

Guardian Angels

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“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” (Luke 15:6).

While on earth, the Lord was censured by the Pharisees and scribes for associating with tax collectors and known sinners, even eating with them. How could a holy man defile himself like that? Didn't He know what kind of people these were? The Pharisees and scribes criticized the Lord for mingling with sinners and the despised publicans.

The Lord used this occasion to teach three parables about celebrating the finding of something that had been lost: a lost sheep, a silver coin, and a wayward son. Our text is from the first of these parables. It tells a happy story. The shepherd returns from his search, rejoicing in his find, with his lost sheep safely on his shoulders. He calls together friends and neighbors. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” There was rejoicing and celebration. Even the hard-hearted scribes and Pharisees could understand the joy in finding a lost sheep.

Then the Lord drew an unexpected parallel: “Likewise,” He said, “there will be more joy *over one sinner who repents* than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7, emphasis added). Did these Pharisees and scribes understand? The Lord had not come to condemn sinners but to save them. Did the parables help them see why He mingled with and taught people of every reputation? His lesson for the Pharisees and scribes was that the angelically-minded find joy when sinners repent and come into heaven. They didn't have any sympathy for sinners or any desire to see them saved. But the life of charity consists in thinking kindly of others, we are told, in wishing them well and “in perceiving joy in oneself from the fact that others also are saved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2284:5).

This parable of the shepherd, like all the Lord's parables, inwardly teaches about the Lord Himself. The Lord is the Good Shepherd. He has come to search out and find the lost sheep of humanity; He has come to call sinners to repentance. And there is rejoicing in heaven for every soul carried home by the Lord.

The Lord shares His love of saving people with angels. He sends them out as spiritual shepherds of His flock to bring light, protection and comfort to each person willing to receive them. We call these our guardian angels. They serve as the Lord's ministers in this work, and they perceive nothing “more delightful and happy,” we are told, “than to remove evils from a person, and lead him to heaven” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6482, 5992:3). They do these things “from the love they have from the Lord” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992:3).

Over the centuries, religions have taught the idea of guardian angels. They are often mentioned in the Scriptures. For example, in Genesis we read of the angel appearing to Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, to guide her back to her mistress. Later, in the prophecy of Daniel, we read of the angel who protected Daniel in the den of lions. After the birth of the Lord, an angel appeared to Joseph, warning him to flee into Egypt with Mary and the infant Lord. In these and many other examples, we see the Lord using angels to guard, protect and care for people on earth. “For He shall give His angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:11).

Popular culture has depicted guardian angels as supernatural beings capable of foresight and miraculous powers, sometimes stepping in to prevent a tragedy or righting a great wrong. Though we live in an age of skepticism concerning spiritual beings, there remains a lingering hope that God can keep us safe by sending angels to watch over us. We remember the promise of another Psalm: “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them” (Psalm 34:7). In the New Church, though, we are taught that the primary concern of the angels is for our spiritual, not our natural, welfare.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches how the Lord employs angels for our care. “In general angels from each society are sent to people to watch over them...” (*Heaven and Hell* 391:2). They “ward off evils and falsities” by perceiving where our thoughts and minds are turning “a thousand times better” than we do (*Arcana Coelestia* 227, 228) and quietly bending them to something better.

It may come as a surprise to learn that these guardian angels are countered by evil spirits who also are associated with us. “At least two evil spirits and two angels are present with every person” (*Arcana Coelestia* 697). We are influenced by hell through our link with evil spirits and by heaven through the angels. There is contention for our soul.

Most of our life, we are blissfully unaware of the constant struggle going on in our mind—the angels fighting on one side, the spirits of hell on the other. What loves are at work? The Heavenly Doctrine shows the contrast: angels find delight in doing good to people and promoting their eternal welfare; evil spirits, on the other hand, find their delight in doing evil to people, and contributing to their eternal ruin. Such is the opposition (*Arcana Coelestia* 5864). These are the stakes. Angels rejoice in our salvation; evil spirits in our eternal ruin. With which camp will we throw in our lot?

Hagar, Sarai’s maidservant, was caught between her own pride and obedience to her mistress. When she conceived Abram’s child, her mistress who was still barren was despised in her eyes. When Sarai dealt harshly with her, Hagar fled the household, goaded by a spirit of contempt and rebellion. She had thrown in her lot with spirits who would bring her and her unborn son to eternal ruin. Then, in the wilderness, the angel of the Lord came to her. The voice of angelic reason spoke: “Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8).

Hagar turned away from her pride to listen to the wisdom of this angel of the Lord. “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand” (Genesis 16:9). The angel added, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude” (Genesis 16:10). Freely, Hagar chose the better way.

The angels assigned to us work secretly and gently. Although one angel has the power to drive off thousands of evil spirits, the Lord does not allow angels to use this “almighty force.” Every person must be led in freedom, gently and gradually, to a state of heavenly order (*Arcana Coelestia* 5854:2). We commonly think of guardian angels exercising supernatural powers to bring about the Lord’s will. We picture them interrupting the plots of the evil and even standing in our way to stop foolish and spiritually harmful acts. While that sometimes is so, when the

Lord permits it, these angels most often act in harmony with our freedom. They moderate and bend our thoughts. They are forbidden to curb our cupidities and evil principles with violence but are enjoined to “act gently” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992).

After Elijah the prophet had single-handedly defeated four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal in a test by fire and had slain these false prophets, his troubles were not ended. Jezebel, the queen, threatened to kill him. Elijah ran for his life, stopping a day’s journey into the wilderness under a juniper tree. Deeply discouraged, he felt he had failed to cleanse Israel of the abominable worship of Baal. Here, he prayed in a voice of despair: “It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!” (I Kings 19:4). He slept until, suddenly, an angel woke him and gave him food and drink. Having eaten, he slept again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time. He encouraged Elijah, urging him to eat and drink again in preparation for a long journey. He assured him he was not alone in his faith in the Lord and that soon he would pass on his mantle to another great prophet. So Elijah journeyed to Horeb, the mountain of God, at the quiet insistence of the angel.

When we are attacked by infernal spirits, the angels defend us. They call forth the goods and truths of remains that we have and “set them in opposition to the evils and falsities which the evil spirits excite” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5992:2). That is the order. As evil spirits attack, the angels protect. They bring about an equilibrium so people in the middle of these forces are free to turn toward heaven or hell. The Lord sees to it that while spirits flow into our thoughts and desires, the angels flow into the ends we have in view, strengthening us from within. “This inflowing takes place silently “without the person knowing it,” we are told, “but even though it is hidden it works effectively” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5854).

Angels with us respect our freedom though the spirits of hell do not. If we choose evil the angels quietly recede. Yet, we are told, they “never depart completely from a person.” We cannot live without this link to heaven (*Arcana Coelestia* 5979, 5854). And, like good shepherds, our guardian angels continue to hope for our return.

We can see an instance of this respect for human freedom in the account of Balaam and his donkey. When Balaam, a seer from the East, was riding to Moab intending to curse the tribes of Israel in exchange for great rewards, his donkey stopped suddenly. The donkey saw an angel of the Lord standing in the roadway with his sword drawn. To go forward would mean death. When the donkey simply refused to go forward and Balaam began beating her with his staff, she spoke out in living voice. Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes to see what his beast had seen. He knew he would have been killed if he had gone forward. He offered to turn back, though in his heart he still longed for the rewards promised to him. The angel compromised with him: “Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak” (Numbers 22:35). In freedom, Balaam went on with his journey and, although he harbored hatred and greed in his heart, his curse against Israel was turned into a blessing and a prophecy of the star of the Lord’s birth.

The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that we have our part in welcoming angels into our life. We must prepare a resting place in our minds where angelic influx can be received. This comes from reading the Word with a sincere desire to learn what the Lord teaches. It is established by reflecting on how spiritual principles can be incorporated into our life. In this way we provide

what the doctrine calls a “plane of influx.” “But this plane cannot be acquired,” we are told, “unless the truths of faith have been put into act” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5893:3). In other words, we must live our religion. Such efforts form a conscience of what is right and wrong. This is where the angels can be present to strengthen us against the influences of hell. In addition, it is important that we acknowledge the Lord and recognize that He alone has all power over evil (*Heaven and Hell* 577). These things together provide the foundation for our spiritual life.

We see this principal illustrated in the account of Daniel, who was taken captive to Babylon but rose to power in that kingdom. While in exile, he continued to worship the God of Israel, praying toward Jerusalem three times each day, even when the king had signed a decree forbidding it. Daniel continued to live according to what he believed to be right. As a result, he was thrown into a den of lions and confined there through the night. When the king came in the morning, crying out to Daniel, and asking, “has your God been able to deliver you from the lions?” Daniel replied, “My God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths, so that they have not hurt me...” (*Daniel* 6:20,22).

By the lions are signified fierce passions of anger. The fact that Daniel was made safe by an angel that night shows that the influences of self-love from the hells were muzzled. Because Daniel worshipped the Lord and continued to obey His laws even in captivity, angels had a basis to protect him from the destructive power of the hells. His body was unhurt by the lions that crouched before him, just as his soul was untouched by any anger or fierceness of revenge springing from hell.

Our guardian angels especially protect our souls from spiritual attack, regarding the body and its well-being as nothing in comparison with the soul (*Arcana Coelestia* 2380e). Indeed, sometimes our natural life must be permitted to suffer for the sake of more important spiritual ends. This does not mean that we have been abandoned by the angels in times of misfortune and tragedy. Their love is unceasing and they continue to care for those to whom they are assigned with a tenderness and passion that models the Lord’s own love.

This love is so strong, we are told, that angels would think nothing of giving their own lives like brave soldiers in battle, if doing so could save a soul from hell. They would even go so far as to suffer hell itself—that is, they would be willing to exchange their place in heaven for the place of a soul in hell—for the sake of that soul—if such a thing were possible (*Arcana Coelestia* 2077:2).

How grateful we should be that the Lord sends angels with this kind of love to be with us! Their inmost joy is to lead souls to heaven. For I say to you, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Therefore, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!”

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 91:1-13; Luke 15:1-10; *Arcana Coelestia* 5992, parts