

## Strengthening Ourselves in the Lord

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But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. *I Samuel 30:6*

You probably have heard many quotations that remind us to depend on the Lord. One from Psalms is: "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains. From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord who made the heavens and the earth" (Psalm 121:1-2). One from the gospel of John is: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

But when life moves along in familiar patterns we can sometimes feel quite self-sufficient. Our health is reasonably good, we have a roof over our heads, food on the table, and the bills we have to pay seem under control. And then something can come along that reminds us that things can go very wrong. A few months ago, over 30,000 people in this world might have had a sense that they were reasonably self-sufficient and now a virus has ended their natural lives. For many others, the jobs and income they relied on have suddenly ceased to exist with uncertainly clouding when they might be able to return to work again.

The story I read of David's band of men returning to a sacked and burned Ziklag is an ancient example of a massive tragedy. For David and his men, their wives, children, homes, and possessions had all been lost during their absence. Their reactions included overwhelming grief. As *I Samuel* states: "Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep" (*I Samuel 30:6*). But there was also tremendous anger. David's men in their loss and desire for someone to blame talked of stoning him--making him responsible for their loss. This wouldn't have brought back their wives or children. It would not have erased the sadness. In this apparently hopeless situation we read that "David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." (*I Samuel 30:6*) And from this strength David sought the Lord's guidance in what they should do next. For them the story had a happy ending. They were able to rescue their wives and children. They were able to regain their possessions and more.

Consider what Jesus was facing as He prayed at the Garden of Gethsemane. While sometimes Jesus felt He was one with the infinite God, other times he felt like a frail and fallible human being. This prayer is one of those later times. Jesus knew that He was facing arrest, being beaten and whipped and then crucified, but much, much more challenging, He knew that He was going to face His deepest and most draining spiritual battle. It was not something He welcomed. He prayed "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." The upcoming temptation was going to strain Jesus to the utmost.

Over and over again we will face the results of tragedies, disorders and outright evil in this world. We will be saddened by these results and we will also be tempted to have a number of reactions that are dangerous to our own spiritual welfare and to the welfare of those around us. There are evil spirits who seek to poison our minds with hatred, bog us down with hopelessness, or cripple us by fear and mistrust. We can feel abandoned by God. When we don't sense God's help, we can think that He has chosen the consequence we are facing. We are told very clearly in the teachings for the New Church that not all things that happen are what the Lord desires.

When we say, therefore, that God allows something to happen, we do not mean that He wills it, but that for the sake of the goal, which is salvation, He cannot prevent it.

Whatever happens for the sake of salvation as the goal, happens in accordance with the laws of Divine providence. . . Consequently at every moment of its operation, or at every step of its progress, when it sees that we are stray from the goal, it guides, bends, and directs us in accordance with its laws, withdrawing us from evil, leading us to good. This cannot be done without the permitting of evil. (*Divine Providence* 234)

We are called to see the Lord as a God of infinite love, wisdom and power. We are told that the Lord is caring for each of us every least fraction of a moment. And yet this is not always the way it appears. God can seem distant in sad situations such as when a baby is born with severe birth defects, or the tragic death of a child or a young person just entering the prime of life or a parent leaving behind a spouse and children. The Lord can seem distant when elderly people feel lonely and useless and when their natural body has gotten so old that it hinders them every moment. That person can feel burdened and like a problem for others. How are we to make sense of events that seem far more destructive than constructive? How are we expected to feel?

We know that when a person dies, the only thing that is really dead is something purely natural--their physical body. However that physical body had been extremely important. By means of it a person's spirit has been able to exist, to learn, make choices and through these choices can serve others in this world. Though something merely natural, that physical body is very important. Similarly when a tragedy strikes in this world harming some other natural thing that has been of use, we can appropriately feel sadness at that loss. When people lose their jobs and the income it provided their ability to support their life is threatened. The sense of loss need not be from a materialistic love. Certainly the Lord encourages us not to set our heart on natural things, but when we have valued the use a natural thing has served, we are not so much valuing the natural thing itself as the use.

Why do bad things happen? A wise answer is not saying, "It's the Lord's plan." If we assume that everything is determined to happen the way it happens we can become apathetic. For example a person can say, "I don't need to wear a seat belt. When my time is up, I'll die and that is that." This perspective taken to an extreme would say we really don't need to worry about any decisions because the Lord is controlling all things.

The truth is that things happen that the Lord doesn't want to have happen. There are things that happen that are extremely destructive of the goals He seeks to accomplish with His infinite love and wisdom. Some people have tried to understand bad things by thinking that God only has a part of the power that governs the universe. Some have seemed to personify an evil force existing entirely separate from the Lord vying with Him for control and sometimes the Lord wins and sometimes the prince of darkness wins. But when we say the Lord's Prayer we end with the words, "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever." We don't say "part of the power." In a very real sense, nothing happens apart from the Lord's government. Nothing is completely out of control. But this does not mean that bad things are what the Lord wants to have happen. Instead, we are told that some things happen directly according to His will, some things happen only partially according to what the Lord would wish and some things happen contrary to what He would want. Such things are said to be "permitted" by the Lord.

Why are they permitted? Why doesn't the Lord intervene to stop such bad things? The reason is that He cannot without causing far greater harm than benefit. The key reason for why He cannot intervene is absolutely essential for our happiness that genuine spiritual freedom exist. Without freedom to choose between good and evil, true ideas and false ones we cease to be human and it is only to the degree that we receive love and wisdom from the Lord that we can feel happiness.

But it is also important for us to recognize that bad things that happen are not always a consequence of our own choices or of some lesson that we need to learn. While it is true that the Lord works to bring some good out all things that happen, even those which are terribly destructive, it is not necessarily the way the Lord would most want us to gain that benefit and doesn't necessarily reflect a problem that we needed to face. When a person faces a series of challenges in his life, sometimes the way he looks at it is reflected in the words, "I guess the Lord is trying to teach me something." If this implies that the Lord chose these events with a lesson in mind, I think it does not reflect the way the Lord really operates. He never wishes that bad things happen even for the sake of teaching us some lesson. When destructive things happen it is always something that has been permitted.

The Lord is constantly working to accomplish His goals in our lives. But there are two other influences that He permits that can interfere with what He wants. Firstly, our individual freedom can have us make choices that hurt us and others. We know that people can make profoundly bad decisions that have terrible consequences. But there is also a second force, one that exists because hell exists. Accidents, sickness and other tragedies can occur whose consequences that far exceed the significance of an individual person's choice. A moment's inattention while driving can result in a terrible car accident. Is the driver responsible for this consequence? I don't think we should think so. A person can slip, fall and hurt himself, perhaps even lose his life. Is he responsible for his death because of where he placed his foot or for being in a situation in which he could slip? I think not. Some bad things happen because the Lord permits even the evil spirits of hell some freedom. They, using their life which they have received from the Lord and perverted, can produce tragedies in this world. These tragedies do not reflect a proper consequence of choices by people in this world. The influence of the hells can produce sickness and natural disasters. They can produce tragedies that seem so random and without clear explanation that they sometimes get called, "acts of God." But in reality it would probably be wiser if we called them acts of hell. We are called to trust that even in these terribly destructive events we have not been abandoned by the Lord. Consider the following words:

From this it may be seen how far someone errs who believes that the Lord has not foreseen and does not see the smallest individual thing with a person, or that within the smallest individual thing He does not foresee and lead, when in fact the Lord's foresight and providence are present within the tiniest details of all the smallest individual things with him, and in details so tiny that it is impossible to comprehend in any manner of thought one in many millions of them. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3854:3)

We are called to trust in the Lord's loving care. This trust will not be an easy matter when loved ones and our financial security is at risk. At times, many of us will inevitably go through feelings of sadness and even anger. But the Lord would lead us to a peacefulness that can follow our initial reactions. May our trust in the Lord grow stronger each day. This trust will come as we face the ups and downs of life and seek to acknowledge that even through things that are not the Lord's will, He can still work to accomplish some good. We can ask for an underlying peace even as we deal with problems and sadness. When facing hard times, we too can strengthen ourselves in the Lord. AMEN

Lessons: I Samuel 30:1-8, Matthew 16:21-26, *Arcana Caelestia* 8478:3-4

## **I Samuel 30:1-8**

<sup>1</sup> Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, <sup>2</sup> and had taken captive the women and those who *were* there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried *them* away and went their way. <sup>3</sup> So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. <sup>4</sup> Then David and the people who *were* with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. <sup>5</sup> And David's two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. <sup>6</sup> Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

## **Matthew 26:36-44**

<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." <sup>37</sup> And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. <sup>38</sup> Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me."

<sup>39</sup> He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You *will*."

<sup>40</sup> Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? <sup>41</sup> Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak."

<sup>42</sup> Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." <sup>43</sup> And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy.

<sup>44</sup> So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

## **Arcana Caelestia 8478:3-4**

Those who trust in the Lord are altogether different [from those who have an unhealthy concern for the morrow]. Though concerned about the morrow, yet are they unconcerned, in that they are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to the morrow. They remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss; they are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infatuated with wealth; if they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either; if lowly in status they do not feel downcast. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state.

It should be recognized that Divine providence is overall, that is, it is present within the smallest details of all, and that people in the stream of providence are being carried along constantly towards happier things, whatever appearance the means may present. Those in the stream of providence are people who trust in the Divine and ascribe everything to Him. But those not in the stream of providence are people who trust in themselves alone and attribute everything to themselves; theirs is a contrary outlook, for they take providence away from the Divine and claim it as their own. It should be recognized also that to the extent that anyone is in the stream of providence he is in a state of peace; and to the extent that anyone is in a state of peace by virtue of the good of faith, he is in Divine providence. These alone know and believe that the Lord's Divine providence resides within every single thing, indeed within the smallest details of all.