

DOES GOD KNOW IF I'M GOING TO HEAVEN?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

Abram learns from God not only what will happen in his lifetime, but what will happen to his descendants hundreds of years later. In the New Testament, the Lord tells us that nothing is unknown to Him—even the hairs of our heads are numbered. And yet the freedom the Lord guards more than any other is our ability to choose between acting selfishly or selflessly at each moment. The Lord watches over even the smallest events of our lives, constantly offering us choices and gently bending our lives heavenwards. We experience true freedom when we freely choose God's leading on the path to heaven.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

If the Lord knows and sees everything, then He already knows whether I'm going to heaven or hell after I die. Does this limit my freedom to choose the kind of life I lead, and where I will go after I die?

The Stars of Heaven

Abram and Sarai were a childless old couple when the Lord came to Abram promising that he would father a child who would be his heir. When Abram expressed surprise that this would be the case, the Lord led him outside his tent, directing him to:

“Look, now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5).

Abram trusted the Lord's words and yet he questioned the Lord when He said that Abram would inherit the land of Canaan. So the Lord came to him in a deep sleep, telling him:

“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age...” (Genesis 15:13-15).

It seems remarkable that the Lord could tell Abram not only that he would live a long life and die peacefully, but also what would happen to his family long into the future. And we read in the Word that all of these events happened as predicted.



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The Hairs of Your Head

The Lord knows and sees all things. And when we die, it will be possible for others to see everything we have said or done while living in the world—nothing will be hidden.

For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.... The very hairs of your head are numbered (see Luke 12:2-3,7).

The Lord foresees our choices and provides that we can grow and develop in freedom—the freedom to choose our place in heaven or hell after death.

Growing in Secret

Each person begins life as a tiny embryo in the womb, growing in secret. As each minute part develops, preparation is made for what will develop next, until the baby is fully formed.

And after the baby has been born, one thing is prepared successively toward another and for another, in order that a perfect person may come forth, and at last such a person as to be capable of receiving heaven. If all the details are thus provided during a person's conception, birth, and growth, how much more must this be the case with regard to the spiritual life (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6491).

The Lord takes even greater care of a person's spiritual growth than He takes with the physical development of a person's body in the womb. In fact the Lord is present in every decision we make and in every action we take.

Unless the Lord's Providence were present in the most specific details, a person could not possibly be saved or even have life, since life comes from the Lord and every moment of life holds a chain of consequences stretching into eternity (*Arcana Coelestia* 6490).

How Does Free Choice Work?

If the Lord knows the choices we will make each day, even down to the smallest details, is our freedom to choose what we say or do limited? Are we free to choose the course of our life, or are we predestined to follow God's plan?

Whenever we act from the desires of our heart, we experience freedom. Our freedom is so important that the Lord never makes us act in a particular way. At first our freedom lies in the choice of whether to act selfishly—putting ourselves first—or to act lovingly—putting the Lord and others first. The Lord wants us to choose our path freely and guards this freedom no matter what kind of choices we are making.

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True Freedom

When we choose to act selfishly, we are exercising selfish freedom—the ability to think and want to do evil and to act on this desire when we think we can get away with it. This freedom eventually makes a person a slave to evil, and it is not real freedom at all. Choosing this path repeatedly leads to an eternal life in hell.

But when we choose to think and will what is good and to act on this desire we are exercising heavenly freedom. This is true freedom—the freedom of being led by the Lord. By repeatedly choosing this path, a person feels more and more as if he is responsible for his own life, and at the same time he recognizes more and more that he is the Lord's (see *Divine Providence* 43). This path leads to heaven.

God Sees Our Choices

The Lord knows whether we will choose heaven or hell, but we are always free to choose between good or evil. Every moment of our lives can be a new beginning on our spiritual journey.

The Lord's foresight and providence are in the minutest things connected with a person, in things so minute that it is impossible by any thought to understand as much as one out of a hundred million of them. For every smallest moment of a human being's life involves a series of consequences extending to eternity, each moment being as a new beginning to those which follow (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3854:3).

The Lord is with us in each choice we make so that we will be able to live after death in the place He knows will make us happiest.

OPTIONAL READING

Doing evil by free choice looks like freedom, but it is slavery, because that freedom comes from self-love and love of the world, and these loves are from hell. Such freedom is after death actually turned into slavery, for a person who indulged in such freedom then becomes in hell a lowly slave. But doing good by free choice is real freedom, because it comes of love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor, and these loves are from heaven. This freedom also lasts after death, and then becomes true freedom (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 142).

When a person rejects selfish freedom, he then receives from the Lord heavenly freedom, which is utterly unknown to those who are in selfish freedom. People suppose that if selfish freedom were taken away from them, they would have no life left; when in fact life itself then begins; and joy, bliss, happiness, with wisdom, then come, because this freedom is from the Lord (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5786).



FOCUS POINTS

Read the statements below and decide whether they are true or false. Discuss your answers.

- T F 1) The Lord knows every detail about what my life will be like.
- T F 2) The Lord can save me whether I want to be saved or not.
- T F 3) So that I can be really free, the Lord doesn't try to influence the choices I make.
- T F 4) If the Lord knows the choices I will make, then there is no point having free choice.
- T F 5) Everything I do has a series of consequences for ever.
- T F 6) Real freedom is the choice between good and evil.
- T F 7) The Lord is constantly bending my choices towards heaven.
- T F 8) After I die, my sins will go with me to the grave.
- T F 9) God is involved in every choice I make.
- T F 10) If I make one bad choice, I am no longer free to go to heaven.
- T F 11. Making the choice to do good gives a person real freedom.
- T F 12) The Lord cares about the choices I make.
- T F 13) As long as most of what I do is good, I will probably go to heaven.
- T F 14) I am predestined to follow God's plan because He already knows my choices.
- T F 15) The freedom to act selfishly is not real freedom.
- T F 16) Even though God knows what I will choose, I am free to go to heaven or hell.
- T F 17) The Lord wants everyone to go to heaven, but He doesn't force people to go there.
- T F 18) The Lord knows what I love, but doesn't know whether I will go to heaven or hell.

Activity 1

GAMES OF CHANCE?



For many years I watched carefully to see whether there was such a thing as fortune. I discovered that there was, and that prudence was not in that case of any avail.... Scarcely anyone knows that fortune has its origin in the spiritual world; yet that is where it does indeed originate. I once played a commonly known game of chance in which dice are used, while the spirits present with me spoke about fortune in games. They said that good fortune was represented to them by means of a bright cloud, and bad fortune by means of a dark one, and that when a dark cloud was seen near me I could never win. Seeing that sign they were also foretelling the changes of fortune that took place in the game....

What people attribute to fortune, even in games, has its origin in the spiritual world. This is even more true with regard to the changing fortunes that happen to a person during the course of life. What is called fortune results from the entry of Providence into the last and lowest degrees of order, in which it manifests itself as fortune. Thus it is that Providence is at work in the most specific aspects of everything, as accords with the Lord's words that not even a hair falls from one's head unless God wills it (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6494).

Play a Game

Choose a card or dice game to play with your group. It could be something very simple, such as setting a goal for the roll of dice, or it could be a commercial game. Keep the game short enough to allow for discussion afterwards. Note: If you are doing this activity alone, set a goal for rolling a pair of dice or tossing a coin.

Predict the Outcome

Before playing, have each person predict the outcome of the game, writing their predictions on a piece of paper. Discuss whether the game went as anyone expected. What factors affected who won or lost? Were these factors in your control?

For Discussion or Reflection

1. In what ways were the players able to make free choices during the game?
2. Were there any parts of the game that did not allow for any choice?
3. Did attitude affect who won the game? (Especially if predictions were made?)
4. Did providence affect the outcome of the game? How?
5. Could the Lord have changed the outcome of the game if He had wanted a different person to win?
6. Does the Lord care who wins or loses a game?



FREEDOM OR PREDESTINATION?

- Read the statements for discussion and decide whether or not you agree with or have a preference for them. The “Teachings from the Word” below may help you decide.
- If you favor it, go to the right side of the room. If you disagree, move to the left side of the room. You must take one side or the other, but you will be allowed to switch sides.
- On each side of the room is a speaker's chair. Only the person sitting in the chair can speak. Each side takes turns speaking.
- As speakers make their points, you may change sides any number of times.

Teachings from the Word:

It is well known in the church that the Lord desires the salvation of all, and the death of no one. Hence it may be seen that any predestination except to heaven is contrary to the Divine Love (*Divine Providence* 330).

Since the Lord foresees the state of all after death and also foresees the places in hell of those who do not desire to be saved, and the places in heaven of those who desire to be saved, it follows that He provides places for the wicked by permitting and withdrawing, and places for the good by leading. And unless this were done continually from the birth of everyone to the end of his life neither heaven nor hell would continue to exist, for without this foresight and Providence at the same time neither heaven nor hell would be anything but confusion (see *Divine Providence* 333).

All the future is present to the Lord and all the present is to Him eternal. The Divine Providence in everything it does has regard to the infinite and the eternal (see *Divine Providence* 333).

All things, nay, the least of all things, down to the least of leasts, are directed by the Lord's providence, even as to the very steps (*Arcana Coelestia* 6493).

Statement for Discussion:

Even though the Lord already knows that my life choices are leading me to heaven or hell, I am free to choose my own path in life.

If you think that people are not free to choose their own path, move to the right side of the room. If you think that people are free to choose their own path, go to the left side.

Further Discussion

If you would like to continue the discussion, you could consider the following statement:

If the Lord didn't know whether I will choose heaven or hell, He couldn't provide me with opportunities to make the choices that will lead me there.

Activity 3

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE DETAILS?



Read the following parts of a Greek myth. Think about how to sequence the parts so that the story makes sense. Put a number beside each part to indicate the correct sequence. (See the bottom of the page for answers.)

Arion stepped out of hiding. The sailors ran away in fear.	Arion made one last request, asking that he could play his harp for the sailors. The sailors were thrilled to hear Arion's beautiful music.
Just as Arion finished his song, he jumped overboard with his harp. A dolphin brought Arion up to the surface, and supporting him on his back, brought him to Corinth.	Arion sailed to Italy and Sicily and played his harp for the sailors and oarsmen on the ship.
Arion told everyone what had happened. Arion was held prisoner.	When the sailors arrived and were asked about Arion, they said that they had left him in Italy.
When the ship was in the open seas, the sailors plotted to take his wealth and throw Arion overboard.	Arion won large sums of money playing his harp. Arion set sail for Corinth.
Arion was an expert harper and composer who lived in Corinth, Greece, in ancient times. Because of his skill, the king asked Arion to travel far and wide and play for people.	Hearing music coming from the ship, dolphins swam along beside the ship, following it for miles.

Compare the way you sequenced the parts of the story with a partner. You may also compare your sequence to that of the story shown at the bottom of the page.

1. Did you sequence the stories in the same way?
2. Were there any significant differences?
3. Does your story differ from the one shown below?
4. Now, imagine that these events were not a myth, but the story of your own life. How would your life be different if the events you have experienced had all still happened—but in a different order?
5. Would you be the same person you are today?
6. What might this tell us about the care with which the Lord leads each person?

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TAKING IT HOME



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

Ideas for Journal Entries

Use one of these journal ideas to help you think about freedom.

- ◆ If each person did only what he or she wanted, what would the world be like? Would anyone be really free?
- ◆ In what ways is being free to choose what you do a good thing? In what ways might it be limiting? Is this genuine freedom?

For Reflection

- ◆ Would knowing where you will be living after death—in heaven or hell—affect how you would experience life here on earth? Would it limit your freedom?
- ◆ Does knowing that the Lord already sees whether you will choose heaven or hell make you feel less free?

Spiritual Task

by the Rev. David Roth

Free Choice

When the Lord is with someone, He leads him and makes provision so that all that happens, whether sad or joyful, may bring him what is good (Arcana Coelestia 6303).

We can see evidence of the Lord's Providence in the story of Joseph. He was hated by his brothers and thrown into a pit to die, but Midianite traders found him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. There he rose to second in command, and he saved Egypt during a terrible famine. When Joseph was reunited with his brothers, they thought he might retaliate. But he said, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

The Lord is constantly doing all in His power to assist us in making the right choices and leading us to eternal happiness. We, however, have free choice in spiritual things. We are free to choose to do evil rather than good, to choose hell rather than heaven. The Lord provides all things for our eternal benefit and foresees the bad choices we will make, permitting them if some good might come from them.

Task

Pay attention to the power of free choice in your life. You always have a choice as to how you will respond to situations. This week choose two things that you **WILL DO** personally to contribute to the promotion of the Lord's kingdom—on earth and in heaven. Do them.

Further Reading

FOUR KINDS OF FREEDOM

by the Rev. Daniel W. Goodenough

Everyone longs to be free. The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church tell us this, and inside ourselves we know it is true. Today, perhaps more than ever, people are arguing about freedom, and in some countries they are even making war over freedom.

Freedom is so important because it lies at the very heart of everyone's life. Human beings have always struggled for freedom, and with good reason. But they usually haven't understood what freedom really is, or how you get it. Too often, people have fought only for the freedom to do what they wanted, without understanding that the really basic freedom is something spiritual that comes from God.

Free Will

The first and most basic kind of freedom is the Lord's gift of free will, or liberty. This is something He gives to all human beings. In fact, it is what makes us human. Everyone is given the ability by the Lord to choose freely between good and evil, right and wrong. You can love and think what is good or what is evil. Even if you can't do and say everything you think and will (or love), still no one can make you love something you don't wish to. We are even free to love and think the most awful, terrible things. We can choose to go to hell if we want to.

This freedom to will or love as we wish is the real reason we live forever, in heaven or hell. Animals do not have free will, but all humans have something of it. Even infants and small children have the beginning of freedom, and can choose, in limited ways, to do good or bad, depending on their maturity. The Lord gradually gives children and young people more free will as they mature and take responsibility. But it is only as adults that we are fully free to choose for ourselves whether we will love the goods of heaven or the evils of hell.

Many people today don't believe in this freedom. Some think God decides everything, including whether a person goes to heaven or hell. This is called predestination. Others believe you become only what your environment, education and experiences make you, as though we were slaves to all the things that happen to us.

But the Lord is love, and because He loves us He wants us to feel as full of life as possible. And we can only feel that life is our own if we are free—free to love good or evil. So the most important freedom of all is the freedom of our spirit to love and think the way we want to. In that freedom lies the very secret of all human life.

Heavenly Freedom

People use their free will to love all different kinds of things, good and bad. If throughout your life you use your free will to love what is good and to turn away from evil, the Lord gives you "heavenly freedom." This second kind of freedom is the freedom the angels have, and it is called "freedom itself" because there is nothing they can't do. That is because everything they want is good and useful

for others. No one stops them from doing these good things. In fact, everywhere they go they are encouraged to do what they want, because their life is to love others. This beautiful freedom comes only from a lifetime of seeking to live the Lord's way.

Hellish Freedom

A third kind of freedom is “infernal” freedom, and it is the freedom you get in hell. In hell, spirits can still go on loving and thinking the way they want to, but everywhere they turn, they are limited and hemmed in by various punishments and obstacles. Why? Because just about everything they want harms somebody else. And since they aren't allowed to damage other people (not even other evil spirits), they are constantly being frustrated by their own selfish loves. Hellish freedom is really slavery because evil spirits always want what they don't have. It's like being in a closed-in box they have built up around themselves, out of their own selfishness. Yet they are still you, free to want and think the way they choose. You get hellish freedom (rather than heavenly) by spending your life on earth trying to please yourself and make yourself happy, rather than working to make other people happy.

Freedom of Action

A fourth kind of freedom is the freedom to do and speak, freedom of action in the world. This freedom comes from the Lord, but it is limited (and should be) by conditions in the world. We are not as free to say and do, as we are free to will and think. There have to be limits on speaking and doing evil in the world. Otherwise evil people would constantly be doing terrible things to innocent victims. The purpose of governments and authority is to keep the freedom to do evil always within definite limits. Yet we always have some freedom of action. And even when we are not free to do and say everything we want, we are still free in our spirit to will and to think the way we want to. The first kind of freedom, free will, always remains with us because it is a direct gift from the Lord.

Freedom is the Lord's most wonderful gift. Even though people often use it badly, He goes right on keeping us free, trying always to lift us out of “hellish freedom” and into “heavenly freedom” while we are living in the natural world.