

## The Challenge of an Uncertain Future

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.’ ~ Exodus 16:4

Probably more energy is wasted worrying about the future than anything else in our human experience. We worry about our health, our careers and our finances; we worry about time, opportunities and decisions; we worry about whether people will like and accept us or not, whether we can perform adequately in various circumstances, and of course whether we’ll fail overall or be successful – however we think about that. We worry about ourselves, we worry about others, we worry about organizations (like the nation or the church), and we worry about the ecological stability of the whole planet. To top it off probably most of us at one time or another have worried about life after death: will we make it to heaven or not? Will we have enough time to get our act together in this world before we leave it for the next... or not?

And yet the Lord says, “Do not worry...” for your heavenly Father knows all the things that you need. Indeed, He says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).

So the question is, given all the uncertainty that does exist in our lives, given all the tension and the accelerating pace of change that we must face from week to week, given the responsibilities that we feel for ourselves and our families, how can we learn to live in the present without worry? How can we meet the challenge of the unknown with equanimity and peace?

There are hundreds of stories in the Word that speak to this question, and even more passages in the heavenly doctrines that help us to understand the issues involved. Perhaps this morning we can take a careful look at just one or two lessons and see some of the spiritual implications in them that shed light on how the Lord provides for us every day.

The first lesson is about the manna, the peculiar bread provided for the Children of Israel during their 40 year journey through the wilderness on the way from Egypt to Canaan. We’ve talked about this before. Some of you may remember the demonstration we had in the family service a few years ago, when the children gathered up coriander seeds from the floor and filled small bowls with them. One of the things that was so powerful about that was the recognition that to do it they had to get down on their hands and knees, a real representation of the humility we all need if we are to gather up what is good from the Lord.

This is discussed at length in the Arcana, especially passage numbers 8478 and 8480 (read as lessons this morning). The point of reference is that in gathering the manna the people were told to gather ***just so much and no more each day***, trusting the Lord to provide for the next day – and the next, and so on for forty long, brutal years in the wilderness (Numbers 14:34). So the difficulty of this is also represented. Our experience with ***other people*** often teaches us that we can’t trust them to do what they promise, and that makes it hard even to trust the Lord. But, we read, “Those who trust in [Him] are constantly receiving good from Him; for ***whatever happens to***

*them*, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, *is nevertheless good*, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness” (AC 8480:3).

The problem with the Israelites, of course, is that they *didn't* trust the Lord. And so they suffered. The extra manna that they gathered in anticipation of the next day bred worms, representing falsities arising from their self-concerns, and they were constantly having to fight against various enemies, and to endure other consequences of their grumbling and disobedience. The worms are particularly interesting – if that's the right word – because like falsities they gnaw and so torment their host – just as worries about the future gnaw at us and so torment *us*.

But the question is, what can we DO about this? What can we learn from the Lord about how to face the challenges of an uncertain future – for ourselves, our families, our church, and even the earth itself, as we barrel along through one political and ecological crisis after another?

The Lord speaks to this in our other lesson, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25-34) *urging* us not to worry about our lives – what we should eat or what we should drink or how we should be clothed. And what could be more BASIC than these needs? Yet He said, “Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?” Now the Greek word for “stature” can mean length, age, or time of life, as well as size. So we may ask, will worrying make you grow – or live longer? The truth is, No. Recent studies have shown that even *mild anxiety* can actually shorten a person's life.<sup>1</sup> “Therefore,” the Lord said, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34).

Okay; easier said than done. What are the practical tools we can apply to this challenge?

Well, as usual the Lord does not leave us guessing. In counseling us to “look at the birds of the air” He actually gives profound advice, for birds have no thoughts about the future, they just DO what they know they must do; the instinct is built in. How much better off would we all be if we just DID what we know we should do, and let the Lord look after the rest? But even more than this we know that birds correspond to thoughts, and the ability to “look” at our own thoughts is a uniquely human trait that provides us an opportunity to change, to think differently, and here, of course, to think from what the Lord teaches instead of from ourselves. We all know that the worst fear is the fear of the unknown. So if we can identify and name the fears that we are experiencing, and counter them with the truths of eternal life, is there anything we can't face?

But the Lord goes on in Matthew, saying, “Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field...” Of course these are very beautifully “clothed,” even though they are not the lilies we normally think of, but more like the poppies that flourish in a meadow. But the deeper spiritual point is that all flowers represent the truths of faith and wisdom gleaned from the Word and applied to life. If we look to these truths surely we will be encouraged about the Lord's providential guidance in all things toward eternal life in heaven, and not be so consumed by our challenges in this world.

Are you, for example, worried about your health? Think. What good does it do to worry? Just

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20120731/mild-anxiety-may-shorten-persons-life>

do something about it. Resources are everywhere at hand today, thanks to modern science and the Internet, and even if there's no known cure for what ails you there are support groups for every conceivable disorder. This is not to say that overcoming the anxiety (and pain) that comes with illness or disability is easy, and it certainly does not mean that you are a failure spiritually if you can't do it. But your point of view matters, and if you point your view toward eternal values, that is, toward what *really* matters in your life, then some of this, at least, may be easier to bear. And in the meantime you can take some comfort from the teaching that you are not really you, not truly free or fully responsible for your *emotions* under the influence of sickness or drugs. Yet even so, you can train your *thoughts* and discipline your *actions* for the best *possible* results under the circumstances.

Turning back, now, to the manna in the wilderness, let's remember that the real lesson here is to take things one day at a time. We don't live in the past; we don't live in the future; we live in the NOW, hour by hour, day by day – which is why we ask the Lord to “give us this day our daily bread,” meaning *day by day*. As Swedenborg wrote in the Arcana #2493,

“I have spoken to angels about the memory of things of the past and about consequent anxiety concerning things of the future, and I have been informed that the more interior and perfect angels are the less do they care about things of the past or think about those of the future, and that this is also the origin of their happiness. They have said that the Lord provides them every moment with ***what to think***, accompanied by blessing and happiness, and that this being so they have no cares and no worries. This also is what is meant in the internal sense by the manna being received ‘day by day’ from heaven, and by the ‘daily [provision] of bread’ in the Lord’s Prayer, as well as by the statement that they must not worry about what they are to eat and drink, or what clothes they are to put on.”

Does this mean that no one should ever think about the future? No, of course not! In fact the passage goes on to say, “...although angels have ***no care*** about things of the past and are ***not worried*** about those of the future *they nevertheless have a most perfect recollection of things of the past and a most perfect insight into those of the future*, because their entire present includes both the past and future within it.”

Note, this insight does not imply clairvoyance or a certain knowledge of the future! It is always ***conditional***, and is a view based on current states, that is, it “predicts” the future to the extent that the future is an extension of the present. But we are free at any moment to make new choices that provide for new insight and a new, different future. The key is that rather than concerning ourselves with all the things *we think we need* we should be turning to the Lord to ask Him ***what it is*** we really need. And given that He asks us to lay down our lives for His sake, should we be surprised if He doesn't provide everything ***we want***?

This business of living in the present is terribly important. Of course we need to provide for our futures: we don't go grocery shopping every day, much less for every meal. And yes, it is good to save up for old age, health contingencies, retirement, and so on. Even ants do that. But there's no point in worrying about it. We just need to DO it. Make a plan and do it. And if we're in trouble for any reason, what good does it do to imagine that trouble going on forever? *Nothing in this natural world goes on forever*; only our spirits do, and there is no time in the

world of our spirits, only states, and these states only exist in the present.

But suppose what you're worried about *is* your *spiritual state*. Suppose you have a problem that is so overwhelming that you really feel you're not able to rise above it even for a day. Then you worry that you don't really trust the Lord, that your faith isn't strong enough, that you're not being useful to anyone – yourself or others, and ultimately that you're on the road to hell. This may sound melodramatic, but there must be at least 25 people in this room today who have felt this way at one time or another.

So if any of this sounds familiar, listen up. The words, “dishonest and unjust,” in what follows may not seem relevant, but actually, given the Lord's wisdom, mercy and providence in every aspect of every your life, condemning yourself *is* both dishonest and unjust. We read,

“That it is not so difficult to lead the life of heaven as some believe, is now clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a person accustoms himself so to think, *and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking*, he is gradually conjoined to heaven; and so far as he is conjoined to heaven the higher regions of his mind are opened; and so far as these are opened he sees whatever is dishonest and unjust, *and so far as he sees these evils **they can be dispersed***.... This is meant by the Lord's words, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden light’ *Matt. 11:30*” (HH 533).

But again, the key is not to worry about the future or the past: our job – our spiritual work – is to shun the evil of a given *moment* and ask the Lord for help to do what is good, not this afternoon, not tomorrow, not “forever,” but right now, right here, even as we see and feel our choices coming up: will we direct our thoughts this way or that way? Will we nurture this attitude or that one? Will we focus on the negative or on the positive? How do we want to **BE** right now?

Remember, it's not YOU who thinks it's too hard, or that you've made too many mistakes, or that bad *or even well-meaning* people, friends, family or fellow church members make it too hard; it's the spirits from hell who have taken you captive. But you can be free. You can make a decision right now to **BE** positive, just for this moment. And you can enjoy that. You can be sustained by it. And you can know that this afternoon, tomorrow, the next day and the next you will have the SAME opportunity, the same new moment in eternity, and the same “Word” from the Lord to make it possible and the same support from heaven - if you choose it.

The manna in the wilderness was not to be saved up. It was given to the people of Israel day by day, every day for forty years – which means the whole state of temptation that anyone has to endure. Will we get down on our hands and knees and gather it up or not? Let's do it, and see how He can sustain us.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 6:25-34  
Children's talk on Living in the Present  
Exodus 16:1-21 & Arcana Caelestia #8478 & 8480, selections