

Reading the Word

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One does not have to be associated with this New Church for long before hearing that one ought to be reading the Word – the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church. While this is done to a greater or lesser extent by members, it is a fundamental goal to have people go to the Word for themselves.

This has roots as far back as the beginning of the Bible. The Ten Commandments and rest of the laws were proclaimed to the people on a very regular basis (Exodus 24:7; Joshua 8:34f). Kings were told read the Word daily to learn of the Lord, to follow its teachings, and to keep them humble (Deut. 17:19, 20). And when the Lord was on earth, on at least six occasions when He was questioned or challenged, He began by saying, “Have you never read in the Scriptures?” (Matthew 12:5, 19:4, 21:16, 21:42, 22:31; Mark 12:10) He expected them to have read His Word, and to know something from it!

Then in the New Church we have this injunction: "Read the Word, and believe in the Lord, and you will see the truths which should make up your faith and life" (AR 224:3). And we are told, “the church where the Word is read and the Lord thereby known, is as the heart and lungs” of His kingdom (SS 105, 110; TCR 268, 270; Ath 2; De Verbo 17). In essence, our turning to the Word and reading it is the basis for the church – in general and in our personal lives.

And if our eyesight is perhaps not as strong as in our youthful days, listening to any reading of the Word is equally useful. For “reading” includes listening. Thus, we find the frequent phrase “truths which one hears or reads” (AC 2701, 5340; SS 76; AR 881; LJP 338; AE 545:3, 546C:3, 547, 721:8; see also AC 10604:3, De Verbo 7:2). This means that listening to the Word read in church or listening to a recording of it, accomplishes the same end.

Now, we’ve often heard that we ought to read the Word for the sake of the angels. And it’s true! - as pointed out by many passages in the Heavenly Doctrines (NJHD 259; HH 306; WH 10). But the effect is not just some vague, “the angels like it.” Rather, it affects them in specific ways.

For one, as we read the Word, the angels associated with us learn new truths (AC 2249:3). Imagine that, we can instruct the angels! And it is more than just them learning new things; whenever we read the Word it clarifies their thinking, enabling them to set aside previous misconceptions and cloudy understandings (AC 2249:3). We are certainly not aware of this, especially when we read the natural stories, for the angels are in the spiritual sense. But this is something that we can do for the angels at any time.

Another way our reading the Word affects them is it touches their feelings. As the Heavenly Doctrines note, “there flows in from the Lord a holiness into the good spirits who are with the person who is reading the Word” (AC 9419:2, 8972:2). The Word is not simply a book of knowledge. It also embodies all the goods from the Lord, all the caring affections and

positive feelings that can exist. We, in effect, provide a conduit for the Lord to flow into the angels when we read, uplifting their spirits.

Still another way reading the Word affects angels is that it creates representatives before their eyes. Consider what Swedenborg once experienced:

“When I was reading Joshua chapter 3 about the crossing of the Jordan, many [spirits] were seized with burning desire to portray to each other the crossing of the Jordan, because the land of Canaan symbolizes heaven, and so they would come into heaven. This was then granted them, and for a whole hour or more, they were portrayed crossing the Jordan, together with their families and their possessions, the ark going before them and staying in the midst of the Jordan until they had passed across. These particulars were all depicted most beautifully before their eyes.... From time to time I sensed with what diligence and eagerness they were crossing, and how afterwards, when they had crossed over, they rejoiced at heart.” (SE 2289)

Their desire to act out this Biblical event was inspired by Swedenborg’s reading of it in the Word. Thus when we read of something there, we provide an opportunity for spirits to enter more fully into the Word.

And this leads to one last use to us reading the Word for the angels – it just makes them happy! We’re told that it places them “in a happy celestial state” (AC 3690:2; see also AC 5398:3, 5249). Yes, angels have plenty of joy and happiness every day of their lives. But we can tangibly add to that happiness whenever we read the Word, giving them something they otherwise would not have.

So, the simple act of reading or listening to the Word has tremendous value for the spirits and angels around us. But it also has a many effects upon us also.

Obviously, we can learn new truths when we do it (AC 10400:2). This can be either new light shed on what we thought we knew before, or seeing something that had escaped us previously (AE 941:2). We are also affirmed or strengthened in truths we had before. Why else would there be such delight in the Christmas, Easter or June 19th stories, told over again each year; or hearing a treasured recitation?

And regularly reading the Word can be a compass for us, redirecting us again and again to the Lord’s purposes for our lives. This constant slight re-aligning can keep us on the “straight and narrow,” reminding us of what is really important in life and how all the troubles of this world, while they may seem so huge, are really minor in the Lord’s grand scheme of things.

More than that, we are told that “they who are in enlightenment when reading the Word, see the Lord” (AC 9411; SS 57). Yes, we see the Lord most obviously in the stories of the New Testament. But also in the Old Testament and throughout the Writings for the New Church. In fact, all the truths in the Word “are so many mirrors of the Lord” (TCR 508e; AR

938:2; TCR 6:2, 11:3; Inv. 41). Every least idea reflects some aspect of the Lord and how He operates in our lives. How better to feel close to Him than by seeing Him in His Word?

Helping in this is the connection the Word provides between us, the angels, and the Lord. We are taught that,

“there are angels with every one, who perceive his thoughts, and who apprehend the Word spiritually while he is reading it, and that through [the angels] what is holy then flows in from the Lord, and thus that through them there is conjunction of heaven with a person, consequently conjunction of the Lord through the heavens with him.” (AC 10137:2, 5247:7)

This connection also benefits our regeneration. While reading the Word alone cannot create heaven within us – periodic repentance and daily self-compulsion being required for that – it is another way the Lord instills good within us. We’re taught: “when a person reads the Word and draws truths from it, the Lord attaches good” (CL 128). When we read it our “interior or spiritual mind looks to the Lord, and the Lord then elevates it up to Himself, and with it the lower or natural mind, thus withdrawing it from our proprium” (AE 177:3, 714:10).

Even more than that, if we come to the Word with an open heart and desire to learn its truths to become better people, the Writings state, “all evil and falsity are removed while we are reading the Word, because the Lord then enlightens us and leads us” (AC 10638:2; AE 176:4). It’s doubtful that just reading the Word will remove deep-seated feelings of superiority, lusts, or other serious evils. But it can modify them, lessening their impact on our lives. So what a wonderful way it is to help our spiritual development!

What’s amazing is how little effort or time this takes. We are encouraged to “read the Word every day, one or two chapters” (AE 803). And how long does that take? The time it takes to get a shower, or skim the headlines? For minimal time and effort the rewards can be astonishing – for the angels and ourselves. And what a wonderful way for those who perhaps feel less useful due to physical challenges to make a real difference in their lives and in the lives of spirits and angels!

Granted, we are not conscious of what the Lord is doing within. We are taught that the truths from the Word “with the light of heaven, flow into the minds of people, even when they are unaware of the fact” (SS 41). Amazing! The Lord touches our spirits and improves our spiritual lives while we seem to be doing a simple task, spending a few minutes a day reading, without us feeling a distinct difference.

This also addresses the question of how much of the Word do we have to understand in our reading. Certainly, the Word is meant to be understood. If we could not see truths there that have meaning in our lives, it would not be read. And the Lord certainly uses it as His primary way of communicating with us. But we’ve all found sections where it is hard, if not impossible to gain a clear idea of what is going on. Some of the portions of the prophets

speaking of cities, people or events which are beyond our experience, or the seemingly trivial laws in Exodus and Leviticus, or some of the more challenging aspects of the Writings, discussing discrete degrees in the Divine Love and Wisdom or the subtle aspects of regeneration in the Arcana Coelestia, can leave us wondering if we understand any of it. Yet, we are assured that “light flows in and enlightens, although the person is unaware of it” (AC 10551:2; see also AC 3480:2, 1871, 5466).

So while we may tend towards reading sections of the Word that are easier to follow – the psalms, the gospels or Heaven and Hell – there is value in reading all of it, even the portions that may make little sense to us at the time. We should not shy away from occasionally picking up Isaiah or the Arcana – to expand our horizons and to let the Lord lead us by means of them.

All it really takes is coming to the Word with a humble spirit and willingness to learn. Then the holiness of the Lord flows into us, enveloping us in His love. It is not a “cure all,” saving us regardless of our life and loves. But it provides a basis for that life of good. It holds untold specific and varied benefits for the angels around us and for ourselves. So let us embrace the treasure-chest of the Word in our arms by reading and listening to it, and let us then throw it heavenwards, so that it reaches the angels, providing them and us with priceless gems.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 24:3-7; Deuteronomy 17:18-20; TCR 238

Exodus 24 (After Moses had received the 10 Commandments and various other laws)

³ So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do." ⁴ And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half the blood and put *it* in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient."

Deut. 17

¹⁸ "Also it shall be, when [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from *the one* before the priests, the Levites. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment *to* the right hand or *to* the left, and that he may prolong *his* days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.

TCR 238

The Word in its literal sense is like a treasure-chest, in which lie arranged in rows precious stones, pearls and diadems. If a person regards the Word as holy and reads it as a useful guide to life, the thoughts in his mind can be compared to one who holds such a chest in his hand, and throws it heavenwards; and as it rises it flies open and the treasures inside reach the angels, who take great pleasure in seeing and carefully examining them. The pleasure they get from this is shared with people and brings about association and also the sharing of perceptions.