

How the Lord Leads Us

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*Show me Your ways, O Lord;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation... (Psalm 25:4-5).*

We all want the Lord to lead us. After all, that is why we are here, isn't it? The Lord has created and sustains us; it is our obligation to discover His will and follow it. And, if He is powerful and wise enough to fashion the universe and the human race, the Lord can surely direct our paths better than we can!

Also, we know what it feels like to be lost. When we wonder if we have any use in this world, or when someone we care for deeply hurts us, our sadness is disorienting, bewildering. Then, like the Psalmist, we are apt to cry out, "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (61:1-2).

But, in spite of our occasional cries for help and a vague sense that the Lord should be leading our lives, we often feel a strong pull to manage our own affairs. Who has not found that a lack of planning results in a frenzied rush just before a trip or the start of school? Even when we have a general idea of what we should be doing, it is amazing how confused things become and how little we get done without a specific plan.

We have also found that *we* can accomplish a great deal. With good planning and hard work, we can earn quite a bit of money, become successful in our jobs, and be respected by our neighbors. While a flat tire may slightly delay a trip, or a dip in the stock market may affect our finances, good planning can take care of most contingencies!

So, we can be seduced into thinking that we are masters of our own destiny—that while the Lord may be out there, somewhere, doing something, we are *really* in charge of what happens. It is not surprising, then, that the Lord posed this question to His disciples: "What is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). The question to us is, so what happens if we do get what we want? What if we are relatively successful? Is planning and achieving a set of goals the purpose of life, or is there more than that?

Consider Moses. He was a great organizer and leader of the Children of Israel. Even without the Lord's help he might well have been a successful commander. But the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church make this fascinating comment: "Moses knew that he could indeed bring the people into the land of Canaan, but that if this were done without the Divine leading...they would not come into possession of it" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10561).

In other words, if Moses had led from conceit or self-love, with a sense that the Lord was not necessary, the Children of Israel might have entered Canaan, but it would never have been a land flowing with milk and honey. This is why Moses's sin of providing water from his own efforts,

rather than following the Lord's directions, prevented him from entering the promised land—it showed his desire to elevate himself to a Divine level, supplanting the Lord.

The message to us is clear. If we are so wrapped up in ourselves that we assume *our* planning, *our* work, has done it all, then no matter how successful we are, no matter how emotionally confident and secure we feel, there is an inner emptiness which will eventually consume all our happiness. It is only when the Lord has been our guide that we can experience genuine, lasting happiness.

How, then, can the Lord lead us?

In one sense, the Lord is always leading us no matter what we are trying to do. For “a person takes no step into which and from which the Lord does not lead” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1174:2). His Providence is unceasingly with us, allowing us the freedom to choose but never leaving us, regardless of what happens.

However, what we need and long for is something more—an open leading to which we can respond. And, indeed, the Lord does show us His ways and teach us His paths *when we look to Him* (see *ibid.*). It sounds so simple, and in one sense it is! If we look to ourselves or the world, we will see less of the Lord. It is only when we recognize the Lord as our Savior, our Guide, that we have any trust in what He may say. It is worth noting that the Lord did miracles only for those who had some openness to Him. In His own country of Nazareth, they could not accept a carpenter with Divine power, so He could do almost no miracles there. Unless we have a basic belief and confidence that the Lord has something to offer, we will not look to Him.

But looking to the Lord is meaningless unless there is also affection for Him. Fortunately, feelings of warmth for our Creator are almost inherent with us. Every child cares for the Lord, and our childlike states are always stored within us. These tender loves call out to the Lord, allowing Him to draw near to us. As the Heavenly Doctrines state, “to him who loves, the Lord enters in and teaches and leads him, and enables him also to love the Lord” (*Apocalypse Explained* 213).

How then does the Lord teach and lead us? By a voice from heaven? An inner dictate? Advice from friends? An inspired speaker?

The Lord does use an array of means (for after all, some of His truth is present in a greater or lesser degree with everyone). But His primary way to guide us is by what we accept as Divine—His Word. And this is also ultimately the way in which we can evaluate the validity of all other sources of information. The principles and ideals of the Word are the Lord's. Indeed, “without the knowledges of truth and good from the Word the Lord cannot be present with a person and lead him, for when he knows nothing of the Lord, of heaven, of charity and faith, his spiritual mind...is empty, and has nothing from the Divine in it” (*Apocalypse Explained* 112:3). The threefold Word reveals the Lord and shows us His ways (see *Apocalypse Explained* 118).

This does not mean that He leads us via a mass of memorized facts from the Word. But, from the true concepts we have learned and embraced, Divine light is shed on our paths. From these truths

we are able to identify and rejoice in our good feelings, while rejecting distorted ideas and hellish impulses. We will always have false ideas which, like clouds or night shadows, make it difficult for us to distinguish right from wrong. But the Lord can lead us in spite of our fallacies, when we seek truth from the Word to guide us. From this Divine Source, we can see to avoid some major missteps and to recognize the good counsel others might offer!

The Lord wants us to walk in His ways instead of taking enticing but frustrating side excursions into the pain of worldliness and the despair of an isolated self. As we sincerely aspire to follow Him, and as we turn from an unhealthy love of self and the world, the Lord touches the good in our lives and leads us (see *Arcana Coelestia* 7761). For “by so doing, a person’s internal is purified, and when this is purified he is led by the Lord and not by self; and so far as he is led by the Lord he loves truths, and receives them and wills them and does them” (*Apocalypse Explained* 808:2, 825:3, 979e).

Does this mean that at some stage in our regeneration the Lord’s leading becomes clear and open to us? In some ways, yes it does. Some truths from the Word almost shout out to us. For example, we may see the commandments in a new light—you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Some truths may be less obvious—angels see only the good of others, God is omnipotent, friendship is the clothing of conjugal love. Whichever truths we see, they speak to our hearts, and we know that the Lord has surely been in this place.

This open leading is described in the Heavenly Doctrines, which declare that a person who is regenerating “*is daily taught by the Lord what he must do and what he must say*, also what he must preach or what he must write; for when evils are removed he is continually under the Lord’s guidance and in enlightenment” (*Apocalypse Explained* 825:2, *emphasis added*). Do we sense such immediate direction from the Lord? Does He speak to us in this way? We may think not, for how many of us have heard the Lord’s voice or clearly known His will? And when we pray for guidance, how often have we heard a specific answer which solved the problem?

But consider how the quote continues: “Yet a person is not led and taught immediately by any dictate, or by any perceptible inspiration, but by an influx into his spiritual delight, from which he has perception according to the truths of which his understanding consists” (*ibid.*).

Even the direct leading of the Lord is not a voice from on high nor a perceptible hand grasping ours. For the Lord “does not command, but leads” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6390). He “does not openly teach anyone truths,” for to do so would deprive us of our freedom of thought and action (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5952). But through the good we have come to love, through the delight we have in heavenly things, the Lord leads us to see His ways. His presence gives us a perception of what is true, of what we should do. Even when He is openly leading us, we need to engage our minds to see and move our feet to act.

But will we then know for certain exactly what He wants us to do? Will we be able to avoid the pitfalls of life in this world? Is this how He will lead us? Unfortunately, no. His leading is to guide us away from evil. To the extent that we follow Him, we will be kept in good. But His leading cannot insulate us from all problems. For when we are selfish, we reject the Lord’s

leading and protection. And in this world the disorders of the hells can reach us no matter how regenerate we are.

What the Lord's leading will do is insure that as we look to Him, He will be with us and bring good into our lives. "For when the Lord is with anyone, He leads him, and provides that all things which happen, whether sad or joyful, befall him for good: this is the Divine Providence" (*Arcana Coelestia* 6303). The Lord is our sun and shield not by eliminating all difficulties, but by guiding us through all problems. His leading enriches and strengthens us, so that the heavenly states He is creating will be happier and fuller than we could ever imagine.

This is how the Lord leads us—not in a deeply shrouded or mystical fashion, not by a living voice or forceful hand, but by *our* reaching out to Him in affection, learning His ways, fleeing from evils, doing His goods. Then He can lead us each moment of each day, always guiding us to the heavenly happiness for which we were created.

We are to ask for the Lord's guidance so that He may show us His ways. We need Him to teach us His paths. For, as we turn our faces to Him, He can lead us in His truth and teach us all that we need to know and do. And, as we use our minds, increasing our understanding and freely walking in His ways, the Lord will indeed become the God of our salvation.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 25; *Apocalypse Explained* 1174:2-3