

Blessing and Acknowledgement

by the Rev. Lawson M. Smith

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits” (Psalm 103:2).

In ancient times, when something wonderful happened, it was customary to say, “Blessed be the Lord” in grateful recognition that the Lord is Blessing Itself and the source of all blessings with everyone (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1096, 2486). People spoke in this way to ascribe all good to the Lord and take no credit for themselves. Also, they wanted to speak from the Divine, or from the Lord’s point of view, and not from themselves (see *Apocalypse Explained* 465). Instead of saying, perhaps, “O Lord, I am so grateful for Your great blessings,” they would simply say, “Blessed be the Lord,” or as in Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” In this way they gave thanks and at the same time, prayed that the Lord would continue to bless them, or that they would rightly receive the blessings which the Lord offers (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1096; *Apocalypse Revealed* 289).

We receive the Lord’s blessing when we acknowledge, from a grateful heart, that “the Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:9), rather than feeling that we deserve the blessings we have and that we bless ourselves by our works. “A person can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven,” neither the bread that satisfies his mouth nor the love that makes his life. When we believe this universal truth and turn to the Lord for all His benefits, then the Lord blesses us with contentment with our lot, whatever it may be in worldly terms, and fills our natural blessings with the eternal blessings of heaven. So, when we sit down to eat together with our families, it is good for us to say, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.”

What are the Lord’s benefits that we should not forget? “Blessing,” we read, “involves each and all things which are from the Lord, both good and true, thus celestial, spiritual, natural, worldly and bodily things” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1422:1). We give thanks for the food we eat, for our nice things, for the favor and love of our families, our friends and our neighbors. We are grateful to the Lord for the order, freedom, and prosperity of our country. But for these external things to be a blessing we must also receive the Lord’s celestial and spiritual blessings within them—the affection of good or of being useful and the affection of truth. Of all the Lord’s blessings toward us, the most important are the ability to be useful to other people, and the Word, where He teaches us how to do this.

To be useful is to communicate to others the goods and truths, the blessings and happiness, that we have received from the Lord. This sharing is an image of the Lord’s Divine love, which loves to bless others from itself. “The essence of love is to will to communicate all its good to another” (*Conjugal Love* 335:2). The fulfillment of the Divine love is seen in the eternal life received by the angels, which is blessedness, happiness and felicity without end. This the Lord gives to those who receive His love into themselves, namely, the love of being useful to other people (see *True Christian Religion* 43).

So our eternal happiness comes from the ability to bless others as if from ourselves. Everyone who is in the life of heaven

from inmost affection communicates his own blessedness and happiness to others, and it is his blessedness and happiness that he is able to communicate it; and as the universal heaven is of this nature, each angel is a center of blessings and happiness to all, and all together are so to each one (Arcana Coelestia 2872, emphasis added).

This communication with others is by means of uses (see *Conjugal Love* 266:3). When parents teach their children the goods and truths, the ways of life and the ideals that have blessed their own lives in the hope that their children may be happy to eternity, the communication of the use is obvious. But there is a communication of goods and truths whenever anyone, from religion, acts justly, sincerely, and faithfully in his office or employment, or with anyone with whom he has any dealings (see *True Christian Religion* 423-4). A person serves his neighbors and contributes to the common good, and others draw inspiration from the Lord through his example.

To be of use from the Lord is what is meant in the Word by bringing forth fruit. The ability to be fruitful from the Lord is the fruitfulness that we celebrate with Thanksgiving. For the love of good and truth and the uses that we perform from them are the heavenly and spiritual blessings which make all the rest of our life to be a blessing.

When the word “blessing” occurs in the Word, it signifies *eternity* in the inmost sense; *the happiness of eternal life*, in the internal sense; and, in the external sense, *the delight of the affections* (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3938:1). The delights of worldly and bodily affections are blessings when they contribute to our eternal happiness. The blessing of eternal life is the only real blessing because it is eternal and is conjoined with every kind of happiness. It is the very *esse*, the being or reality, of blessing. “For what really *is* unless it is eternal? Everything else ceases to be” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1096:1). “For the wind passes over it and it is gone; and its place shall remember it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear Him...” (Psalm 103:16-17). We are inclined to think of our place in society and our material welfare as the most real blessings. But the Heavenly Doctrine says,

Honors and wealth are blessings and they are curses.... Dignities and riches were blessings in the world with those who are in heaven, while they were curses with those who are now in hell... [T]hey are blessings with those who do not set their heart on them.... Not to set the heart on them is to love uses and not oneself in them.... When dignities and honors are blessings, they are spiritual and eternal, but when they are curses they are temporal and fleeting.... Honors and wealth that are curses in comparison with those that are blessings are as nothing compared to everything, or as that which in itself has no existence compared with that which has existence (Divine Providence 217).

So the Lord said, “What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

We can, perhaps, best illustrate that eternal life is the essence of blessing through the example of marriage, for all the blessings of life from the Lord are gathered into conjugal love (see *Conjugal Love* 68:2). Those who are in truly conjugal love look to the eternal in marriage because there is eternity in that love, from the fact that the love with the wife and the wisdom with the husband increase to eternity. In this increasing progression the married partners enter more and more deeply into the blessings of heaven which their wisdom and its love store up within them. Husbands and wives, united as wisdom and its love, think and breathe what is eternal, and on eternity their happiness is founded (see *Conjugal Love* 216a, 321). All true blessings are eternal.

So the psalm of our text is addressed to the “soul” and to all that is “within us.” The blessedness of heavenly and eternal affections is a blessing of the soul or spirit itself, which lives to eternity. The affections of good and truth flow in by an *inward* way. They penetrate down toward the body so far as the delights of natural and sensual loves do not stand in the way. “This blessedness does not exist at all with those who are in the delight of the love of self and of the world, for these loves are entirely opposite” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6408:1).

So the *first* of the Lord’s benefits of which the psalm reminds us is that the Lord forgives our iniquities and heals our diseases (Psalm 103:3). This is the first blessing because falsities and evils have to be removed before the Lord can crown us with His lovingkindness and tender mercies (v.4). If we have our hearts set on the honors of the world and its riches, rather than on the uses we can perform for other people, we do not see the Lord’s blessings as blessings at all, and we turn away from them. Inwardly, we do not even believe that our life and sustenance is from Him.

Everyone begins in this kind of life. But the Lord does not deal with us according to our sins, nor reward us according to our iniquities, for, as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who learn to fear Him (v.10-11). He redeems us from the “pit” of selfishness. The Lord does this Himself out of pure mercy, not from any righteousness of ours, though we have to fight against evils as if of ourselves. By regeneration the Lord gradually removes the loves of self and the world, until they are so far removed that in heaven they never trouble us to eternity. “As far as the east is from the west so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (v.12).

When a person’s bodily and worldly delights have been reduced to obedience, so that he no longer seeks them as an end in themselves but as a use which serves heavenly delight, then the angels can be with him in both his heavenly and his worldly delights. Then his delights become blessedness and finally happiness in the other life (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3928:1). For example, the Heavenly Doctrine points out that the first love of marriage partakes of the love of the opposite sex, a love belonging to the body and from it to the spirit. This love does not conjoin a husband and wife, nor endure, as a love of the spirit does. But spiritual love is gradually insinuated into the souls and minds of the married partners together with friendship and confidence. This takes place as each of them approaches the Lord and shuns the evils of selfishness, as sins against Him, and as hurtful to their partner and to their marriage. When spiritual friendship and confidence conjoin themselves to the first love of marriage, it becomes conjugal. We read, “this opens the breasts and breathes into them the sweetnesses of love, doing

this more and more deeply as friendship and confidence adjoin themselves to the primitive love, and the love enters into them and they into it” (*Conjugal Love* 162).

In the beginning we have to act from self-compulsion, from the knowledge of the Lord’s commandments and the fear of the Lord. We think of the promise of His blessings mainly in terms of natural delights. We act from a knowledge of truth and from obedience, which is not a truly blessed state (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3203:2). “After death,” we read, “man has blessedness not from truth but from the good which is in truth. Hence he is the more blessed and happy in proportion to the amount of good in the truth” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2434). In Psalm 103 the “mouth” signifies our *thought*, knowledge, and obedience to truth. When we obey, the Lord gradually infills our obedience with delight in what is good for its own sake (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2434). This is what is meant by the words “The Lord satisfies your mouth with good.” The Lord infills our obedience with innocence, the *willingness* to obey so that our spiritual childhood or youth is renewed (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5236:5), but now in intelligence and wisdom. This intelligence is represented by the eagle (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 244; *Apocalypse Explained* 281:4). “The Lord satisfies your mouth with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (v.5).

The Lord executes justice and judgment for all who realize that they are oppressed and turn to Him for help (v.6). Without Divine revelation we would know nothing of the life after death, nor of the Lord our God and His eternal purpose in creating us (see *Doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures* 116). We would not realize that we can rise above natural self-love to the love of use—the love of serving the Lord and the neighbor. But in the Word the Lord shows us that we are created for eternal life, a life higher than the mere pursuit of worldly and bodily pleasure. We read,

Wherefore let him who would be eternally happy know and believe that he will live after death. Let him think of this and keep it in mind, for it is the truth. Let him also know and believe that the Word is the only doctrine which teaches how a man must live in the world in order to be happy to eternity (*Arcana Coelestia* 8939e).

Thus the Word, and the ability to be of use now and forever, are the greatest of the Lord’s blessings.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.”

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 103, 145; *Arcana Coelestia* 8939