches that have ever existed on earth is that it will worship one visible God in whom dwells the invisible God, as the soul dwells in the body." ⁴

We can see the visible God, the Lord incarnate. We cannot see the invisible God. The ratio between them is like the ratio between the soul and the body. To claim that we "know God" is a little like saying that we know people because we have examined their medical histories or their CAT scans. We learn some things and may deduce others, but the essential person remains a mystery to us.

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Trans. Jonathan S. (Jonathan Searle) Rose. New Century Edition ed. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010. Print.

The visible God, though, the glorified Christ, is the self-disclosure of the incomprehensible Divinity. It is infinite Deity reduced to our scale, infinite wisdom speaking our clumsy language. This disclosure, this adjustment, is made with infinite care and concern for our own freedom and rationality as well. We are in process, capable of understanding more today than we could grasp yesterday, and looking forward to understanding still more tomorrow. We might well say that the Lord deals with us on a "need to know" basis, making sure that we have available the light we need for the steps we can actually take. Divine Providence 60 says it very nicely:

". . . no one can become an angel or get to heaven unless he or she comes bringing along some angelic quality from the world. Inherent in that angelic quality is a knowing of the path from having walked it and a walking in the path from the knowing of it."⁵

The knowing and the path are inseparable. If we would learn, we must do more than read. We are to "Stand at the crossroads and look." This means that we must ask our questions when we are faced with decisions. We are to learn not for the sake of learning alone, not for the sake of knowing more than other people, but for the sake of finding our way. Ultimately, the most important question about any theological principle is "How do I do it?" How does our teaching about the Second Coming affect the way I treat other people, or for that matter, how I treat myself?" If it makes no difference, it is a bit of intellectual property lying idle, some mental coinage buried in the field.

To stay with this particular teaching for a moment, it can make a difference. If we believe in the new freedom of thought associated with the Second Coming, if we believe that the judgment occurs by having the things that are hidden become manifest, then we are not especially concerned to keep up superficial appearances. We appreciate candor, and treat it gently. We want to be understood, and welcome the insights into ourselves that others can offer. Our lives are not lived under the cloud of apocalyptic fear but in the light of trust in the Lord's providence. We have a sense that our own decisions really matter, a sense that leaves no room for fatalism.

⁵ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. Trans. George F. Dole. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2003. Print.

All these effects and others may follow from a belief in the Second Coming, but they do not follow necessarily. They follow only if we let the light of the teaching illumine our path, only if we "ask where the good way is." To ask where the way is is to recognize that we have not arrived. We have still a way to go, and we do not know what lies ahead. In fact, the way ahead leads on into eternity, which ought to give us some notion of the extent of our ignorance.

It is not still enough to stand at the crossroads and ask where the good way is. Unless we "walk in it," our view does not change very much. We may for the first time see clearly all the way to the next corner, but we cannot see around the corner. I am reminded of my favorite climb in the White Mountains, Mount Webster. About two-thirds of the way up, you get a glimpse of Crawford Notch to the immediate west and a little of the distant lower country to the south.. From then on, you keep dipping back into the trees and reemerging, each time with a larger view. Eventually you reach the summit and can see to the horizon in all directions. You can read about all this in the White Mountain Guide Book, but you cannot see it unless you walk the path.

Our text is not just a series of commands, though, It ends with a promise: "you will find rest for your souls." This rest, we may be sure, is not idleness. That soon turns to boredom, and eventually to a feeling of uselessness and depression. The rest we need is rest from fear and strife. It is the dynamic balance of walking rather than the static balance of standing still. It occurs to me that the whole reason for rocking chairs is that sitting absolutely still is burdensome. Even when our physical energies are low, it feels good to have a little motion.

The rest we need is essentially the assurance that we are in the Lord's care. It is the trust that in spite of the immense range of our ignorance, we do know what we need to know.

Amen.