

Close Enough to Catch Us

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Readings: *Matthew* 14:22-33; *Arcana Coelestia* §8165

It's often said that the Lord will never give us more than we can handle. The big question for today is, how true is that? Perhaps another way to ask the same question is, while we're going through something hard, what is the Lord asking of us? What is He asking, and what is He offering us when we feel like we're giving everything we've got to whatever it is we have to deal with?

A lot of the time this kind of question isn't immediately relevant. At least, *hopefully* a lot of the time we're not asking this kind of question; hopefully we don't spend that much of our lives feeling like we're pushed to our limit and wondering if we can go any further. But when that feeling does arise, these questions suddenly become very important. Where is the Lord? What does He ask of me?

And we might feel pushed to the limit of our strength more often than we think we should. It doesn't necessarily take a traumatic event to make us feel this way. Sometimes our daily work—doing our job well, managing our money, keeping the house clean, *and*, on top of that, being a good parent, giving our kids the father or mother we want them to have, and being a good spouse, a good friend, a good neighbor—all of that, just by itself, can feel like too much, like we've got to let some of the pieces drop somewhere. And if anything extra goes wrong on top of that—if our financial situation gets scary, or if someone gets really sick—we can very suddenly start wondering if the Lord really expects us to make it through all this. Or if we become aware of something within ourselves that we really don't like, and feelings of failure rear their heads, then we might find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, like Peter in the waters of the storm, wondering, “Did the Lord really promise me that I can handle this? Did He really promise that He won't let me fall?”

The idea that the Lord won't give us more than we can handle seems to originate from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). According to the teachings of the New Church, this statement expresses an important truth. The first part—“no temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man”—is a useful reminder. None of us gets custom-made, extra-unendurable temptation. Yes, what each one of us goes through is unique, but in the end we're all dealing with a common enemy, which is hell, and we're all helped by the same God. But the second part of this teaching from *Corinthians* is what we're really focusing on: “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” *There it is*: “God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.”

According to what the Lord Himself teaches, this idea is true, or almost true. But there's also an important sense in which it's not true. In some ways the real point of Paul's message is that the Lord's not out to get you; He's not going to heap an impossible burden on you because He wants you to fail. And that is absolutely true. The Lord absolutely wants us to make it through the storm; that idea must shine out or we'll never understand the Lord.

We're also taught that the Lord doesn't let us enter into temptation until we're ready. We're told, “no one undergoes temptations until he has arrived at adult age” (AC §4248), and also, “He who has not with him truths of faith from the Word by which he may fight ... is not admitted into

any [spiritual] combat” (AC §8964). The Lord won’t let us face our real spiritual tests until He knows we’ve been prepared to deal with them; that’s almost the same as saying He won’t give us anything that He knows we can’t handle.

We’re also taught that even when the Lord permits evil—even when He permits things that He really doesn’t want—He’s seeing something good that we may be brought to through the evil, or in spite of the evil. We are told that the Lord foresees all evils, and that, “the evils which are foreseen are, by the provident disposition of the Lord, continually bent to good, for the Divine end of good reigns universally. Thus nothing is permitted except for the end that some good may come out of it” (AC §6489). In other words, the Lord will never allow us to enter a situation so terrible that there’s no hope of us being brought through it to something better. That’s sort of the same thing as saying that the Lord never gives us more than we can handle... but not quite.

The fact is that the Lord, in His Word, says that sometimes we are stretched beyond our limit. This is what it said in the lesson from *Arcana Coelestia*: a person in the last stage of temptation is “as it were on the slope, or as it were sinking down toward hell.... for every person’s power is limited, and when the temptation reaches the furthest limit of his power, the person cannot sustain anything more, but sinks down” (§8165). We’re taught in a lot of places that despair—the feeling of being overwhelmed and defeated—is part of temptation. And temptation comes to everyone who is led by the Lord.

Think of Peter. Peter and the other disciples were in a small boat on a hostile sea, and it was the fourth watch of the night—the last watch; the darkest, coldest hours before the daybreak. They had been trying all night long to cross the lake. They were battling a headwind, probably rowing with all their strength, with dangerous waters all around. They might have been asking, “Will we get through this? Or is this where we go down?”

Then they saw the Lord, and Peter said, “Lord if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” And the Lord said “Come” (Matt. 14:28-29). So Peter got out of the boat and walked on water, but then he became afraid. He looked and saw that the wind was wild, and his courage failed him. Peter was *falling*; he was sinking into the water, and he was not able to do anything about it. It’s a picture of us at the utmost limit of our strength, when we cannot sustain anything more; when whatever it is that we’ve tried to overcome is instead overwhelming us like dark waters. But as soon as Peter was starting to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him” (vv. 30, 31). The moment he slipped, the Lord was there, and the Lord caught Him. The Lord never really told us that we’ll never face more than we can handle. He never told us that we will never fall. What He does show us is that He will not let us fall until He’s close enough to catch us.

In truth, the Lord knows that we will fall sometimes, and that reaching the point where we’re not strong enough to go on by ourselves is part of the way it needs to be. The Lord didn’t expect Peter to stay on top of the water. He knew, with perfect clarity, that Peter would sink—so in what sense could He have expected him to make it? Did the Lord hope that Peter would manage to stay on top of the water? Maybe; maybe Peter could have been braver. But the fact is he wasn’t, and the Lord knew that. He knew He would need to catch Peter. So He was right there.

We’re taught that when we’re in a state of temptation, it seems like the Lord isn’t there. We read, “So long as temptation continues, a person assumes that the Lord is not present, because he is troubled by evil genii so severely that sometimes he is reduced to despair, and can scarcely believe there is any God. Yet the Lord is then more closely present than he can ever believe” (AC §840). That apparent absence of the Lord is what makes a temptation a temptation; we reach the point of despair because we don’t feel any Savior standing close to us, we don’t feel anything strong or good or hopeful present with us, and we believe that we have to carry on anyway. When yet the truth is that the Lord is more closely present than we can believe.

He wants us to make it through; He doesn't want us to sink. But He also knows that we won't make it without His help. In the end, none of us are able to keep our heads above the water without His strength. But we have trouble remembering that. Imagine if Peter had insisted that he should be able to walk on water, and tried with all his might to keep going even as he was plowing under. Of course it wouldn't have worked—but how often do we do something like this ourselves? How often do we insist that we just keep going under our burden even when we clearly can't, even when it's really clear that we need help? In *Isaiah* we read, “Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (40:30-31). The Lord is the only person in all of creation who can give us what we need to keep going. The truth is that He alone can save us (AC §2334), and when we believe that, He's free to reach out His hand. Our willingness to believe that truth is the good, or part of the good, that He draws out of our states of despair. The whole story in the Gospel of Matthew turns on the moment in which Peter cries out, “Lord, save me!” When he reached out to the Lord, immediately the strength he needed was present with him, and he was safe. The Lord let Peter fall far enough to realize that he needed to cry out those words—and then He let him fall no further.

In temptation—in our hours of trial—the Lord is more closely present than we can comprehend. He's watching over us with truly unfaltering love, love deeper than we can fathom. He *wants* us to make it. And in a way, even when we're falling, we're never really falling—because He is there, bending away and softening everything that hurts us, waiting to be called on to catch us by the hand. In the Scriptures we're told:

Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. (Mi. 7:8)

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. (Ps. 139:7-8)

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand. (Ps. 37:23-24)

For our part: Yes, we shouldn't simply throw up our hands and let ourselves fall. Yes, we're called on to do what we can to walk uprightly—to love the Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength (Deut. 6:5). But in the most real sense we're only children—only children in the Lord's eyes, and walking on water is too much for us. We will get overwhelmed. But the Lord, our Father in heaven, longs to save us: that means He will not let us fall until He's close enough to catch us. And that means that in the moment of falling—in the moment when our strength runs out and we are overwhelmed—the Lord is *right there*. His hand is *right there*.

Peter said, “Lord, save me!” And “immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him.” And then He said to Peter, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:30-31). Think of Peter, in the midst of the storm, holding onto the Lord's hand, looking into His face: here was His God. Why had he doubted? Then the two of them got into the boat together, and the storm was gone.

“Peace I leave with you,” says the Lord, “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

Amen.