

UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE
A Sermon by Rev. Coleman S. Glenn
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“Unless Jehovah builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless Jehovah guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” (Psalm 127:1)

Has your life gone according to plan? Your first response to that question might be to laugh or groan and say, “Absolutely not.” No matter where you are in life, it’s unlikely that everything has turned out precisely as you envisioned it so far. But if you think about it objectively, it’s probably also not true that life has *never* gone according to plan. We all have the experience of setting goals, working to achieve those goals, and finding some measure of success. In fact, this is essential to the Lord’s goal for us as human beings. If we are to be truly free, we need to have confidence that actions will have predictable consequences, that we do have some power to shape the world around us and to shape our own lives. The Lord has made us so that we have freedom and reason, and according to the book *Divine Providence*, the primary delight of reason is to foresee in one’s mind a future effect. We read, “This is the source of what is called Hope, which increases and decreases in the reason as the person sees or anticipates the event” (*Divine Providence* 178). If no plans ever succeeded, we would be without hope.

But this reality – the reality that actions have predictable outcomes which let us carry out our plan – this leads to the appearance that we are the directors of our own lives, that I alone am responsible for every one of my own failures and successes. If we buy into this appearance, we end up either despairing of the possibility that we might be saved – since we see how far we are from perfection – or we end up worshiping ourselves while intentionally looking away from all our faults and failures. It is partly to prevent this that the Lord sometimes allows our plans to fail – not that He wills our failure, but that He sees how we can learn from it.

The story we read from the book of Daniel gives us an extreme example of this. King Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful man in the known world. Judging from the outside, there was seemingly nothing that could take his power away from him. It would have been laughable to suggest that his hold over his kingdom was fragile. In his dream, he saw a tree towering over the earth, giving nourishment to animals and birds. But while he looked, a watcher and holy one came down from heaven and called for the tree to be cut down, with its roots and trunk nevertheless remaining, while his heart was changed from that of a man to that of an animal for seven periods of time. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the dream predicted his own temporary fall. Sure enough, a year later, when the king articulated that mistaken belief in his own power –

saying, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the strength of my security, and for the glory of my honor?” – he immediately lost his senses and began living outdoors, eating grass like an ox, allowing his hair and nails to grow wild. In a split second, with no attack from an enemy, no natural disaster, he lost everything. The illusion that he had an iota of control over his own fate was shattered.

Throughout the Word, Babylon – as well as the tower of Babel, which is the same word in Hebrew as Babylon – represents the desire to rule over everything, even over heaven. It is connected with a desire to be the greatest. The king of Babylon here represents a trap we can fall into – when we realize that we are good at something, we can be seized by a desire to be the *greatest* at that thing. It might begin with something good – you notice you’re particularly effective in one part of your job, or you have a knack for creating beautiful things that other people appreciate. The king’s dream begins with a tree that provides nourishment. But when we are seized by the desire to be the greatest, that good thing becomes an obsession, and we start to care less about how it serves others, and instead we start to pursue it for the sense of greatness it gives us, even if that detracts from our other roles and relationships. We do not let the Lord build the house – we ourselves build a tower of Babel to make a name for ourselves.

When we do this, we set ourselves up for a fall. At some point we realize that no matter how good we are at something, someone else is better than us. Or we realize that we have become so focused on our success at work that we have ignored our families. When that fall comes, it can be devastating, because this kind of building up can go on for years and come to be a core part of our identity. Our instinct when faced with what we have done can be to try to deny it, to protect the thing we have built. But unless the Lord is guarding the city, we guard it ourselves in vain – to keep propping it up only causes further harm. There is still hope – in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the stump of the tree remains, and he can be returned to his position when he has been reduced to sanity. But it takes time.

That is an example of attempting to build the house without the Lord, in circumstances where our own success blinds us to the fact that everything we have is a gift from the Lord. But even when we are not having great success, we can be caught up in the illusion that our success or failure depends entirely on our own efforts. In our story from the New Testament, we read of some fishermen who had spent an entire night toiling without catching any fish. When Jesus told Simon to launch out into the deep to let down his nets, Simon replied that they had labored through the night, taking nothing. The word “labored” there in Greek is the same word that is found in Greek translations of Psalm 127: “unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” Simon and the others had literally been laboring in vain – they had nothing to show for their efforts. His reply to the Lord suggests that he did not see how taking similar

actions at the Lord's command would result in something different from taking those same actions on their own initiative.

But the key here is that despite his skepticism, Simon *did* launch out into the deep again, and when they had let down their nets, they drew in so many fish that the nets began to break and the boats began to sink. An event like this would occur again after the Lord's resurrection. There, the Lord told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. But in this account, the only difference between what they had done all night and what they did now in the day was that now they had the Lord with them, and now they were doing it because the Lord had told them to.

In one version we might imagine, this could be the whole story – fishermen who did not have success when acting on their own became successful fishermen when they did what the Lord told them to. But what actually happened is far more radical. Their success in fishing did not lead them to the conclusion that they should keep fishing with the Lord in mind. Instead, it prepared them so that when the Lord called them to be fishermen of an entirely different kind – fishers of men, teachers who would draw people to the Lord – they were willing to leave their nets, their entire lives, behind and start something completely new and unknown. To let the Lord build the house was, for them, to leave their old houses behind.

In many cases, this is the key difference between building our own houses and letting the Lord build the house. When we build our own houses, we have our own picture of what the outcome will be, and we try to force that outcome to happen, whatever the cost. If that outcome doesn't happen, we become lost and despondent. When we invite the Lord in, we still work toward an outcome that we hope for – but when things inevitably change, we are able to change our vision of what the Lord has planned for us and keep working with Him. We might recall here one of the most beloved passages from the teachings for the New Church, *Arcana Coelestia* 8478, which speaks of those who trust in the Lord:

Although they have care for the morrow, still they do not have it, because they do not think of the morrow with disquiet, still less with anxiety. Unruffled is their spirit whether they obtain the objects of their desire, or not; and they do not grieve over the loss of them, being content with their lot. If they become rich, they do not set their hearts on riches; if they are raised to honors, they do not regard themselves as more worthy than others; if they become poor, they are not made sad; if their circumstances are mean, they are not dejected. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things advance toward a happy state to eternity, and that whatever befalls them in time still leads toward this.

When we let the Lord build the house and guard the city, we can have this attitude, because our hearts are set on doing the Lord's will, not simply on the outcome.

It is worth diving a little more into exactly what is meant by building a house with the Lord. A house is where we dwell, where we live the most intimate scenes of our lives. A house represents what is *good*, where we act from *love*. To attempt to build the house on our own is to let the emotions of a moment determine what is good and what is bad. It is to build on the shifting sands. To let the Lord build the house is to derive our definition of goodness from the Lord's definition of goodness. It does not rely on our ability to perform any particular task. Rather, it relies on our willingness to shun evils as sins, and let the Lord flow into our lives so that every single action we take, no matter how big or how small, can be an opportunity to express the Lord's love.

A city, on the other hand, represents our doctrine, the framework by which we view the Word and the world. Again, if we let the world dictate our worldview, we will have priorities for success that are not the Lord's priorities; and clinging to these, trying to guard them, is futile, because anything built apart from the Lord eventually falls apart. If we let the Lord guard the city, when things seem to be falling apart, we can still see the framework of the Lord's wisdom and love.

And things will fall apart. No matter how much we might say that our lives are going according to plan, there will be things that do *not* go the way we expect or want them to, no matter how hard we work for them. There's the medical student who pours years of work and thousands of dollars into studying but is not able to complete their degree because family obligations call them away. There is the young woman who loves taking care of children and is not able to have any of her own. There is the successful businessman who rises to the height of his profession but eventually must retire. There is almost all of us, who will see our faculties decline, who will no longer be able to do the things we could in the past. There is everyone, whose life on this planet will cease, who will lose every last worldly possession.

There is real cause for grief in some of these things. The Lord does not desire our suffering, and we are not blamed for sadness when a vision we have had evaporates. But the question is whether this will destroy us entirely. If our entire identity – our whole house, our whole city – depends on any kind of temporary goal, then it will inevitably fall. But if we have been working with the Lord to build the house and guard the city, then a fall in one opportunity is a new opportunity somewhere else to continue loving our neighbor, to continue living in the Lord's truth. We can leave behind our familiar fishing nets and be given opportunities to use the skills we have gained in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

It is not that we give up on having goals, and it is not that we stop doing work. To say “unless Jehovah builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” is to imply that if the Lord is really building the house, our own work alongside Him is NOT in vain. Our own participation is vital. The Lord did not say, “If you follow me, you will have to do no work.” Rather, He said,

“Come to Me, all you that labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” There is rest even in the work we are doing when we can do it without anxiety, without a sense of striving. We have focused on the first verse of Psalm 127: “Unless Jehovah builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless Jehovah guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” But the second verse reveals why the Lord commands this – not for His own sake, but because to work from Him rather than ourselves frees us from anxiety. The second verse of the Psalm says, “*It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.*”

This peace comes from doing hard work toward a vision *and* acknowledging that the Lord’s vision is better than anything we can come up with on our own. It comes from remembering that the Lord’s plan for us does not last for the short span of a lifetime on earth, but to eternity. It comes from knowing that, despite the appearances, things *are* going according to plan if we are continuing to build our house on the rock of the Lord’s Word. As we read of the operation of Divine Providence in the work *Apocalypse Explained*, “It is like a person who is about to build a house. He provides himself with the requisite materials, such as timber, rafters, stone, mortar, and various other things. But the Lord, while the person is ignorant of it, afterwards builds the house from the foundation to the roof entirely suited to the person.”

Amen.

Lessons: Daniel 4:20-33; Luke 5:1-11; Divine Providence 321

Divine Providence 321: It is owing to a law of Divine providence that a person should think as though of himself, and act prudently as though of himself, but still should acknowledge that he does so from the Lord. It follows, therefore, that someone who does think and act prudently as though of himself, and at the same time acknowledges that he does so from the Lord, is human, but not someone who affirms in himself that everything he thinks and does originates from himself. And neither is someone human who, knowing that wisdom and prudence originate from God, still awaits influx. For the first becomes no different from an animal, and the latter no different from a statue.

It is apparent that someone who awaits influx is no different from a statue, for inevitably he must stand or sit motionless, his hands hanging down, his eyes either closed or open without blinking, not thinking or breathing. How much life does he have then?

[2] It is also apparent that someone who believes that everything he thinks and does originates from himself is no different from an animal, for he thinks only with his natural mind, which the human being has in common with animals, and not with his rational, spiritual mind, which is the truly human mind. For the rational, spiritual mind acknowledges that God alone thinks of Himself, and that people think from God. Consequently, the kind of person here described does

not know of any difference between man and animal other than the fact that the human being has the power of speech while an animal makes sounds, and he believes that the two die alike.

[3] We will say something more about people who await influx. They do not receive any, except for a few who long for it from the heart. These sometimes receive some response through a consciously experienced perception in thought, or through a tacit verbal communication in the influx, and rarely by an evident one; and the response then is for them to think and act as they will and are able, that someone who acts wisely is wise, and that someone who acts foolishly is foolish; and they are never told what to believe or what to do. They are not told in order to keep their human rationality and freedom from perishing, which is to say, to keep each of them acting in freedom in accordance with their reason, to all appearance as though they did so of themselves.