

The Still Small Voice

How the Lord leads us out of temptations

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Over 800 years before the Lord's coming there arose a great prophet called Elijah. He was indeed a very great and powerful prophet. He started his role as prophet by predicting a great drought (I Kings 17). He performed miracles such as raising the widow's son (I Kings 17). Then he confronted 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah in a climactic showdown on top of Mount Carmel by commanding the Lord to consume the altar with fire after their altar remained unlit. As we can see, he proved himself to be a great prophet from the beginning.

We can liken Elijah's successful start to times when we feel that things are under control. We may feel successful in certain areas, but the best we can ever feel is when we are together with the Lord, there is a sense of peace. And peace is simply when the good things we do are paired with the truth of our faith. Or better yet, we feel peace when our will and understanding are conjoined, which can happen every so often when we are striving to live according to the Lord's commandments. But then, as with Elijah, something happens. For Elijah it was Jezebel threatening his life. For us it could be something unfortunate, or something unexpected. There could be a variety of things that can go wrong. What bothers you the most is that unsettling feeling, or that the sense of peace you used to have is now at stake.

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon. She was married to king Ahab of Israel and various times, as it is written, she enticed him to sin (16: 31; 21:25). She corrupted her husband and Israelitish nation with idolatry. She supported about 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah (18: 19), and suppressed worship of the Lord (18:4, 13). As we can see from the Word, her influence in Israel was very strong. It was strong enough to instill fear in Elijah as we read. All these details on Jezebel, who she was and what she did, show exactly what evil does. According to the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church, Jezebel represents faith separated from charity (AR 132). Faith separated from charity is what produces evil deeds, because if there is no charity or love to the Lord and the neighbor, then there is only selfish love, or love of worldly things as the end. And just as Jezebel had a strong influence over Israel, the loves of self and the world can have a strong influence over our lives if we're not careful.

When Jezebel heard what Elijah had done to the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, she sent the message to him saying that she intended to do the same to him. What Elijah did in response to this threat is pretty much the same as what we should do when we are threatened by some lurking, selfish desire. Elijah ran away. Elijah ran away into the wilderness. And so the temptation is on. The temptation actually began with Jezebel threatening Elijah, because it was an attack, and temptation is nothing but an attack from the hells on our good loves.

What is remarkable about this story is the progression of events after Elijah ran. Each subsequent incident describes how the Lord leads us through temptations and how our state will always change. In each incident the Lord is present in some way: when Elijah was under the broom tree, the Lord was present through an angel. In the cave, the Lord was present in His Word. Then out on Mount Horeb He was present in a voice. Each incident supplied something in order to move on to the next event.

The first and most important thing to remember when we are in a state of temptation is that the Lord is more closely present with us. In fact the Lord is ever more present with us than any other moment. This is contrary to all appearances. When we are down and under attack, we often feel that the Lord is far from us. But if it weren't for His presence we would perish in an instant. The Lord's special presence increases our spiritual freedom so we can see and choose from ourselves what we need to do.

It may not seem like we have freedom at all when enduring the attack of a temptation. We feel down, hopeless, that there is nothing we can do about it. Yet we can take a number of steps to get out of temptation. And we are free to do so because the Lord is with us protecting that very freedom that will help us get out of trouble. So what do we do? After Elijah came to a broom tree and slept there, he ate the bread that was by his head, and he drank water. He was commanded by the angel to do so, which may seem like a violation of freedom. The truth is, however, that the Lord is the freedom Himself despite how we see it. When we compel ourselves to focus on the goods of love and the truths of faith, represented here by bread and water that Elijah consumed, we do so under the Lord's power yet as though of ourselves. This way, we are free but still under the Lord's command, and in this way does the Lord eventually lead us out of temptation. And, from freedom, that is from the Lord, we try to focus on all the good things of love and all the true things of our faith, which are also from God. So in a picture, the Lord is leading us in freedom to Himself. But we're not quite there yet.

The reason why we're not quite there is because we must endure the state of temptation first, which is represented in the Word by "forty days and forty nights." After Elijah awoke and ate, he traveled forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb. "Forty days and nights" represent a state of temptations, as we see many times throughout the Word. His eating and drinking bread

and water under the tree was not the solution to his problem, just as focusing on goodness and truth is not a solution for us. These things only help us on our way as the angel said "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you" (I Kings 19:8). The goodness and truth are what keep the Lord with us. They sustain us. They keep us alive and moving so that we can make it to the next phase. The next phase is where the Word instruct us. And we need instruction most when we are in doubt, or as though we were in a cave.

This is the next place Elijah goes to, a cave. It's a closed place. The reason why we may not see the answers, or a solution right away is because our minds are still clouded with doubts and distress. The Lord guides us still, as the angel did with Elijah, yet we are still in a state of temptation so not everything will seem clear. We can see this kind of obscure state from Elijah spending the night in a cave. A "cave" indicates the quality of reception with us during a state of temptation. Since a cave is closed, the quality will be more obscure. When this is the case we are in what the Heavenly Doctrine call the "good of falsity" or "obscure good" (AC 2463). Here we try to do good, but not really sure why. Or, we know what we need to do, but there is no sense of meaning or purpose. It's something like going through the motions, helping others, doing our regular duties, but feeling that something is lacking. This is obscure good. It is called "obscure good" because it is still good, it benefits others, but the truth that comes with it is also obscure, so we end up being short on clarity and meaning. This is a result of the falsities clouding our minds, since we have been under attack in temptation. In these types of moments, seeking guidance from the Word is vital.

It was in the cave that the Word spoke to Elijah. Elijah did not read the Word, the Word spoke to him. How true is this for us? Do we really read the Word or does it speak to us? Obviously reading the Word is our part, and when we do read the Word we usually have

questions, or issues, concerns, something that we hope will get resolved. These questions we have actually come from the Lord, because with questions we begin a quest for the answers. We know something is wrong so we tend to figure out why. There are many places in the Word where the Lord or an angel asks someone what's wrong. It is the driving question. It's not that the Lord doesn't know the answer. Instead, by providing questions, He invites us to reflect on our current state and tell Him what's going on. This way we see for ourselves what is wrong and what we need to change. So when the Word of the Lord asked Elijah what was wrong, Elijah revealed the situation, he got it out, it then went to the Lord's hands. Yet even after this, the Word did not give a direct solution to his problem. It simply told Elijah where to go next, or how to be able to find the Lord.

We may find that reading the Word doesn't always give us the help that we want. We may end up turning to some seemingly obscure passage or story that appears completely irrelevant to what we are going through at the time. But the Word isn't always a place where we find all the answers to our problems. Rather, it is a guide, "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119: 105). It helps us find the answers ourselves. This is how we benefit from the Word, it helps us reflect on our lives. It elevates our minds into more spiritual light where we will find the Lord. And so the Word of the Lord told Elijah to stand on top of the mountain where he would see the Lord.

When we receive guidance from the Word, we may be able to determine what is proper and fitting in our lives and what is not so proper. Determining what is proper involves being able to see what is from the Lord. When we are in a state of temptation, often times we desire the Lord to intervene. We may even feel like giving up our freedom to have the Lord come and take care of the problem for us. This is the type of thinking we have when we are under attack. We

become stuck in the natural world where things are heavy and bothersome, and we are distracted from focusing on more spiritual things where things are purer and more serene. This kind of natural thinking comes at us like a "strong wind" and can even break into pieces like rocks the key truths we build our lives on. But about the "strong wind" and the rocks breaking to pieces, we read that the "Lord was not in the wind." Such persuasive thoughts and natural thinking have nothing good in them; they are what lead us to forsake the covenant with the Lord, which was one of three concerns Elijah had about the Children of Israel. After the wind there was an earthquake. And so we have been shaken by an assault on our minds and we are in a state of instability and doubt; it assaults any heavenly loves we have like tearing down altars, another of Elijah's concerns . Yet we read again that "the Lord was not in the earthquake." After the earthquake there was a fire. Strong desires rise up and we feel tendencies to commit certain acts that would harm others, like killing the Lord's prophets with the sword; yet another of Elijah's concerns. Yet, as before, we read that "the Lord was not in the fire." When we are able to see and know that the Lord was not the cause of the influential thoughts we had, the unstable state of mind we were in, or the selfish desires we felt, then we are opened and ready to hear the Lord. And so after the fire there was a "still small voice." It was a delicate whisper. It was nothing but peace and that is where the Lord is.

After the still small voice, Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle and approached the Lord outside the cave. At this point the voice of the Lord asks again "what are you doing here, Elijah?" It's the same question as in the cave, but this time in a different state of mind. Elijah responded the same as he said in the cave. This time, since he has endured the journey and has approached the Lord, a solution will come to his troubles. As for us, when we have attained a clear state of mind and sense of peace, we are then able to present our problems to the Lord with

understanding. With this, we will be given a clear sense of direction. We will know just what to do as the Lord told Elijah exactly what to do.

At this point, Elijah had an answer. He was to anoint Hazael king over Syria, Jehu king over Israel, and Elisha to be the next prophet. It would seem that his problems are solved and are taken care of. But it was not the end of the story, Elijah just got to a place where he could proceed with his duties with the Lord's help. And so when we have been comforted from a state of temptation and we start to feel peace again, we may find that it is easier to carry on with our regular duties. We get to fulfill once again the purpose for which we were born, and that is to be useful and of service to others. In addition, we get to see that things were not as bad as they seemed to have been, because the Lord always preserves countless things we had previously been unaware of. Elijah discovered that things weren't as bad as they seem since the Lord told him that He has reserved 7,000 in Israel who have not bowed down to Baal, nor kissed him.

So the task for this week is to listen to the still small voice. It's not really a matter of hearing it or not, but whether we are paying attention to it. Are we tuned in? Are we opened to receive? What kind of questions or concerns shall we bring before the Lord? It will be different for each one of us. But the process is the same: bread and water, rely on the good things of love and the truths of your faith to sustain you; the Word of God, the fountain of life, a guide for your spiritual path; the still small voice, the Lord Himself talking to you, a sense of peace. Peace and tranquility are what we get to experience after the Lord has lead us out of temptation. No more turmoil. No more instability. Just peace and complete "confidence in the Lord, that He directs all things, and provides all things, and that He leads to a good end" (AC 8455).

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 11: 1-10 (Children); I Kings 19: 1-18; AC 3696:2, 8455:3

AC 3696 [2] [Concerning those who have begun regeneration] at first he is in a state of tranquility; but as he passes into a new life, he also passes at the same time into an un-tranquil state; for the evils and falsities with which he had before emerge and come forth, and disturb him, and this at last to such a degree that he is in temptations and trials inflicted by the diabolical crew, who are continually striving to destroy the state of his new life. Yet inmostly the man is in a state of peace, for unless this were with him inmostly, he would not fight, for in his battlings he is continually looking to this state as the end, and unless he had such an end, he would in no wise have power and strength to fight. This moreover is the reason why he overcomes; and because this is the end in view, he also comes into this state after the combats or temptations. This is like the state of spring, which succeeds the state of autumn and winter; or it is like the state of dawn, which succeeds evening and night.

AC 8455 [3] Concerning the state of peace which prevails in heaven it can be said that it is such as cannot be described by any words, neither, so long as he is in the world, can it come into the thought and perception of man, by means of any idea derived from the world. It is then above all sense. Tranquility of mind, content, and gladness from success, are relatively nothing; for these affect only his externals; whereas peace affects the inmost things of all-the first substances, and the beginnings of substances in the man, and therefrom distributes and pours itself forth into the substantiates and derivatives, and affects them with pleasantness; and affects the origins of ideas, consequently the man's ends of life, with satisfaction and happiness; and thus makes the mind of the man a heaven.

The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion together; and a little child will lead them. And the young cow and the bear will feed; their young will lie down together. Isa. 11:6, 7.
No fear of evil, unable to be infested with falsities because present / one with the Lord. For kids, like being good especially when someone is around