

## The Greatest Gift

A Christmas Sermon December 25, 2022

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### [Jehovah] bowed the heavens also, and came down... (Psalm 18:9)

What would it be like to ‘witness’ the Lord’s birth from the perspective of being an angel in heaven? We have the story of the host of angels celebrating the good news with the shepherds. There had to be tremendous rejoicing in heaven. On that desert night, the angels articulated their excitement of the Lord’s birth with a joy of a quality far deeper than any joy we could comprehend on earth.

But there was more to it than simple joy. The angels’ expression of happiness isn’t just a inconsequential detail of the story, their interaction with the Lord is a key part of the advent with its universal system that the Lord put in place supporting the salvation of the human race.

For the Lord to accomplish His mission of saving humanity, heaven had to change, and with it, the angels needed to change too. And with these changes, the relationship between the Lord, heaven, and the human race was altered for all time. This shift is spoken of in the Heavenly Doctrines:

**“[Jehovah] came down in the form of Divine Truth, which is the Word and which was God with God, and took upon Himself the human form, so as to reduce to order everything in heaven, in hell and in the church. For at that time, the power of hell was stronger than the power of heaven, and on earth the power of evil was stronger than the power of good, so that utter damnation stood threatening at the gates. This impending damnation was removed by Jehovah God by means of His Human, which was Divine Truth, and thus angels and men were redeemed.” (TCR 3)**

The Lord’s reordering was a dramatic event that altered everything in the spiritual world. At the time of the advent, the angels didn’t know the full nature of the changes that would be asked of them. While we can completely understand that hell needed reordering and subjugation. And we could say the same about the world which was, at the time of the Lord’s advent, filled with cruelty as a product of deeply ingrained selfishness. But it might seem surprising that the angels in heaven also needed to change their ways of interacting with both the Lord and the Human Race.

We see this reflected in Psalm 18:9 (used as our text) which prophecies of the advent saying: **‘Jehovah bowed the heavens and came down.’** One would think that this reference to the angels would be joyful and filled with happiness, but it is actually pretty dark. The Psalm makes clear reference to the conflict that was to take place with the Lord’s coming even in the heavens. We read that **“He came down with darkness under His feet”**; that **“He made darkness His secret place;”** and that **“His thick clouds passed with hailstones and coals of fire.”** We see something of the gravity of Lord’s purposes with the angels with the reference to ‘bowing the heavens’ which here means to ‘prostrate’, ‘stretch-out’, or to ‘humble’ – none of which sounds particularly easy or light-hearted.

The Heavenly Doctrines build on this by noting that even the angels were challenged by the Lord's coming; that while they certainly rejoiced and welcomed His Advent, part of the Lord's purposes involved serious temptations on their part (Arcana Caelestia 4295, 4287, 4307).

The state of heaven, by the time the Lord was born on earth, was that angels had assumed responsibility and ownership for tasks that really were the Lord's. They were inserting themselves in the work of saving people in efforts that reflected their own proprium or self-interest. They also wanted to "help" the Lord in His process of glorification by showing Him what **they** thought He should be doing. This was a boundary that had been crossed by angels, who had moved from supporting, protecting and inspiring with the Lord's goods and truths, crossing into a place where they were attempting to meddle with the outcome by inserting themselves inappropriately into the equation.

The Lord, through His life on earth was able to reestablish this boundary. He showed them through His becoming the Divine Human (God present in perfect Human form) that while it **is** the role of angels to cooperate with the Lord, they in NO Way were to contribute anything from their own self-interest into the Divine work of salvation. This was unnecessary.

Consider this teaching about the Lord and His interaction with the angels. We read that **"when the Lord made the Human within Himself Divine, He too had communities of spirits and angels around Him; for it was His will that everything should be accomplished in keeping with order. But He chose for Himself the kind of communities that would be of service, and changed them as seemed good to Him. Yet, He did not take any good or truth at all from them and apply it to Himself, but only from the Divine."** (Arcana Caelestia 4075 (and 4073)\*)

The indication is that the angels themselves tried to supply goods and truths to the Lord thinking that they could change Him. But, of course, even the angels could not do this, for no finite being can teach the infinite anything.

What is implied here is that the angels had something selfish embedded in their desire to teach out of an effort to manage the Lord's divine purposes in life. And this mistaken notion had to be dealt with and laid aside. So, in response, the Lord bowed the heavens – meaning that He humbled the heavens. Then He was able to differentiate His Divine work from the angels genuine abilities of introducing His goods and truths using them to bring light to situations that are evil. He clarified that His divine role for the angels is to simply act as 'messengers' to the human race - nothing more. After all, the name 'angel' is an ancient word meaning nothing other than 'messenger' or 'messenger of God.' You could say that an angel's job is to share the Lord's messages. And with the Lord's advent the Angels were warned to not attempt to author the messages themselves leaving any trace of their own proprial (selfish) nature.

The Lord's coming in Human form allowed, then, the angels to redirect their focus on what they were permitted to do to help. And while there was **nothing** from their selfish nature that they could do for the Lord, they could serve Him by communicating about of the states that they were experiencing. States that they themselves experienced, and states that they observed by interacting with others. This shared information about these states allowed the Lord to respond to those states from Himself with His divine love and wisdom.

This might be considered deep theology because from our earthly perspective it is difficult for us to fully comprehend. But the point is, this is important information for us from the perspective that the angels and the kingdom of heaven continue to play a critical role in our

lives today helping us prepare for life in heaven. Not only does this explain how we are influenced by angelic communities that are subconsciously around us every moment of every day, but this example of the angels teaches us how we too should be interacting with others.

If one was going to boil down the reasons for the Lord's Advent into the simplest of terms it would be this: the Lord came to provide the antidote to selfishness at all levels of human spiritual existence including heaven! The Lord came to bring awareness that self-centered living was destroying the universe, threatening all human life. To take that a step deeper, he came to re-establish the notion that selfishness comes from the false belief that the life we are living is our own – a notion that is the origin of all evil. Then, we (falsely) believe that **we** are the origin of our own happiness; and in consequence we believe we generate our own pleasures; and we believe we manufacture our own insights and world view; and that we are responsible for our own success and progress in life.

The fact is that all of this is an appearance. We do not own any of it and therefore we cannot claim true responsibility for our thoughts, our wisdom, the uses we perform, or anything that might be considered successful.

This was perhaps the most stunning news that the Lord brought with His birth. It was news to heaven, to the human race, and certainly to the spirits in hell. One might also say that this news was the greatest gift that the Lord could bring into the world -the concept that we, as human beings, do not actually own anything. Everything that contributes toward our ability to be truly human in the Lord's image and likeness flows into us from above.

Consider this earthshaking passage from the Arcana Caelestia: **“if a person were to believe as things really are, which is that everything good and true comes from the Lord and everything evil and false from hell, he could not have been found guilty of any offence or had evil ascribed to himself. But because he believes that it begins in himself he takes evil as his own; for his belief causes this to happen. Thus evil clings and cannot be separated from him. Indeed the person's nature is such that he would be indignant if anyone told him that his thoughts and desires came from others and did not begin in himself.” (Arcana Caelestia 6324)**

This teaching unlocks the key to what it means to be a human being! In order to be human, one has to come to realize that nothing originates in self; that everything of conscious human life originates outside of self. Human Beings are receivers or vessels of life. Knowing that and living according to that knowledge, allows us to become human and be saved.

To put it another way, the Lord came into the world to make clear to all human life that no finite being is the origin of their own life. The Lord grants us the ability to experience life 'as if of ourselves' but that is only a feeling which is generated by the experience of receiving life from the infinite, but it is not the reality.

Scripture teaches this. We read from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus words saying **“let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’, whatever is more than these is from the evil one”** (Matthew 5:37). And this was echoed in the message to the rich young ruler when Jesus said **“go and sell all that you have and give to the poor and you will have riches in heaven...”** (Matthew 19:21).

The passages are not suggesting that one divest oneself of all material possessions, rather they teach that all aspects of our lives are entrusted to our care allowing us to interact with and use to serve others. All of our abilities, our insights, our possessions are simply means

for us to serve the Lord and His kingdom, they are not ends in themselves and as such offer no intrinsic happiness on their own.

We are taught that realizing this is **‘the origin of true [human] happiness!’** (Arcana Caelestia 4220). And that **“when this is a person's state, peace can be granted to him, for he trusts solely in the Lord. Nor can peace be granted to anyone else but those who have that faith springing from charity; for others constantly plunge themselves into anxious cares and evil desires that give rise to feelings of unease”** (Arcana Caelestia 6225).

These are powerful teachings! All our happiness and sense of peace are dependent on recognizing that all goodness and truth and all falsity and evil are from sources outside of self.

When the Infinite Lord who was Divine Love, Divine Wisdom, and Life itself was born on earth as a Human Being, He showed humankind that He was the origin of all life, all wisdom and all happiness. His greatest gift to the human race is letting us know that He alone through, His Divine Humanity, gives us the ability to be human – to live and love others. He alone brings the power to overcome evil (evils that we of our selves can be convinced we cannot live without).

True Christianity describes the Lord’s birth as having caused the spiritual sun to shine seven times more brightly than before He was born on earth (TCR 109, AC 1530, Isa. 30:26). The angels bowed, (humbled themselves) to let this divine power shine anew into the world. And with this miraculous event, the Human Race is offered the ability to receive the power of the Lord’s love and wisdom enabling us to live and serve and bring the message of the Lord’s gentle healing love for all the world to see.

Lessons: Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14 Arcana Caelestia 4180 [5]

Lesson: AC 4180 Before the Lord came into the world the Divine itself flowed into the whole of heaven; and because heaven at that time consisted for the most part of those who were celestial, that is, who were governed by the good of love, that influx of God's Almighty power furnished the light which shone in the heavens, and with that light wisdom and intelligence.

But when the human race departed from the good of love and charity it was no longer possible for that light to be provided by way of heaven, nor consequently for the wisdom and intelligence to come through to the human race. For this reason, so that the human race might be saved, the Lord out of necessity came into the world and made Divine the Human within Himself in order that as to that Divine Human He might become Divine Light, and in so doing might bring light to the whole of heaven and to the whole world.

He had been from eternity Light itself, for the Divine itself passing through the heavens was the source of that Light. And it was the Divine itself which took on the Human and made this Human Divine; and once that Human had been made Divine He was then able to bring light not only to the celestial heaven itself but also to the spiritual heaven, and to the human race too, which received and receives Divine Truth within good, that is, within love to Him and within charity towards the neighbour, as is evident in John,

As many as received Him, to them He gave power to be sons of God, to those believing in His name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. [John 1:12-13](#).