

# Intentions Over Expectations

John L. Odhner, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, October 7, 2018

*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Psalm 23:2*

## The Innocence of Childhood

Babies have such innocence—they are so harmless, cute and lovable, it is easy to see why the Lord said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14)

Little children have innocence, because they do not think from deeper motives; for they do not yet know what is good and bad, and true and false, to think from them. Therefore they do not have any plans of their own, nor any design from a deliberate motive, so they are without any purpose for evil. They do not have any self-interest acquired from love of self and the world. They do not credit anything to themselves. All that they receive they attribute to their parents. They are content with the little things they are given as gifts. They do not worry about their food and clothing, and are not anxious about the future. They do not pay regard to the world and covet many things on account of it. They love their parents, their nursemaids, and their little companions, and play with them in a state of innocence. They allow themselves to be guided; they listen and obey.

In other words, little children have no expectations and no sense of entitlement. Instead, they are willing to follow and they feel gratitude for all they receive. *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.* We can see why the Lord said, “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Later on, when we grow up, this good, innocent, and peaceful state of early childhood departs from us little by little; and insofar as we are introduced into the world, we enter into its pleasures and delights, and so into evils, and the heavenly things or the good qualities of early childhood start to be dispersed. —*Secrets of Heaven 1906*

It seems as though we gradually lose our innocence as we get older. Yet in fact “all these states are so preserved in us by the Lord that not the least of them is lost.... Every one of our states, from our infancy to extreme old age, not only remains in the other life, but also returns.” The Lord stores up these good qualities within us, and they become the starting point for our future spiritual development. (AC 1050) In this way the Lord is providing for our spiritual life—making us lie down in green pastures and leading us beside still waters.

As little children we are free of expectations, but we change. We get a clearer sense of what we want from life and what we expect from other people. These changes in our lives are reflected in Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a statue with a golden head.

## Asking the Fortune Tellers

King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and wanted to know its meaning. Most of us have wondered what our future will be or what our dreams mean. We have an inkling about the future, perhaps even some dreams of what we want to do. And we want to know more. How will things turn out? Will I be okay? Perhaps someone we love dies and we want to know if they are alright. We would like to talk with them again. Just as Nebuchadnezzar turned to his astrologers and fortune tellers for understanding, many people today turn to psychics, fortune tellers, astrologers or mediums seeking to find answers about the supernatural and the future. Trusting psychics for spiritual knowledge is risky. According to New Church teachings, "Spirits tell very tall tales, and they lie. When spirits begin to speak with a person, one must take care not to believe them at all, for almost everything they say, they have made up, and they are lying." (*Spiritual Experiences* 1622)

Often people want to know the future, believing that knowledge of the future would give them power and wealth, or at least a sense of confidence and safety. They may not realize that sure knowledge of the future may actually be harmful to us, because it can take away our freedom. The Lord knows that *hope* for the future is better than *certainty* about the future, because sure knowledge would change our future from something that we participate in and help create to something we passively watch happen with no investment in the outcome. (See *Divine Providence* 178) *Hope* for the future encourages us to have intentions that may bear good fruit. *Knowing* the future would simply lead to a sense of entitlement and an expectation that everything will be given to us without any effort on our part.

It seems that it was because Nebuchadnezzar did not trust his fortune tellers that he asked them to tell not only the interpretation of the dream, but the dream itself. Yet Nebuchadnezzar showed his despotic character by commanding that his astrologers and magicians should be cut in pieces if they could not tell the meaning of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar was demanding and expected everyone to do things exactly as he wanted.

## Daniel's Response

As Daniel and his friends (Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael) were among the wise counselors who advised King Nebuchadnezzar, they too were to be killed for not telling Nebuchadnezzar about his dream, but Daniel pleaded for more time, so that he could ask the Lord for answers. Then he and his friends prayed, and the answer was revealed to Daniel in a vision that night.

Daniel and his friends were not magicians, soothsayers, or astrologers looking for answers from spirits, stars or secret rituals. Instead they went directly to God in prayer, knowing that God knows all things, and could tell them whatever He wanted them to know. They probably knew what Isaiah had said a century earlier:

And when they say to you, “Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,” should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. —Isaiah 8:19-20

So Daniel spoke with the King to give him the answer from God.

“The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.” —Daniel 2:27-28

Apparently the Lord wanted Nebuchadnezzar to recognize that Daniel was His prophet. The Lord gave the king a dream that Daniel could explain so that the King would know he could trust Daniel to speak for God. Daniel told the king what would be in the future, just as the Lord always tells us in His Word what we need to know about our future, but tells us in a way that does not take away our freedom. That is, the Lord encourages us to focus on our intentions for the future (what we want to give) more than our expectations from the future (what we want to get).

## Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream

Daniel explained Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about a statue with a gold head, silver breast, bronze belly and thighs, iron legs, and feet of iron mixed with clay. Daniel said that each part of the statue represented a different kingdom, the gold head being Nebuchadnezzar and rest being kingdoms that would follow and be inferior. On a deeper level it is about the kingdoms of the Lord, the sequence of churches throughout the history of the human race. The head of gold represents the earliest religious era, the Most Ancient Church which in some myths was called the Golden Age. This was followed by the Ancient Church or the Silver Age, then the Israelitish Church in the Bronze Age (not the same kind of bronze age as when the actual use of bronze became widespread), and finally the Christian Church in the Iron age. Each age had its purpose at the time. Each age was in some ways an advance and in others a decline.

In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the statue was shattered by a stone which struck the feet of the rock and scattered its pieces. The stone then became a great mountain which filled the whole

earth, representing a new kingdom and a new church that will endure forever, where the Lord (who is the Rock) would be everywhere known and worshiped.

## Our Ages of Life

The Ages of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron are also the ages of our individual lives. Our personal golden age is the time of infancy and early childhood, when the Lord establishes in us innocence, peace, trust, and love for our parents and playmates. Our silver age is childhood, when our innocence fades a little and our minds soak up knowledge, rules and principles. In these ages the Lord is nourishing us, helping us grow in our knowledge and purpose. He is making us lie down in green pastures and leading us beside still waters—storing up remnants of innocence, charity and knowledge from the Word.

In our bronze age as adults we focus on work and usefulness, and then in old age we become again like a little child as we gradually let go of worldly life in preparation for eternal life in heaven. The pattern that the Lord revealed to Nebuchadnezzar He reveals to all of us, letting us know in a general way the heavenly goal of life on earth and the sequence of states that will lead us there. We begin in innocence, and that innocence will decline, until in old age it is renewed. In the mean time each stage takes us a step further in the development of our ego, with increasing knowledge, ability, vision and purpose, until we become as strong as iron, able to crush to pieces whatever stands in our way.

We start our lives with no expectations, just an innocent willingness to trust our parents and receive what they give. As we grow we become stronger and less flexible and become more focused on what we want and expect out of life. Along the way our ego or sense of who we are and what we want becomes more pronounced. At the same time, our expectations are often unfulfilled. Perhaps I didn't get the kind of job or career I wanted. Perhaps my spouse turned out to be much more difficult to live with than I expected. I thought I would have a better home and more friends, better health. Instead my children made bad choices and people I loved were suddenly gone.

Our expectations of life and our focus on what we want to get are just pictures we dream up of what life will be. What eventually smashes those expectations is the rock of reality. What the Lord is doing in our lives is sure and solid, and fills our lives—and it works through our intentions. Self-importance is replaced by self-actualization, letting the Lord work in us. Expectations for how life treats us give way to intentions for how we treat life.

Daniel was able to change the course of the king's life and of the kingdom because his intentions were good—all he wanted was to protect the lives of his friends and all the wise people of the kingdom, and to trust that the reality the Lord gives us is greater than any expectations we create for ourselves.

Yet our destiny is not simply to build a splendid image of ourselves, but to come to the recognition that the Lord is everything and ego is nothing except to the extent that it allows the Lord to work in us and through us. The Rock that broke the image in pieces is the Lord, who works in our lives with a power far beyond anything we have from our own power and ego. Yet we can acknowledge that the Lord is everything good in our lives and still have the feeling that the life the Lord gives us is the life we are meant to live, the life that is our own, who we are and want to be.

## Readings:

Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was so troubled that his sleep left him. Then the king gave the command to call the magicians, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I have had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to know the dream."

Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation."

...

The king answered and said, "I know for certain that you would gain time, because you see that my decision is firm: if you do not make known the dream to me, there is only one decree for you! For you have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the time has changed. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation."

The Chaldeans answered the king, and said, "There is not a man on earth who can tell the king's matter; ...and there is no other who can tell it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh."

For this reason the king was angry and very furious, and gave the command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon....So Daniel went in and asked the king to give him time, that he might tell the king the interpretation. Then Daniel went to his house, and made the decision known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, that they might seek mercies from the God of heaven concerning this secret, so that Daniel and his companions might not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. So Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

...

Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, "The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream, and the visions of your head upon

your bed, were these: As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about what would come to pass after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be....

“You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image’s head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

—*Excerpts from Daniel 2*

But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.

—*Luke 6:32-36*

**As Long as We Believe That Everything Good Comes from the Lord,  
We Do Not Take Credit for the Things We Do As We Practice Goodwill**

It is damaging for us to take credit for things we do for the sake of our salvation. Hidden within our credit-taking there are evil attitudes of which we are unaware at the time: denial that God flows in and works in us; confidence in our own power in regard to salvation; faith in ourselves and not in God; [the delusion that] we justify and save ourselves by our own strength; contempt for divine grace and mercy; rejection of reformation and regeneration by divine means; and especially disregard for the merit and justice of the Lord God our Savior, which we then claim as our own. In our taking credit there is also a continual focus on our own reward and perception of it as our first and last goal, a stifling and an extinction of love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, and total ignorance and unawareness of the pleasure involved in heavenly love (which takes no credit), while all we feel is our love for ourselves.

—*True Christianity 439*