

How Much of My Life Do I Have to Change?

Abram Pleading for Sodom

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And Abraham came near and said, “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?” Genesis 18:23-24

One of the things for which we can be deeply thankful is the Lord’s perfect and unending love for each of us. No matter who we are or what we have done the Lord wants the best possible for each of us. We are taught that the Lord “ascribes goodness to everyone and evil to no one, and therefore that He judges no one to hell but instead lifts us all toward heaven to the degree that we will follow along” (*True Christian Religion* 652)

But some stories in the Word seem to indicate a different nature to God. Stories such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can have a certain horrible fascination for some people’s minds and leave others feeling very uncomfortable. Interestingly, the story that describes the greatest destruction is that of Noah and the flood and it is among the most beloved by many young children. Why aren’t they disquieted by it? It seems that they see the story more in terms of the Lord protecting and caring for Noah and his family. Since young children can often see themselves as basically good, they take comfort from the Lord’s care. Concerning the perspective of children, we read in the *Arcana Caelestia*:

The truths that people learn and believe in their earliest years when they are young children but which later on they either endorse, have doubts about, or refuse to accept, are in particular these: There is God, and He is one; He created everything; He rewards those who do what is good and punishes those who do things that are bad; there is life after death, when the bad go to hell and the good go to heaven, and so there is a hell and a heaven. (*Arcana Caelestia* 5135:3)

Certainly one of the things that the Lord wants us to know and believe with absolute certainty is that He loves us beyond anything that we can imagine. Although the stories of the Word speak of God being angry, punishing, and casting into hell, we are assured that is as false as the convicted criminal who states that the reason he is in jail is because a judge was nasty and put him there. The following passage gives some idea of the genuine reality.

Those who are opposed to the Lord perceive Divine Truth as falsity, and Divine Good as evil; for the way in which everyone sees that Truth and Good is determined by what they really are in themselves. So it is that the Lord's zeal, which in itself is love and compassion, is seen by them as anger; for when the Lord in love and mercy protects His own in heaven those ruled by evil are indignant and angry with the good. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8875:1)

This sermon continues a series on the stories of Abraham’s life. The description of Abraham pleading for the inhabitants of Sodom occurs after the Lord commanded the rite of circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham. On a deeper level this command represents the Lord

call to us to undertake the work of self-examination and repentance. Perhaps you recall the steps of this process that are given in the *True Christian Religion*: “examining oneself, recognizing and acknowledging one’s sins, praying to the Lord, and starting a new life.” (*True Christian Religion* 530)

When a person undertakes this work of self-examination he or she will be capable of seeing many things, some of which are very unpleasant to recognize in oneself. Within many aspects of our behavior, if we are honest with ourselves, we can see lurking various thoughts and motivations that are false and evil. For some this is more than they can face. One passage in the teachings for the New Church states that some people compare reflecting on their own spiritual state as being “like casting a net into a lake full from bottom to surface of mud teeming with noxious worms” and others when they even consider the idea of this self-reflection “are struck by fear and terror, as if they saw a monster beside their bed in twilight” (*True Christian Religion* 562:1).

The Lord wants us to feel hopeful that if we do our part we can certainly be saved from the misery and consequences of evil. But as we contemplate the various spiritual qualities of our thoughts and motivations we can be aware that they are a rather mixed lot. We can wonder as we look at some of the flawed, but not terribly evil parts of our mind which ones need to change and which are allowable to leave basically as they are for the time being. We, not unlike Abraham, can end up seeking from the Lord some understanding of just how bad something has to be before we really need to focus on removing it from our lives. Each of the numbers that Abraham pleads for--fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, and ten--all represent descending levels of good that a state of mind might have. There can be a state in which we are acting from a knowledge of truth and care about what is good (fifty). A lesser state is when there is both a knowledge of truth and a concern for good, but we are not yet acting on it (forty-five). A step lower is state in which we are experiencing times of temptation, in which there is a powerful battle between truth and good within our lives (forty). A step below this is the state in which we aren’t doing exactly what we’re supposed to but there is some determined effort resist our natural inclinations (thirty). Still lower is the state in which we aren’t battling our natural inclinations but we feel some sense of true unhappiness at evil and some desire for a better life (twenty). The lowest state refers to a state in which we can still feel some desire to follow the Lord and serve our neighbor (ten.)

For example, a person may note that he has a temperament and pattern of thinking that makes him likely to be rather easy-going about what is or isn’t happening in life. He is unlikely to make strong judgements. At times he sees this as a strength. It allows him to be with a wide variety of people rather comfortably. But he also recognizes that in some situations he really ought to be more active in making judgments to take care of himself and other useful things. Sometimes he realizes that it is almost a spiritual laziness in himself that shows up as “easy-going.” So he looks at his patterns of behavior and wonders, “How much of this has to be shunned or what is the good here that can be preserved?”

Our minds are not always reliable guides to what is and is not important. A particular group of spirits can be present with us that cause particular problems. They are described as follows:

[There are] spirits who hold on tenaciously to their point of view and also spirits who take a conscientious stand on issues that are not vitally important. . . [T]hey make meticulous enquiries into matters into which no such enquiries at all ought to be made.

Consequently, because they burden the consciences of simple people they are called 'the conscientious ones'. Yet they have no knowledge of what true conscience is, because they make all issues into matters of conscience. For if a thing is subjected to minute questioning or to doubt and the mind is anxiously fixed on such, ideas supporting this attitude and weighing the mind down are never absent. (*Arcana Caelestia* 5386)

Each time that Abraham asked about a number of good people potentially being in Sodom, the Lord responded that He would not destroy the city if that many good people were there. Anything genuinely good in our life need not be destroyed. Anything that is truly useful need not be destroyed. But a wise person realizes over and over again that the Lord has allowed a quality to exist for a time, and from it good things came, but eventually the person sees that there is a hidden flaw within it that really needs to be battled and overcome. The Lord doesn't expect us to become perfect people in a short period of time. He knows far better than we do how apparently intermingled our thoughts and motivations are.

What He asks is that we recognize and acknowledge that there are dangerous evils in our lives that need to be fought. He asks us not to make this as just a broad and easy statement. He asks us to take the time to seek out, recognize and acknowledge to ourselves and to Him that there are evil motivations, thoughts words and actions that we need to shun in our lives. Once recognized and acknowledged, He calls us to do what we can to prevent them from appearing in our words and deeds. He even calls us to beware of harboring and nurturing them in our thoughts.

In the highest sense this story of Abraham pleading for the inhabitants of Sodom describes the thoughts of the Lord while in the world about the human race. We read:

[This part of Genesis 18] deals with the Lord's grief and anguish over the human race because it was steeped so much in self-love and therefore in the desire to exercise control over others from what is evil and false. In that state He interceded for the human race and secured salvation for those with whom good loves and true ideas would be present. But who these are is indicated by the numbers of the righteous that are given. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2140)

And in another statement we are assured:

With the Lord, when He was in the world, no other life was present than the life of love towards the whole human race, which He passionately desired to save eternally. . . for . . . Jehovah, is nothing else than mercy, which is the manifestation of love towards the whole human race - and that life was the life of pure love. Lord's. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2253)

The Lord promises that He will be with us every step of our spiritual journey. He wants us to know that our eternal happiness is a most precious thing to Him. The Lord will work with the tiniest details of our lives to lead us from where we are now to that better and happier life. As we prepare for our celebration of Thanksgiving may we remember the Lord's perfect love for us, indeed for the entire human race and give thanks for all the things He does for us each moment of each day far beyond what we could ever imagine. AMEN.

Lessons: *Genesis* 18:20-33, *Arcana Caelestia* 2256

Genesis 18:20-33

²⁰ And the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, ²¹ I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know." ²² Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. ²³ And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare *it* for the fifty righteous that were in it? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." ²⁷ Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who *am but* dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: ²⁸ Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for *lack of five*?" So He said, "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy *it*." ²⁹ And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose there should be forty found there?" So He said, "I will not do *it* for the sake of forty." ³⁰ Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not do *it* if I find thirty there." ³¹ And he said, "Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not destroy *it* for the sake of twenty." ³² Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy *it* for the sake of ten." ³³ So the LORD went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Arcana Caelestia 2256

"To make the righteous die with the wicked" means making good perish with evil; but because this ought never to be done, and also because the very thought of it evokes horror, it is removed in the internal sense, and the following is at the same time presented - that good cannot die, because evil can be separated from it.

The implications of this particular matter are known to few, if any. It has to be recognized that all the good whatever that a person has thought and done from earliest childhood through to the very end of his life remains; and the same applies to all the evil, so much so that not even the least trace of it completely perishes. All that good and evil is written in his book of life, that is, in each of his memories [internal and external], and in his true self, that is, in his character and disposition. From that good and evil he has formed a life for himself and, so to speak, a soul, the essential nature of which remains unchanged after death. But good things are never so mixed up with evil things, nor evil things with good ones, that they cannot be separated; for if they were so mixed a person would perish for ever. The Lord sees to it that they are not. If he has led a life abiding in the good things of love and charity, then when a person enters the next life the Lord separates the evil things, and by means of the good things present with him raises him into heaven. But if he has led a life immersed in evil things, that is to say, in things contrary to love and charity, the Lord separates the good things from him, and his evils carry him into hell. Such is the experience of everyone after death. But it is a separation and in no way a complete removal.