

- I. A basic New Church teaching is that the Lord guides us without our knowing it.
  - A. As our reading today said, if we were able to see His providence at work we would resist it.
  - B. The reason given is that a lot of the Lord’s guidance involves leading us away from motives that we are very much attached to – the native concern for ourselves and our well-being. His guidance would feel like death
    1. If we were to feel the Lord’s guidance we’d regard Him as the enemy, and fight against Him
    2. The passage gave a lovely picture of how the Lord works with our lower motives for wealth and greatness, using them to get us to do good things, and only gradually over a lifetime shifting us to a place where we may still want those things, but now for a good reason not a bad one
    3. It’s such a beautiful picture of tender care, taking us slowly on a journey toward happiness.
    4. It is reminiscent of the parable of the wheat and the tares. A man plants wheat, and his enemy sows tares, a plant that looks similar to the wheat until much later in the plant’s growth cycle.
      - a. The landowner lets them grow together and then harvests the wheat and removes the tares, and illustration of the long, slow journey the Lord takes us on to separate the good and the bad in our lives
    5. Another reason given for why the Lord guides us in secret is that if we were to experience the Lord’s guidance we would not feel free, and that feeling of spiritual servitude would sap us of all will to make the important life choices we are here in this world to make
    6. It’s perhaps ironic that by our not seeing the Lord’s guidance He actually preserves our freedom.
    7. We’d normally think of it in reverse – the fact of its being secret means we can’t choose. But the Lord’s love and gentle guidance is such that he guides us while maintaining full free will. By being secret He can do both these things – guide us and leave us in freedom. Were his guidance to be explicit He could do one or the other but not both.
- II. Today we’ll look at some teachings about the Lord’s guidance of our lives, taken from the two stories from Scripture we read
- III. The first is the story from Revelation, the letter to the church of Sardis
  - A. Unlike the letters to most of the other churches, the letter to Sardis is a warning, a warning that they are dead and that if they don’t repent He will come to them like a thief and they will not know the hour of His coming
  - B. The image of the Lord as a thief is so striking
  - C. Normally in Scripture thieves are depicted as we would expect, as negative
  - D. “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” (Luke 10:30)

- E. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” (Matt 6)
  - F. “When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was uncovered, and the wickedness of Samaria. For they have committed fraud; a thief comes in; a band of robbers takes spoil outside.” (Hos 7:1)
  - G. In each of these as in other places where a thief is mentioned, the passage is describing the ways in which evil spirits come into our lives and steal away what is good.
  - H. Evil is constantly trying to sneak into our lives unseen and to subvert our intentions for good, just as thieves sneak in when we’re not paying attention to take our goods
  - I. I’ve just been talking about how the Lord act secretly, but how His secrecy serves to protect our freedom. A spiritual thief, by contrast, tries to destroy our freedom by tricking us into what is evil and seducing us without our awareness of the seduction
    - 1. Theirs in an unseen undermining of our freewill, all the while leaving us with the illusion that we are free
- IV. Our reading today is speaking, not of the evil spirits as thieves, but of the Lord!
- A. It is similar to a passage in Matthew: “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”
  - B. The Lord is compared to a thief, but in this context the focus is on the secrecy of the Lord’s actions, not the stealing. We read: “A person should watch and not know the hour at which the Lord comes in order that he may think and act as though of himself, thus in freedom in accordance with his reason, and not have fear interject anything. For everyone would be fearful if he were to know. Moreover, whatever a person does of himself in freedom remains to eternity, while what he does out of fear does not remain.” (AR 164)
  - C. The Lord comes like a thief, secretly, so we can get on with our daily lives without living in fear of the consequences of our actions. Our very unawareness of His presence makes our actions lasting because free.
  - D. So one reason the Lord comes as a thief is because He takes pleasure in leading us secretly to allow us to be free
- V. Yet our story about those from Sardis is about a slightly different, and less happy aspect of the Lord’s secret guidance.
- A. The people in Sardis were not doing what was right, and they describe people who are in dead worship – going through the rituals without any spirit in them
  - B. The Lord’s warning to them, and to us when we fall into this state, is to pay attention because if we don’t the good things we have will be taken away without our being aware: I will come to you as a thief means “means that the things of which their worship consists will be taken from them, without their knowing when or how.”

1. You can picture someone who once had an affection for the truths of the church slowly falling into lethargy and coming to realize that he no longer cares
  2. This drift away is attributed to the Lord as a thief because when we are in selfish states we blame the Lord for the bad that happens. "If there was a loving God He would not have put me in this unfair situation," we might say, not paying attention to the fact that our choices made the situations
  3. It would be the same if a person in a marriage were to say thoughtless and cutting things to their partner, and then feel surprised when the person withdrew.
- C. In both the story we read, and the section from Matthew I quoted, the Lord says, "Watch!" Pay attention, something bad is about to happen. If you watch the thief won't come.
1. And if you pay attention, you will not call the Lord a thief of your happiness when life gets painful
- D. Here we have a story where the Lord is calls Himself a thief, when in fact He's not. It's the forces of hell who steal away our joy when we are not watchful
- VI. Yet in our other story the Lord is not called a thief, but it is describing a time when the Lord does act secretly, deliberately circumventing our awareness, but in order to secretly bring good into our lives
- A. The story is the beginning of the flood story. People were turning to evil, the Nephilim were in the land, and in the story God repented of having made humanity, leading to the flood.
  - B. In that story, we read "And Jehovah said, 'My spirit shall not contend with man to eternity, because he is flesh; and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.'"
  - C. This statement comes after the previous characters had been living many hundreds of years, capped with Methuselah who lived 969 years. Now people would live a mere 120 years, a seeming punishment
- VII. But the inner meaning of this story is very different. It describes the fall of humanity into such comprehensive evil that they had no remnants of good or truth
- A. Remnants, or remains, are central to our spiritual well being, so a time when no more remnants were possible is a tragic situation
  - B. Let's pause for a minute to consider why that is important
  - C. Remnants, as we read, are every state having to do with goodness and truth from infancy to extreme old age that the Lord stores inside of us. He does this secretly, and we read that "we ourselves are not directly conscious of this."
    1. So here's another kind of secret work the Lord does
    2. We go through life experiencing good and having sparks of affection for truth, and the Lord is paying attention. Every single one of these, whether we chose them or whether they were simply a gift of circumstance, such as our mothers tenderly holding us, are stored up for future use
    3. These remains are the Lord's alone with us. They are not even ours that He merely stores (AC 565, 576:4). They are the presence of the Divine

touching us, and transforming us, if we let them.

4. And we're told that this storehouse of goodness and truth deep in our spirits becomes the channel through which all the goodness and truth the Lord wants to bring into our lives flows. As it flows in it reactivates those old states and they in turn inspire us to live well and develop new states of goodness and truth. This is the only way we can improve.
  - a. This is why Christmas hymns & the Christmas story inspire us to be kinder than we might be, and why people get more & more emotional at weddings as they get older.
  - b. Those deep stores of good and truth are being activated by the Lord
  - c. Without these remains we cannot be saved or change for good

- VIII. In our story the meaning of a person now living to 120 years is describing the way the Lord now has to do this work in secret, storing goodness up without our seeing it so that He can gradually build up a storehouse of good desires that can counteract the negative heredity that has built up over millennia as people have made poor choices that they have passed on to their children
- A. You can picture the Lord taking great delight in noticing and storing away each good thing, especially in those whose growing up was not so delightful or filling with truths
  - B. One teaching describes these remains as tithes or offerings of plunder: "Bring all the tithes to the treasure-house, that there may be plunder in My house, and let them put Me to the test in this matter whether I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing for you until there shall not be room enough." (Mal 3:10).
  - C. Tithes, or a tenth of their income Jews were supposed to offer the Lord stands for, we read, "remnants in the internal self, which are likened to 'plunder' because they are implanted, so to speak, by stealth among so many evils and falsities; and by way of such remnants comes every blessing. ... the whole of a person's charity comes to him by way of the remnants ..." (AC 576:3)
  - D. Here the Lord is saying that when we turn to Him, which happens when we embrace His truth and goodness, we offer a gift offering, a tithe, to Him, and that will be plunder, a secret blessing He will store up and will use it to shower down more blessings on us until we do not have room for more.
  - E. It is a picture of the Lord working hard on our behalfs to bring good out of situations that don't seem to warrant it. And then that goodness becoming a shower of blessing. And all this done in secret because He loves us.
- IX. Life can seem pretty rough at times, both in the external world, and in our own spirits. It can seem like hell is stealing away our happiness, and even like the Lord is at times party to this pain
- X. Yet the message from the Word is that the Lord is constantly working in secret to bring amazing and powerful good to our lives
- A. He acts secretly because we are often not ready yet to receive
  - B. His goal is to open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings in our lives.

Gen 6:1-8 And it was, that humankind began to multiply themselves upon the faces of the ground, and daughters were born to them. And the sons of God saw the daughters of man that they were good; and they took to themselves wives of all that they chose.

And Jehovah said, My spirit shall not contend with man to eternity, because he is flesh; and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.

The Nephilim were in the land in those days; and even more after the sons of God came in to the daughters of man, and they gave birth for them; they are the mighty men, who from of old were men of renown.

And Jehovah saw that the evil of man was multiplied on the earth, and that all that is formed by the thoughts of his heart is only evil all the day. And Jehovah repented that He had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart. And Jehovah said, I will wipe away humankind, whom I have created, from upon the faces of the ground, from man to beast, to creeping thing, and to the fowl of the heavens; for I repent that I have made them.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of Jehovah.

Rev 3:1-6 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."'

DP 183. The idea that if a person were to clearly see Divine providence and its operation, he would deny God, appears as unlikely, because it seems that if anyone were to clearly see it he could not help but acknowledge it and so acknowledge God. And yet the contrary is the case. Divine providence never acts in harmony with the will's love in a person, but continually in opposition to it. For in consequence of his hereditary evil a person forever goes panting toward the lowest hell, whereas the Lord by His providence is constantly diverting him and drawing him back from there, first to a milder hell, then out of hell, and finally to Himself in heaven.

This operation of Divine providence is unceasing. Consequently if a person were to clearly see or feel this withdrawal or diverting, it would anger him, and he would regard God as an enemy, and from the evil of his native character deny Him. Therefore, lest a person become conscious of this, he is kept in a state of freedom, so that he does not know other than that he is guiding himself.

[2] But let examples serve to illustrate: Because of his heredity a person wishes to become great, and he also wishes to become rich; and to the extent that these loves are not kept in check, he wishes to become greater and richer, and eventually the

greatest and the richest. Nor would he be content in such a case, but would wish to become greater than God Himself and to possess heaven itself. This lust is inmosty present in hereditary evil, and so in a person's life and its character.

Divine providence does not take away this evil in a moment, for if it were to take it away in a moment, the person would cease to live. Rather it takes it away quietly and gradually, without the person's being at all conscious of it. It accomplishes this by permitting the person to act in accordance with the thought which he makes the thought of his reason; and by various means then it turns him away, doing so both by rational means and also by civil and moral means. And so the person is turned away to the extent that he can be turned away in freedom.

Nor can evil be taken away from anyone, unless it becomes apparent, is seen, and is acknowledged. It is like a wound which does not heal unless it is laid open.

[3] So then, if a person were to be conscious of the fact and see that the Lord through His Divine providence thus works against his life's love - the love which affords him the highest delight - he could not help but go in the opposite direction and become incensed, argue, rail, and at last, because of his evil, reject the operation of Divine providence by denying it, and thus denying God. Especially would this be the case if he were to see obstacles to his successes, himself reduced in status, and his wealth taken.

[4] It should be known, however, that the Lord never turns a person away from seeking honors or acquiring wealth, but that He turns him away from a lust to seek honors solely for his own advancement or for sake of himself, and also from acquiring wealth solely for his own wealthiness or for the sake of the wealth. At the same time, when the Lord turns a person away from these, He introduces him into a love of useful endeavors, so that the person looks for advancement not for the sake of himself but for the sake of being useful, so that it is an advancement of useful endeavors, and consequently of self, and not an advancement of self, and consequently of useful endeavors. So, likewise, with wealth.

AC 561. But what are remnants? Not only the goods and truths which one has learned from the Word of the Lord from early childhood onwards and so had imprinted in his memory, but also all resulting states, such as states of innocence from early childhood; states of love towards parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and friends; states of charity towards the neighbor, and also of compassion on the poor and needy; in short, all states involving good and truth. These states, together with the goods and truths that have been imprinted in the memory, are called remnants, which the Lord preserves with a person and stores away in his internal self, though the person himself is not at all directly conscious of this. Here they are separated completely from the things that are the person's own, that is, evils and falsities. The Lord so preserves all of those states with the individual that not even the least of them perishes.... If a person possessed no remnants, he would inevitably be subject to eternal condemnation.