

The Past, the Future and the Present

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Sitting as we are in the gateway of another New Year, reminiscing about the past and making plans for the future, it seems useful to spend a little time on the topic of time itself. To be as focused as possible on what the Lord actually says about this you'll be hearing more quotations than usual from the heavenly doctrines today, but you will (hopefully) find them easy to follow.

Of course you all know the Lord's famous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about worry. In the old translation we read "Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink," and so on, but of course we know that the word, thought, means "anxious thought," and so the new translations use the word, worry. You also know all about the manna that was given the Children of Israel when they left Egypt, just enough being given for each day: no more, no less, so that they would learn to trust the Lord for the "daily bread" we still pray about today.

But just as we are warned not to be overly concerned about the future, so we need to learn not to be overly concerned about the past. Possibly one of the most damaging influences on our lives is our tendency to dwell on mistakes, misfortunes, embarrassments and abuses of the past, many of which have the effect of making us feel inadequate or unworthy to pursue some fulfilling, useful purpose in the present. At the same time we know that one of the most important uses of our memory is to help us learn, so that we don't suffer the same or similar problems again.

What we're looking for, then, is balance – an ability to *benefit* from the past and move forward in faith and hope without worry, all while living fully in the present. How can we do that?

Well, as we are given our lives in this world to prepare for eternal life it can be instructive to understand how time works in the spiritual world – which, after all, is the world of our minds. And so we turn first of all to the book about heaven and hell where we read that although there is something analogous to time in heaven, the angels have no concept of time the way we do. For one thing, heaven is not like a planet that revolves around the sun; it is a relatively constant state of being – always oriented toward the Lord. So there is no sunrise or sunset, least of all any such change dictated by purely natural conditions. Instead they have only progressions of state, from one thought to another, from one affection to another, from one use to another, none of this being governed by a clock (or the rotation of the earth). (See HH #161-169.)

So angels actually live *only in the present*, that is, their present state of mind. Yet, as the passage from our third lesson (AC 2493) says, "their entire present includes both the past and future within it." In fact, as you heard, "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."

This may seem a curious statement until we realize that our present thoughts and affections are all tied to experiences we have had before, that is, they're all related to what we've learned and how we've been affected emotionally. If, for example, a person has a tendency to be fearful or apprehensive, it may have a lot to do with some frightening experience of the past that has left a deep impression on the mind. And if a person has a lot of confidence or a positive outlook it

may well be due to a lot of good experiences growing up. It's not the whole story, of course, but in a sense our past makes us who we are. And when we think of the future we are always limited to some degree by our present understanding of things. Still, the promise is "a most **perfect** recollection of ... the past" and "a most **perfect** insight into ... the future"? Let's think about this.

The word, perfect, here clearly doesn't mean that we will know everything about our past or future; in fact other teachings plainly state that we *can't* know the future (DP 178-179), and the fact that we can't provides us with an essential human delight, namely, that of thinking and reasoning about it, taking responsibility and anticipating some outcome with hope rather than a fatalistic sense of certainty. The point is that the insight is "perfect" in the sense that it is viewed with an understanding of the Lord's Providence, and with "perfect" confidence that He has only what is good in store for us as long as we cooperate with Him. Likewise the recollection of the past: it is not that we will recall every detail perfectly, but we will see it in the context of Providence knowing that the Lord can use every bit of it for good.

But here's the problem: there are spirits associated with hell who play on our memories and use them as a way to torment us, tempting us away from our confidence in the Lord.

"Temptations" we read, "are nothing other than conflicts between evil spirits and angels who are with a person. Evil spirits activate all the dishonorable things the person has done or even thought which have been with him since early childhood, thus both evils and falsities; and in so doing, the spirits condemn him, for nothing gives them greater delight. Indeed the very delight of their lives consists in doing just that" (AC 741).

Further, we read, "There are two kinds of temptation, the first involving things of the understanding, the second those of the will." These are explained in terms of the clean and unclean animals and the birds that were preserved by the Lord in Noah's ark.

"When a person's temptation involves those of the understanding, evil spirits activate only the evil deeds he has carried out, which are meant here by 'unclean beasts.' And with these they accuse and condemn. They even activate his good deeds as well, which are also meant here by the 'clean beasts;' but these they corrupt in a thousand ways. At the same time they also activate his thoughts, which are also meant here by 'bird,' and in addition they activate the things meant here by 'things creeping over the ground'" (AC 751:2).

"This kind of temptation however is mild" *because*, we read, "it is perceived only through the recollection of such experiences, and a kind of mental anguish resulting from this." In other words, it only occurs to us when we dwell on the past, and generally speaking, there are enough things going on in our lives to keep us from going there very often.

"When however someone's temptation involves things of the will, it is not so much his deeds and thoughts that are activated. Instead there are evil "genies", as evil spirits of this type may be called, who inflame him with the evil desires and the foul loves in which he is steeped, and in this way direct their attack through the person's very desires. They do this so wickedly and secretly that one cannot possibly believe it is they who are doing it. In fact they worm their way in no

time at all into the life of his desires, and almost instantaneously twist and convert the affection for good and truth into the affection for evil and falsity. They act in such a way that the individual inevitably thinks that these things come from himself and flow forth of his own free will. This kind of temptation is very severe, and is felt as inward pain and burning torment” (AC 751).

One reason this is so bad is that it destroys our sense of who and what we are right now, in the present moment, and so by extension spoils our hope for the future.

Now of course we all do stupid things! We all get carried away sometimes with selfish and worldly concerns. But these are not who we are. The Lord gives every one of us good, kind, generous states along with understanding and wisdom so that there is always a balance in us between heaven and hell. It seems we can't hear often enough the simple teaching given in at least half a dozen places in the Writings that (paraphrasing slightly) “If we believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, we would NOT make goodness our own and think ourselves worthy of merit, NOR would we appropriate evil to ourselves and account ourselves responsible for it” (AC 6206, NJHD 277, DP 320, etc.).

We are, every moment of every day, simply instruments of choice, and *in those choices*, NOT in the good itself which belongs to the Lord or the stupidity and evil which belongs to hell, is all our delight and fulfillment of life.

And so we return to the question, how can we live joyfully *in the present* with “a most perfect recollection of things of the past and a most perfect insight into those of the future”?

The work on Providence, no. 179, gives the answer – the same answer given to everyone after death when they inquire about the lot that awaits them in heaven or hell:

“They are told that *they may do and believe as they will*; but that they should know that in hell good is not done and truth is not believed, but only in heaven. *To each one the answer is: ‘Seek out what is good and what is true; then think the truth and do the good, if you are able.’* So in the spiritual world as in the natural world all are left to act from freedom according to reason; but as they have acted in this world so do they act in the spiritual world. His own life awaits everyone and consequently his own lot, for the lot pertains to the life.”

This aligns perfectly with the short chapter in the book, Heaven and Hell where we find, “It is not so difficult to live the life that leads to heaven as is believed.” There we read,

“...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*, for no evil can be dispersed until it is seen. Into this state a person is able to enter because of his freedom... And when he has made a beginning, the Lord

performs all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see the evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them. This is meant by the Lord's words,

‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’ – Matt. 11: 30.

“But it ought to be known that the difficulty of so thinking and of resisting evils increases so far as man from his will does evils, for in the same measure he becomes accustomed to them until he no longer sees them, and at length loves them and, from the delight of his love, excuses them, and confirms them by all kinds of fallacies, and declares them to be allowable and good. This is what happens with those who in early youth plunge into evils without restraint, and then at the same time reject Divine things from the heart” (HH 533).

Note the phrase, “plunge into evils without restraint!” Yes, we do stupid things, but even this extreme situation is not irredeemable, it only makes the challenge “more difficult.”

And so, finally, we are confronted with the issue of forgiveness, a word that really means “letting go.” Of course we know it applies to *others* in that we must be forgiving of their mistakes, and it's not hard to see how it applies to ourselves in that we know how challenging it is not to let our own past inhibit us from realizing our potential. But here's the thing. Often what keeps us from letting go of our past is the thought that *others* will not be able to forgive us. But that is not really our problem! *Our problem, our challenge is in our own heads*, and if we are willing to forgive others then we have to *assume* that they will be willing to forgive us. Otherwise they are just like the spirits who torment us, and really, if that is so why should we care what they think?

Our job is to live in the present, from moment to moment, and from day to day, one day at a time, trusting insofar as possible that the Lord will lead us, doing what He asks of us so that He can. Again, we read,

“A longing to know the future is innate with most people; but this longing derives its origin from the love of evil. It is therefore taken away from those who believe in the Divine Providence; and there is given them a trust that the Lord is disposing their lot. Consequently they do not desire to know it beforehand *lest they should in any way set themselves against the Divine Providence*”. (DP 179).

The bottom line, as the accountants say, is whether or not we are thinking the truth and doing what is good – right now, even as we contemplate the days and years to come. If so, despite any errors of judgment; despite even selfish, *impetuous* actions, if we see the errors of our ways and learn from them, the Lord can work with us and, as the angel said, save us from our sins.

So let it be in this New Year of our Lord, 2,016. And let us be thankful to Him that He makes it possible.

~ Amen.

Lessons: *Joshua* 10:1-5 (Children's talk: how long is a day? It depends on your affection!)
Revelation 22:6-17 & *Arcana Caelestia* #2493