

20/20 Vision

A sermon about our search for the truth in the New Year.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, January 5, 2020

And Balaam said to Balak, "Look, I have come to you! Now, have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak." Numbers 22:38

Balaam was actually in an easy position. It is true that he was trapped between the urgent demands of Balak, his own desire for success and riches, and the Lord's absolute commands. He was hoping to find a way to wiggle out of it and satisfy both Balak and the Lord, and this was not easy. But it was easy in the sense that the parameters were clear. He was not able to disobey the Lord, even though he wanted to.

Our own situation when dealing with challenging religious issues, as we begin this New Year, may be less clear and more complicated. We also may want to satisfy both the Lord and the spiritual equivalent of Balak in our lives, but for us it is not so obvious which is which.

Our topic this morning is how to have a clear vision of what is true. How to have 20/20 vision in 2020.

The *Heavenly Doctrine* provides an unparalleled opportunity in our search for truth. If we believe in what they say, and trust them as an accurate source of information directly from the Lord, we have access to a perspective on every controversy that we face. We have access to 20/20 vision.

Yet controversies persist. The reason may be partly due to the influence of Balak, who seems to represent the way that our natural and worldly interests cause us to be easily led astray even when our intentions are not evil (*Arcana Coelestia* 3242). But another reason may be simply that controversies pose questions that are difficult to answer. Despite our best efforts we can't agree on the best solutions.

The first reason is well illustrated by the Balaam story. Balak's desires are clear, and they conflict with the Lord's desires for Israel. Balaam understands the conflict but is on Balak's side and hopes to satisfy both. In us a combination of bias, ignorance and self-interest misleads us into thinking that our conclusions are consistent with the truth, even when they are not.

This may be better illustrated by our lesson about the little book given to John, which was sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. The explanation that we read said:

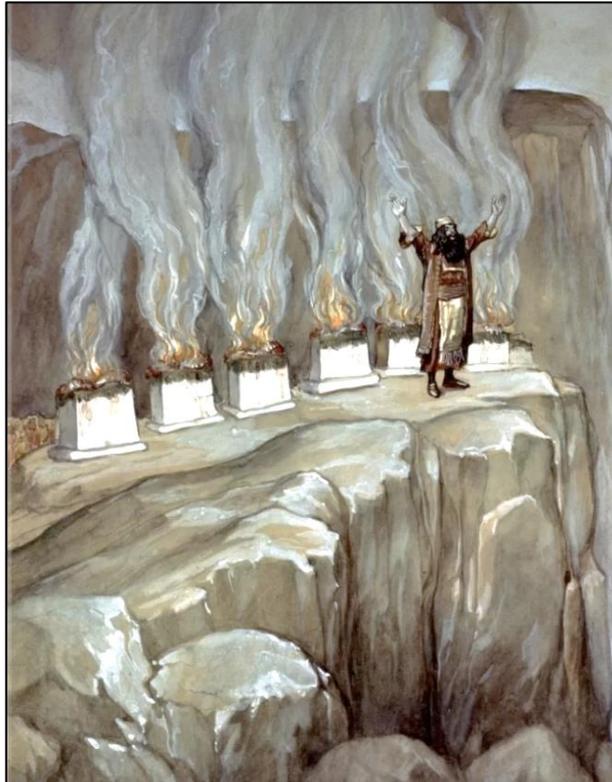
"This symbolically means that accepting the doctrine from an acknowledgment that the Lord is the Savior and Redeemer is pleasing and agreeable, but

acknowledging that He alone is God of heaven and earth, and that His humanity is Divine, is displeasing and vexatious." Apocalypse Revealed 481

Another way to put this may be to say that it is pleasing to have a rational doctrine that answers our questions, but it can be bitter to acknowledge their authority when they conflict with what we want them to say. We want the Lord to save us, but we don't necessarily want to acknowledge that He alone is God and that we need to obey Him.

The General Church position on doctrine

This church is founded on a single position, which is that the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg are the truth, the Word of God. As it is put in the *"Statement of Order and Organization of the General Church of the New Jerusalem"*: *"The Old Testament, the New*



Balaam speaks the word that God puts in his mouth.

Testament and the Writings together are the supreme authority in matters of faith.”

This position has been the rock that this organization has been built on, seen from the beginning as the way to promote love to the Lord and love to the neighbor in the community and towards all others.

At the same time this position is also sometimes seen as providing stones to throw at those who disagree. Any claim to certainty about religious questions has this potential. Religious people may be prone to seeing themselves as Balaam, speaking only the word that God has put into their mouths, and may see others who think differently as Balak, misled by bias, ignorance and self-interest.

The truth is that many controversial issues are controversial because they involve questions that are difficult to answer. So it is only natural that people will come to different conclusions. For the most part people are fine with that and respect other people’s right to their own views. But of course, this is not always the way that it works.

The Information Age

In any case, this is the Information Age and people have an expectation that information will have a major role in solving issues of every kind. I think most of us are also aware, though, that controversies are often most acute among the so-called experts in various fields, people who have the most knowledge about them. So who do we trust?

Despite this, or maybe because of it, there is a widespread interest in discovering accurate information, and in finding ways to ensure that it is accurate. This in turn has generated an understanding among all of us that we should not believe something just because we have read it, or heard it, or because some expert has pronounced it. Instead we learn to rely on evidence, and learn the rules for how evidence demonstrates the truth.

We come to understand the common tools of scholarship that help to establish the accuracy of the information that we encounter. We learn to look for evidence, to ask about the science behind it, if it is a scientific question, to wonder whether the source is reliable, and whether the context of statements we hear is consistent with what is quoted.

This approach is completely consistent with what the Writings teach, and the Writings themselves include many similar rules and guidelines that help

us take a scholarly approach to religious belief.

These guidelines are genuinely helpful tools for discovering and clarifying the truth. Learning how to use them could be an important key to getting past some of the controversies that lead to doubts and anxious feelings in our religious lives.

Guidelines from the Writings for discovering the truth

If you accept the General Church view that the Writings “*are the supreme authority in matters of faith*” you might think that it would be a simple matter to tell right from wrong. But hard questions are hard questions. Here are some ways that the Writings help us to discover the truth.

1. The Word is the only source.

The first example is the understanding that, when it comes to religious questions, divine revelation is the only authoritative source of information. That is, not our own reasoning, not our own feeling that the Lord has enlightened us, not our study of psychology, or the lessons of science or history.

“The Word is the only source of divine truth for Christians.” True Christianity 777

“The Word is the one and only teacher of how a person should live in the world in order to be happy for evermore.” Arcana Coelestia 8939

2. The Word is about spiritual things.

A second example is the understanding that the Word is about spiritual questions, not natural, scientific or historical ones. Arguing about the accuracy of scientific examples or historic events misses the point of divine revelation.

“The Word of the Lord does not deal with worldly things but embodies Divine matters.” Arcana Coelestia 1151

3. The Rule of Two Witnesses

A third example is the importance of bringing together multiple teachings when trying to demonstrate an idea.

“For one truth unconnected to others does not confirm it only a number together, because from one truth it is possible to see another. One by itself does not give any form to good, and so does not manifest any essential quality possessed by good; but many in a connected series do so. For just as one musical note by itself does not constitute the melody, still less the full harmony, neither does one truth achieve anything.” Arcana Coelestia 4197

4. Understanding opposites

A fourth example is what is taught about how important it is to be able to understand opposing points of view.

“It should be recognized that it is in accordance with the laws of order that no one should become convinced of the truth instantaneously... This goes to explain why in the next life as soon as some truth is presented through plain experience to good spirits, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed a truth... This enables their spiritual vision in respect of that truth to be broadened, seeing even into the ideas that are opposed to it... for truths take varying forms as dictated by circumstances.”
Arcana Coelestia 7298

The point here is that unless we are able to understand and empathize with opposing points of view, we don't really understand the truth.

5. Falsity is more easily demonstrated than the truth.

“There is nothing that cannot be defended, and falsity more easily than truth.” Divine Providence 318

“Being able to provide arguments to support whatever you want is not intelligence; intelligence is being able to see that what is true is true and what is false is false and to provide arguments to support that.” True Christianity 334

The reason that false ideas are often more easily defended than true ones is that they are often in line with the way that things appear to be and not the way that they really are. There is no way to prove that there is an afterlife, or that God exists. If we are searching for the truth we need to avoid being misled by easy and obvious arguments based on appearances, and instead think from the Word.

6. All genuine truth is about love.

A final example of ways that the Writings help us to resolve issues and discover the truth is the understanding that in the end the purpose is not so much about coming to the correct conclusion but about seeing the love that is in the truth. We read:

“Rational good never fights, no matter how much

it is assailed, because it is gentle and mild, long-suffering and yielding, for its nature is that of love and mercy. But although it does not fight, it nevertheless conquers all.” Arcana Coelestia 1950

Rational good, or love based on the truth, is said here to “conquer all” because there is no real resolution of issues without love and kindness and a sight of how the path taken leads to them.

Summary

There are many similar teachings in the Writings that can guide us in our efforts to resolve whatever challenging issues and questions we may encounter. The main thing, though, is to know that the answers exist, that they

can be found, and that the rules of scholarship play a role as we approach the Lord in His Word, and pray for enlightenment.

The point here is that many of our controversies could be resolved by closer attention to the rules of scholarship that are given in the Writings.

More important, though, is the fact that the life of religion is not about answering hard questions, but about living a life of love and charity. The truth is that this kind of life is the only way to get past the seemingly endless controversies that surround us.

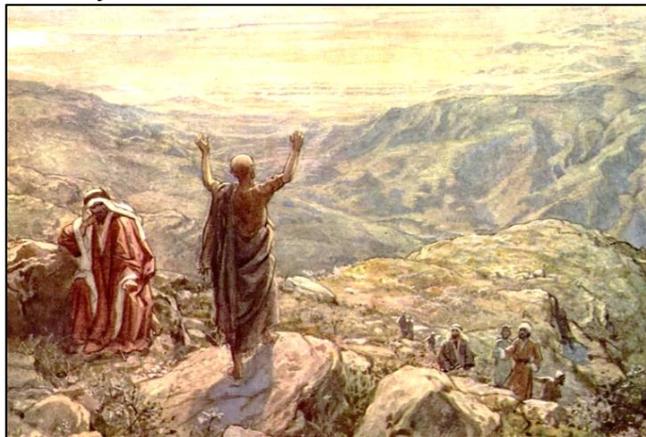
The bitterness of the little book that John was commanded to eat is something that all of us experience in life.

But the prophecy that Balaam was sent to give – against his own will – gives us hope. He said:

“I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel.” Numbers 24:17

The Light will shine in the darkness, it will not be snuffed out, and it will prevail in the end.

The star coming out of Jacob is a prophecy of the Lord's coming as Divine Truth to bring order to a disordered world, and to bring love and peace to a world in conflict. This was Balaam's true mission, although he never knew it. If we can believe in it, study it, and live by it, we will be able to see clearly in this New Year. That is 20/20 vision. AMEN



Readings from the Word

Numbers 22

Balaam said to God, “Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, *saying*, ¹¹ ‘Look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.’”

¹² And God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they *are* blessed.”

¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, “Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you.”

¹⁴ And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

¹⁵ Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. ¹⁶ And they came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: ‘Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.’”

¹⁸ Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more. ¹⁹ Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.”

²⁰ And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men come to call you, rise *and* go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do.” ²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

Revelation 10

Isaw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire. ² He had in his hand a little book open, and he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³ and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars... ⁸ Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, “Go, take the little book that is open in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the earth.” ⁹ So I went to the angel and said to him, “Give me the little book.” And he said to me, “Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.” ¹⁰ Then I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter.

¹¹ And he said to me, “You must prophesy again about peoples, nations, tongues, and many kings.”

Apocalypse Revealed 481

And he said to me, “Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.” This symbolically means that accepting the doctrine from an acknowledgment that the Lord is the Savior and Redeemer is pleasing and agreeable, but acknowledging that He alone is God of heaven and earth, and that His humanity is Divine, is displeasing and vexatious, owing to their falsifications.

Heavenly Secrets 231

A single evil afflicted not only the earliest church, before the Flood, but also the ancient church, after the Flood, and the Israelitish church, and then the church that came after the Lord’s arrival into the world, just as it afflicts the modern church. It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one’s senses. The result is an absence of faith, and when faith is absent, so is love for others--a situation that leads to all falsity and evil.

