

ANXIETY FOR THE FUTURE

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“Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart”
(Psalm 37:3, 4).

Consider the simple faith expressed in this Psalm. A confidence that if we trust in the Lord and do what good we can, all will be well. The future is bright. There is no need to worry.

We might assume that the author was an idealistic youth—one who has never experienced pain or disappointment. Yet this psalm did not come from any naive child. It was written by a very old man, a man who had known incredible hardships. It is a psalm of David.

Think of David. Although from a shepherd he became king, he also knew hardship. As a youth he had to flee for his life from the jealous Saul. He felt the grief over being responsible for the death of his infant son. Later, as king, he saw his children rape and kill one another. He was forced to flee Jerusalem for his life, because his own son Absalom had rebelled against him. Then he regained his throne at the cost of his beloved Absalom’s life.

David experienced intense pain. Yet he could advise us not to worry, we will be given the desires of our hearts. All we need do is trust in the Lord and do good. Indeed, he asserts that those who commit their way to the Lord will have everything they need, even if it be but a little in comparison with those who are evil.

There is a similar teaching in the doctrines of the New Church:

“When the Lord is present with someone, he leads him, and provides that all things which happen, whether sad or joyful, befall him for good; this is the Divine providence” (Arcana Coelestia 6303.)

Whatever happens—being promoted or fired, realizing our dreams, or having them dashed—all result in good!

A difficult idea to accept—especially when we feel like failures, or the world is crushing in upon us.

What we need to hang on to is that the Lord would never cause anything bad happen. He would prefer that we never suffer any pain. His providence is a gentle leading which causes good things to happen and tolerates evil things. However, He permits us to hurt ourselves and He allows others to cause us grief. Not as punishment, but as the result of free choices by individuals and groups.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to sensing mercy in His providence is that when we feel pain or worry about the future, we think that is all there is in life. We cannot see beyond the

worry, the concern. But while we feel anxiety the Lord is already looking ahead—to what can come from the experience, to how He can lead us to grow in spite of, and even because of, the difficulty. For the Lord's view is eternal. Where we see darkness, He sees hope. Where we feel anxiety, He is providing for eventual happiness.

The Lord's long-term view and ability to bring about good is described in the Heavenly Doctrines with pebbles. The Lord allows a person

“to go here and there, so that the moments of his life appear like scattered pebbles. But the Lord then sees whether he fills up that space between them; He sees what is lacking and where; and then, continually, what is next in order, after a hundred or a thousand years” (Spiritual Experiences 4692m).

The Lord's sight and providence encompasses eons of time. He sees all we are, and all we might become. He then gradually provides for it—not immediately, but over the course of an eternal lifetime. Whatever happens, whatever decisions we make, or whatever others do to us—the Lord eventually turns everything to good.

Unfortunately, our view is seldom as long. We cannot see how things will turn out in twenty, much less two thousand years. And when we are suffering our sight is even more limited. So we worry about what will happen. We may try to trust in His guidance, but we are more likely to feel abandoned by the Lord. Whatever He might be doing is both invisible and insensible to us.

In such a frame of mind we might wish we could see the future, be certain of how things will work out. If we were assured of the specific outcome, or knew exactly which path were the best to follow, we could then really trust in the Lord—have confidence in Him to lead us!

Yet, in this, as in all other things, the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. He does not hide the workings of providence from us as a test of our trust, or a puzzle for us to sort out. The Divine does not tease us. But the Lord is fully aware that if we were to know the future, or if we received the “right” answers to our specific questions by a voice out of heaven, we would wind up destroying ourselves.

Imagine what we would feel like if someone predicted every last thing that we would experience for the 24 hours. At first, we would disbelieve, but what if the predictions started coming true? It would be disturbing, to say the least. And would we not begin to feel restricted, and try to prevent the predictions from coming true?

We value our freedom, our sense of self. We will protect it at all costs. When we are forced to do something, or if we are pressured into one course of action, do we not resist, wanting to act against that pressure?

Such resistance is not adolescent or infantile reaction to authority. It stems from our inner freedom of thought. For us to be human beings we need to think things out for ourselves and then act in freedom. Whatever choices we make determine the kind of person we become—and

whether our choices are good or bad, at least they make us who we choose to be, not who someone else forces us to be.

Yet, when we are confused or suffering, we have a tremendous yearning to see something of the potential the Lord sees for us and those we love. Unfortunately, if we were able to glimpse it, we would probably work against it. A paradox which can be frustrating and lead us to worry about the future.

It would be much better if we could just let go and trust the Lord to make the best of whatever we do. That is what the angels do. They have no memory of past events from their earthly life to trouble them. Nor do they have any desire to know what is to come. For they are content in the present. Imagine if we could be so fully engaged in our present activities, dealing with what we can do rather than what is beyond our power, that we had no time to worry about the future! It is a goal worth striving for.

But for now, we tend to worry. We tend to worry about our jobs, our health, our children, our spiritual state, the future of the church. The list can on go on and on. Certainly, some amount of thoughtful consideration is important. We are meant to make plans for the future—use good judgment to provide for our families. “Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him...” (Luke 14:28, 29). And we can delight in looking forward to continued productivity or happier times. But planning and worrying about what might or might not occur can become excessive.

David in this Psalm continues: “Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm” (37:8). Do not worry, it only causes frustration. Thinking too much of the future can lead us to forget that the Lord’s providence is silently guiding us. The doctrines of the New Church point out that, “a longing to know the future is innate with most people; but this longing derives its origin from the love of evil” (*Divine Providence* 179).

That love of evil is the desire to control the future—to have us in charge, replacing the Lord’s providence. It is a subtle trust in self, and denial that the Lord can be relied upon.

Compounding this sense that we must do it all, is the reality that we do have to take action. The Heavenly Doctrines describe the Lord’s providence,

“as when one walks in thick forests, the exit out of which he does not know; but when he finds it, he attributes the discovery to himself, whereas providence meantime is as one who stands in a tower, sees the wanderings of such a person, and leads him without his knowing it to the place of exit” (Spiritual Experiences 4393).

The Lord is in the tower, inspiring our thoughts, motivating our actions so that we can be led from darkness into light.

We do need to cooperate with the Lord's providence. We have to search for ways out of the forest. The Lord gave us the ability to think so we would use it. If we sit back and ponder our situation, how hopeless it may seem, little is accomplished. Can we add one cubit to our height by worrying about it? We also need to act. If we stand around and complain about how lost we are, or how unfair life is, it is very difficult for the Lord to lead us anywhere. He will not drag us out of our forests against our wills.

Returning to the Psalm: "Trust in the Lord and do good." Such simple advice, but so true! We cannot alter the past, but we can do something in the present, enabling the Lord to create a happier future.

There will still be times of selfishness where we long to know how things could possibly work out, and there will still be things happening to us which are not pleasant. We cannot control life. But we can avoid being defeated by it. We have been given the knowledge of how the Lord operates to bring about happiness in the long term. We have been given the freedom to act with reason. We have the basis for trusting in Him.

Let us then listen to the Psalm, not worrying about the future, not worrying about what is or what might be. Let us do the good that we can and leave the rest to the Lord. After all, He can do a much better job than we can! Let us commit our ways to the Lord, trusting in Him, and He can give us the heavenly desires of our hearts.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 37 (parts); Matthew 6:24-34; *Divine Providence* 179