

Everybody has Problems

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted...

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:4 & 10).

To be blessed is to be happy. How can anyone who mourns be happy? How can anyone who is persecuted, especially for righteousness, be happy?

Some of the most wonderful teachings in all of the Heavenly Doctrines have to do with the origin, nature and purpose of temptations. Among other things there we learn that the suffering of temptation is not the punishment for evils we have done, nor is it some sort of horrible endurance test, it is simply the effect of someone or some thing attacking what we love, for all temptation is an attack against something we love.

Being in temptations therefore does not mean we are evil; in fact if we were simply EVIL we would have no temptations, for there would be no good love to attack. When challenged to think or feel or do something wrong we would just give in. We would, as they say, just “go with the flow.” But when we are in doubt about something good, or when we question something we believe is right, or when we feel the burden of guilt or shame, that burden is the grief associated with the loss – or threat of loss – of something precious that we have from the Lord in our lives. This is what He meant when He spoke about those who mourn, or indeed, when He spoke about the sick, the lame, the naked, the prisoner and many others in their limitations and needs. These are the ones who recognize and acknowledge the things that are wrong in their lives, and thus who know better and want to improve. And the fact that they do know better and do want to improve is the principal sign that the Lord is with them. It is the evidence that there is, in fact, something inside us to be happy about – something positive and good which is being challenged!

So when we experience temptations, which really are the attacks of the hells, it is important to acknowledge, and try to be aware that the Lord IS with us on some spiritual level, urging and encouraging us to co-operate with Him. Indeed, if He were not doing so we would not be able to choose between good and evil, we would just do what comes naturally, rather like a dog or a cat, a rabbit or a fish.

The truth is that the Lord is actually closer to us, more nearly present with us, in times of temptation than at any other times, preserving our freedom and protecting us against the whole mad rush of the hells.

Still, because the hells do attack, the work of temptation is hard. And it can be painful. Sometimes it will even get to the point of despair, an awful feeling based on the appearance that the battle is lost, that the good within us cannot sustain the war against it. Then, of all times, it is most important to think clearly and to remember that the good is the Lord’s, and that the Lord is all-powerful. If we think WE can overcome from our own power we are finished. But if we can

turn the battle over to Him He will sustain us. In fact that is the purpose of despair – that we may come to the point of deep-down, heartfelt, personal acknowledgment that HE does the work, and that we cannot do it without His help.

Another thing we learn from the teachings of this church is that no one is immune from temptations. Some are born with hereditary inclinations to good, and also with particular “natural” gifts for understanding the truth. Some are blessed with particularly wise and loving families, and have opportunities to flourish in ways that would seem to ensure their happiness. Many also inherit worldly wealth, power and privilege. But no matter what their circumstances, we are taught (and we can easily see) that somewhere along the way, everybody has problems!

Just look at the biographies of all the great men or women of history: somewhere in every story you will find an illness or a tragedy, a broken home, poverty, oppression, disability, depression, economic disaster, or some other form of hardship. These do not necessarily represent spiritual temptations but they serve to illustrate that on some level or another everybody has problems. And the great thing about all these stories is that somehow they were able to overcome these problems, or succeed in spite of them, often rising above them to a higher level of achievement.

And this is certainly the case with people who are trying to prepare for heaven. Why? The reason is because no one is BORN spiritual, that is, no one is born heavenly. We are ALL born natural and we must become spiritual. We must completely change our priorities and our focus!

In some ways this could almost be compared to a fish learning to breathe air or a bat not only learning to see in the daylight but learning to enjoy great works of art. It seems impossible. Not one of us is even born human, but the difference between us and a fish or a bat is that we are born with the potential to become human if we learn from the Lord and follow His Word. Like a butterfly, which is transformed in its chrysalis from a miserable grub into a beautiful, light, winged creature it IS possible under His incredible, profound, infinite care and direction for us to be transformed.

But this is a lifelong process, and it involves a lifelong tension – often a battle – between what is internal and what is external, between what is spiritual and what is natural, between what is God-centred and what is self-centred within us. So we read (in connection with an Old Testament story about Jacob wrestling with an angel), “Temptations are nothing else than the wrestlings of the internal man with the external, or of the spiritual man with the natural, *for each desires to have control over the other*. And when there is any dispute about that control, conflict takes place, which is portrayed (in the Word) as wrestling” (AC 3927). Again, the conflict or wrestling mentioned here is that within the individual; it isn’t really about the conflict between two people. Furthermore it is the conflict in an adult mind which has had the ability to learn and fully accept the principles and responsibilities of heavenly life.

We read, “Those who have not been instructed about human regeneration suppose that a person can be regenerated without temptation, and some suppose that when he has undergone one temptation he is regenerated. But it should be known that no one is regenerated without temptation, and that many temptations follow on, one after another. The reason is that regeneration takes place to the end that the life of the old man may die and a new life which is heavenly may be instilled. From this it is evident that fierce conflict takes place between

mutually hostile sides, *since each is fighting for its life*" (AC 8403:2; see also section 3).

Here, then, is the great battle-field of life: not some worldly location where two worldly forces collide, but every individual human mind where spiritual forces meet natural forces and struggle for control. Sometimes the spiritual overcomes and the natural suffers: the love of truth overcomes a temptation to lie for the sake of some personal advantage; a generous thought replaces one of blame or criticism; a feeling of joy in someone else's joy replaces the tendency to be resentful or jealous. But sometimes the natural overcomes and the spiritual is taken captive: the love of reputation, honour and gain dominates over the love of use and a person becomes boastful, self-centred and mean; the love of food or drink, sensual delights or any number of other pleasures "makes" us do things we regret when we think again more deeply; bad habits simply overcome good sense or the will to do better.

When the spiritual overcomes it is important not to get conceited; it is the Lord who brings the victory. But when the natural overcomes it is also important not to be devastated; we cannot always judge whether we have been in freedom or not, whether we have truly sinned or whether we have been deceived by the hells. Thus, in a striking passage from the work on Divine Providence (#320) we read. "If a person believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, he would not appropriate good to himself and account it meritorious, nor would he appropriate evil to himself and account himself responsible for it." To be sure, we have a LOT of responsibility in temptations, but essentially it boils down to one thing, the simple choice to accept one influence or the other.

Sometimes, we read, a person can do evil out of ignorance or as a result of some overwhelming physical craving – in which case it is not held against him because he did not plan it on his own or confirm it in himself (CL 529). Further, we are warned that there are some states – especially concerning the quality of the love in marriage – that are so deeply hidden that we cannot see them clearly even in ourselves, let alone in others (CL 531). So we must be very careful about how we judge concerning internal things.

The use or purpose of temptations is to break the power of hell. In a simple statement we read, "they have as their object the subduing of a person's externals, rendering them obedient to his internals" (AC 857).

How is this done? Of course the Lord has most intricate and wonderful means, almost all unknown to us. Yet they do require our co-operation. And one way He inspires that co-operation is by giving us samples – examples – of heavenly delight. How beautiful and peaceful it is to feel the blessings of a life in harmony with God! "How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together" in charity and peace, to marvel at the simple innocence of a child, or to share the wisdom of an old man or woman who really knows and loves the power of God.

Another way He inspires co-operation is by allowing us to be exposed to the pain and suffering caused by external things when they are allowed to dominate over internals, that is, when evils are allowed to come out, and to be expressed. The grief that follows in the person who is being regenerated prepares the way for an influx of the Lord's mercy, leading him or her away from hell. Indeed, the definition of mercy is *love grieving*, which is exactly what we feel in the depths of our trouble. So we read, evils are permitted for the sake of the end, which is salvation, for if

they were kept hidden or suppressed they would only grow and fester, but if they can be seen for what they are, they can be addressed (DP 275).

Here is a familiar quotation: “The Divine Providence has for its end a heaven from the human race, and in all that it does it looks to what is infinite and eternal” (DP 46).

Here is another: “The Divine Providence of the Lord is in the least particulars of human life, for there is only one fountain of life, which is the Lord, from whom we live and move and have our being” (AC 10774). Thus, “...evil things are foreseen, but good ones are provided; and the evils things that are foreseen are constantly being turned towards what is good by means of the Lord's provident arrangement, since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything. ***Nothing is therefore allowed to happen except to the end that something good may (or can) come out of it***” (AC 6489).

The teaching on temptation is sad, and the truth about it very regrettable, but the wonder of it is that in spite of all the hereditary and acquired evils that we do possess, and that actually rule in our unregenerate lives, still the Lord IS with us, and He DOES regenerate us when we apply to Him for help and direction. He foresees all our evils and misunderstandings, yet He provides every moment of every day for our redemption and freedom from these things if we will turn to Him.

So He has given us all the means at our disposal today, including the profound insights of all these teachings about the nature of our lives, the order and structure of a workable program for our spiritual growth, the supportive environment of a church in which we all know that we all have work to do, so that we can support one another in it, and much more.

He has also given us the clear teaching and the example of His own life – powerfully and passionately demonstrated – that those who mourn over the disorders in their own lives WILL be blessed, and that those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake also WILL be blessed. It just takes patience. It also takes humility, trust, and a willingness to bear the responsibility we have for our own actions so that we can learn to let go of whatever stands in the Lord's way as He takes us through our temptations to a state of real peace.

For the complementary truth is that if we find nothing in ourselves to mourn, and if we feel no temptation, no doubt or threat or persecution “for righteousness' sake,” well, maybe that is because we're not letting ourselves hear the Lord's voice sufficiently in contrast to our own. And that, ultimately, is the saddest state of all.

- Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 8: selections
The End of the Great Flood (of temptations)

Matthew 5:3-12

Arcana Caelestia 8403:2 & 8413:3

See also Arcana Caelestia 3318:2-3