

## Bargaining With the Lord

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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? Far be it from You to do 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?’” Genesis 18:23-25

Bargaining with God. Amazing! How can one argue with the Infinite? Does God change His mind? Is He susceptible to flattery and praise? Will He alter the course of providence if we can give good reasons for what we think is right?

Imagine Abraham, in hopes of saving his brother Lot who lived in the condemned city of Sodom, coming near to the Lord and posing a rhetorical question as to whether God would destroy good people who were living among the evil. It’s interesting that he did not seem to entirely trust God to be merciful. So he specified fifty as the number of good people that shouldn’t be consumed with the wicked. And before the Lord could answer, Abraham tried appealing to His vanity by calling Him the “Judge of all the earth.”

Jehovah’s response is even more interesting. He didn’t condemn Abraham for his tactics. He didn’t answer in an obscure way. He seemed to go along with it. Yes, He said, if there were fifty just found in Sodom the city would be spared.

But this did not satisfy Abraham. He then posited whether Sodom could be saved if there were five less – forty-five. Again, obtaining a positive response, he dropped the number of those who were good from forty-five to forty, from forty to thirty, from thirty to twenty, and finally from twenty to ten. With each drop he increased the possibility that his brother and family would be saved. Yet in the end there were not found even ten good people and the city was consumed. Lot and some others escaped, but the city was so filled with wickedness that it was not preserved.

Left with the literal sense alone this is a most confusing story – does God change His mind like that? Can we bargain with Him to our advantage? It’s fortunate that we have the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church to describe what is taking place spiritually. For it is a beautiful description of the Lord’s love and mercy toward the entire human race.

This story depicts a phase in the Lord’s development while in the world when He was especially aware of human frailties and the evil present with people, the hellish state of Sodom. The dialog between Abraham and Jehovah was actually an internal reflection by the Lord regarding how little good had to be present with people for them still to be saved and go to heaven. The numbers that are used of good people remaining – fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty and ten – describe the various stages of regeneration which enable one to receive heaven in their hearts.

Fifty, the first number offered by Abraham, means a full regenerate state – “truths...full of goods” (AC 2252). This is the ideal. It is a state in which we have a firm knowledge of what is true and a powerful love of living that truth. In fact there is so much of good within that there is a pure delight in seeing the truth and an inner satisfaction in doing it. When this state exists life is preserved, the city is not destroyed. While there may be evils still clinging to the regenerate person they can then be separated when the natural body is put off. The good is not destroyed, any evils in the person do not harm spiritual life (AC 2256).

Yet what of those who are not as perfect as this? Those who know a lot about what the Word says but have not put it all into practice yet? Perhaps the fifty righteous persons will lack five. The number forty-five describes those who are well along in the path to regeneration but still have many evils with which they are dealing – “with whom there should be less of good, but this good nevertheless conjoined with truths” (AC 2141, 2269). Yes, there is an inner ruling love of good, but it may not be obvious. The person is still drawn to what is evil and has to resist it with all his or her strength from time to time. What becomes of these? As Jehovah will spare the city for forty-five so He will raise into heaven those who have the potential of fully joining what they know with their life, even if they haven’t entirely done it on earth.

Yet what of those who seem to be in constant struggle? What of those whose lives seem to be filled with turmoil – one spiritual battle after another, with apparent failures along the way? Is there hope for them? Yes, indeed there is. The Lord will spare the city for the sake of forty – those “who have been in temptations” (AC 2272). Although when a person is in the midst of struggling with evil it may seem like evil is winning, within the pain the Lord is holding the person in what is good. The Lord permits temptations that through them good and truth are strengthened and eventually become the source of eternal happiness.

Well, if those who are facing many struggles can be saved, what of those who don’t seem to have many temptations? Because they’ve not been severely tempted does it mean they cannot love good and cannot enter heaven? Jehovah will save the city for the sake of thirty – for this represents “those who have been in some combats against evils” (AC 2141). One need not face all one’s evils on this earth. All that the Lord requires is that we make a beginning, take the first steps. The Lord’s providence protects us from facing too much too soon. What is important is what choices are made during life here, not how many spiritual challenges are faced. There is plenty of opportunity in the other world for development.

Yes, but what of those who never seem to be tempted? Who seem to go through their natural lives without deeply questioning spiritual values or having struggles to do what is right? Does it mean they do not really love the Lord and the neighbor? Jehovah will save the city for the sake of twenty – “those with whom there [are] states of the affection of good” (AC 2141). Even those who have not proceeded very far in the path of regeneration are accepted by the Lord if they care for what is good in life. Perhaps they have some very simple principles to follow in their lives. If even halting attempts are made at following them a good quality is acquired.

All right then, what of those who make many bad choices in life, harming themselves and others? Who seem to be selfish on a regular basis, or thoughtlessly say or do things that are embarrassing or hurtful? Can they be saved? Jehovah will not destroy the city for the sake of ten. Even those who seem to have little good, but still have an affection for what is true can be saved (see AC 2141, 2284). People who seem to have little concern for others can still acquire a heavenly life if they embrace the ideals of the Lord's truth and care for them. Even if their follow through in life is faulty and limited, their acceptance of and affection for the truths of the Word provide the basis for their salvation. For with these people there is the kernel, the seed, that when planted in this world can bear fruit in the next.

The one and only thing that keeps anyone out of heaven is an active opposition to the Lord – elevating self and the world above all things that are good and true. Within this is an intense focus on oneself, to the exclusion of all others. And it actually contains within it a hatred towards others and the Lord. This is the only path that leads to hell, that rejects salvation and heavenly joy.

These reflections of the Lord brought Him tremendous comfort, seeing a path to fulfill His mission on earth – the salvation of the human race. For His essential love is to save the human race, to make others happy forever. Or, as the Writings state it, the Lord “wills to save everyone and by His mighty power to draw all towards heaven, that is, towards Himself” (AC 1038; for other powerful and uplifting statements like this see AC 1813; TCR 73, 577, 652:3; AE 646:3; Charity 20). Reflecting on how many can be saved, the 50-10, even though many may appear to be undeserving, satisfied His soul.

While we are not the Lord, this perspective can help us as we deal with the faults and foibles of people around us. We can look around at the people we know, perhaps those who irritate us or we find it difficult if not impossible to deal with. It's easy to judge them harshly, thinking they don't care about what is true, or don't do very much good. But perhaps we should be thinking of what might be good or worth saving there. While we can never know their spiritual states, we might consider how the Lord looks at them – seeking for what would enable them to be saved, in effect, praying for our neighbors.

As Abraham stepped the numbers down from fifty – to forty-five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten – we can think of the good and truth that might exist in others. We can think of the potential that exists even where it has not been brought into practice very often. It is this good we should focus on. We do not need to look upon what is not good.

At times we can also look into our own lives and wonder if salvation is possible for us. We may have experienced times when there seems to be the guiding light of truth and the strength of good within, fifty good people. But we also know many other times when we haven't entirely lived up to our ideals, the forty-five. And the times of forty when we are besieged with doubts and hellish struggles. Even more, we can be aware of the times of thirty and twenty when we were busy with our normal duties and were giving little thought to the Lord's presence in our lives or what we should be doing. And we are often painfully aware of the times when it seems there

are but ten good within. Is there hope for us? Can we be saved even though at times it seems there is only minimal good within?

The answer that the Lord gives to us is exactly the answer that He gave to Abraham - "I will not destroy it for the sake of ten." Wherever there is a basic belief in the Lord and initial desire do what is right, the Lord is near and can lift us up. So maybe, just maybe, there is hope for us! Although the Lord is always leading us to a deeper grasp of truth and to a higher state of good, and we should never slake our efforts to follow Him, He is willing to accept whatever of good and truth we have that He might create something of heaven within.

It is interesting then, that in spite of all the bargaining that Abraham did, not even ten good men were found within the city and Sodom was completely destroyed. What does this mean for us? It simply describes the fact that evil will sink down to its own level. Throughout our lives, and then visibly in the next world, the evil which exists with a good person will be cast away to the outer regions of life. The good will be preserved, even as Lot was, but evil is hell itself and always remains so.

Can we then bargain with the Lord to get to heaven? Of course not. But we can reflect on His mercy, His providential leading to save even where we might not think it is possible. We cannot save ourselves, but then, we don't need to – the Lord does it for us. The Lord preserves us from all evil. He preserves our soul. He preserves our going out and our coming in, from this time forth and even forever more. Amen

Lessons: Genesis 18:20-33; AC 2140, 2141

## Genesis 18

<sup>20</sup> And the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, <sup>21</sup> 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."

<sup>22</sup> Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. <sup>23</sup> And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> 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? <sup>25</sup> 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?"

<sup>26</sup> So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes."

<sup>27</sup> Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who *am but* dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: <sup>28</sup> 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*."

<sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> 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."

<sup>31</sup> 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."

<sup>32</sup> 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." <sup>33</sup> So the LORD went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

#### AC 2140

This chapter 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 goods and truths would be present. But who these are is indicated by the numbers of the righteous that are given.

#### AC 2141

While that perception [of the human race being steeped in self-love and the desire to exercise control over others from what is evil and false] existed with Him... He interceded on their behalf – first on behalf of those with whom truths were both present and filled with goods, who are meant by 'the fifty', ... then on behalf of those with whom less good was present but was nevertheless joined to truths, who are meant by 'the forty-five', ... after that on behalf of those who were undergoing temptations, who are meant by 'the forty', ... and also on behalf of those who have been involved in some conflicts with evils, who are meant by 'the thirty', ... following these on behalf of those with whom states existed of affection for good, which were from some other source, who are meant by 'the twenty', ... and finally on behalf of those with whom states of affection for truth existed, who are meant by 'the ten' .... And each time the reply came back that they were to be saved ....