

**Forcing ourselves to do what we don't
like doing for the sake of both our
own, and of the greater good**

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a light-colored suit jacket and a white shirt cuff, resting on the cover of a dark brown leather-bound book. The book is placed on a wooden surface. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the leather and the skin of the hand.

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Please read beforehand: **Genesis 156: 7-9**

When we stop to think about it, and reflect on it, it is obvious that we human beings have countless gifts bestowed on us by the Lord.

Awed by **the beauty and wonder of creation**, the writer of Psalm 8 exclaimed, “When I consider Your heaven, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?” (Verses 3, 4). Who of us isn’t also moved by majestic scenery or a beautiful sunset?



And then there is **the human body**, about which it has been so rightly written: “The human body is often described as a miracle due to its complex functions, and ability to heal and adapt. From the microscopic level of cells to the macroscopic level of organs and systems, the body’s ability to perform countless tasks simultaneously is remarkable. Examples include the pumping of blood, the eyes distinguishing millions of colours, and the brain storing vast amounts of information.” (AI Overview)

But creation, and our bodies, are by no means the only gifts and miracles the Lord bestow on us. There are many more. However, in this sermon we are focusing on one which is not as readily seen to be a gift and a miracle, and this is **human freewill**. There are reasons for regarding our freewill as the greatest miracle and gift of them all.



Without needing it to be shouted from the house-tops, throughout the Bible it is taken as known, that we have freewill, or the freedom to make choices. And not just any everyday choices, such as what clothes we are going to wear, but **choices in relation to our eternal destiny**, hopefully in heaven. Way, way, back in Old Testament times when the people of ancient Israel had not long settled into the promised land, Joshua – now an old man and soon to die – challenged the people in these words:

“Now therefore, fear the LORD, and serve Him in sincerity and truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:14, 15)



And think back to the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were warned by God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And yet they chose to do so. (Genesis 3:6).

Then there is the great contest which the prophet Elijah initiated, challenging the people at that time and amongst whom the worship of idols had become widespread. “And Elijah came to all the people, and said, **‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him ; but if Baal, then follow Him .’** (1 Kings 18:21) **The time had come for the people to make their choice.**



Our freedom to choose is central in the teaching of Jesus. Do you remember what He said during His “Sermon on the Mount”? “No one can serve two masters”, He said, “for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24) Once again, we are challenged to choose.



The teaching of The New Church is that we have - as precious gifts from the Lord both - freedom and rationality. This simply means that we are constantly challenged with regard to choices we must make,(freedom) and at the same time we have the ability to think through what we are being challenged by(rationality). We are continually challenged by such things as **darkness or light, love or hate, forgiveness or resentment, humility or self-importance**. So precious are these gifts, of freedom and rationality, that in the Doctrines for The New Church we read, “The Lord protects these two abilities untouched within us and as things that are sacred through the whole course of His divine providence.” (“Divine Providence” 96)




So protective of our freedom to choose, as the Lord is, that “He does not openly teach anyone truths but **leads people by means of good to think what truth is**, and also imparts to people, though they are not aware of it, a discernment and consequent adoption of a thing as being true because the Word declares it to be so, and because it squares with the Word.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 5952) What this means is that **the Lord inspires us with respect to what is good** and when we are so inspired **we search for the truth that supports such good**, eventually finding it in the Word, apparently by ourselves. It is all the unseen work of the Lord in our lives



In this modern age, when some owners try to “humanize” their dogs, it is a reminder to us that animals do not possess freedom and rationality. Animals live out according to their instincts and if we favour these instincts, giving them their food, our attention and caring for them, animals such as dogs and cats respond out of what is thought to be affection. But it is not a chosen response or affection. Again, from the Teachings of the New Church, “animal life is a life of merely physical impulses accompanied by knowledge that matches them.” “Divine Providence” 161).

Why is this so? The answer given is that animals have only a natural mind, whereas humans are multi-level. This makes it possible for us to rise above what is mere instinct. We can **look down on instinct, so to speak, from a higher level of our minds.** And this makes possible our choices as to what is awakened - or is moving us - at a natural, external, level.



A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a light-colored suit jacket and a white shirt cuff, resting on a dark, possibly black, rectangular object. The background is a warm, brownish-orange gradient.

Now, it is not just because we are multi-level beings that makes us different from animals and enables us to make choices and decisions. **Human beings are uniquely connected to the spiritual world** and there are influences and impulses, some originating in heaven and some originating in hell, that are continually impressing in on us and seeking to influence us. All our waking hours we humans **need to be alert to these influences and rise to the challenge of making choices about them.** If we choose the awakening of what is good and true in our lives, and continue to do so, then what is good and true will gradually become embedded in our hearts and minds. But if we are responsive to what is evil and false, and choose it, then what is evil and false will become embedded with us.

It is many people's experience that though humans have the gift of freedom and rationality, yet it

Why is this?

From the Bible and from Teachings of the New Church, I have gleaned four reasons:

Firstly, we feel the influence and activity of evil spirits, from hell, more readily and persuasively than the influence of angelic spirits from heaven. It is an appearance, even, that the influence and activity of evil spirits is actually stronger. But it is not. **We give such influence power.** We allow ourselves to be persuaded that it must prevail.

It helps to know that evil spirits, when they come to us, are noisy and boisterous, whereas angelic spirits are quieter. Evil spirits appeal to the immediacy and to the possibility of instant pleasure and gratification, whereas angels seek to influence us at a deeper level. It is for this reason, alone, that it is wiser to postpone reactions and from actually going forth into action.



Secondly, it is extremely helpful to remember what Jesus taught us, “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ be ‘No’. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:37) Once we enter into a conversation in our head about what evil spirits are urging on us we quickly become entangled in the trap they have set for us. It is **dangerous**, therefore, **to be ambivalent or irresolute**. A firm “No” to self-serving thoughts, feelings and behaviour is absolutely essential.



Thirdly, we all need to keep close to the Lord, in His Word, **reflecting on ourselves, checking the standards we live by**, and if they are slipping. It is, indeed, a slippery road, to indifference and to excuses and rationalizations, if we are not continually monitoring our lives in the light of the Lord’s truths and values.



Fourthly, there is the matter of our spiritual laziness and unwillingness to make the effort to dismiss thoughts and desires which the devil urges on us. In such situations, and notwithstanding there may be no delight on doing so, we need to **compel ourselves to think, desire, say and do, what is of the Lord**. It will seem an unrewarding duty at first, to compel ourselves. But as we persevere that sense of dry duty becomes one of fullness and delight.

The Lord cannot and will not compel us to live a truly spiritual life. Such compulsion would be on the surface only and would not change what is in our hearts. **“What is sown in freedom”**, we read, **“remains**, because it is implanted deeply in the person’s actual will, which is the indispensable element of a person’s life. But what is sown under compulsion does not remain, because compulsion is not an impulse originating in the person’s own will but belongs to the one who compels him (or her).” (“Arcana Caelestia” 9588)



But there is a world of difference between attempts to compel us from the outside and self-compulsion; **compulsion which is initiated by ourselves**; compulsion from coming from within.

And this is fascinating, that when we compel ourselves we are exercising freedom, or free-will, more impressively than in any other time. We read, **“When people practise self-compulsion, and set themselves against evil and falsity that are implanted and prompted by evil spirits, more freedom is present than there would ever be in any state outside those times of temptation.”**(“Arcana Caelestia” 1937:5)



Whilst Sarah, the wife of Abraham, dearly wished for a child, they remained childless for decades. It was for this reason that she urged Abraham to have a child by her servant girl Hagar, who, once she had conceived became insolent towards Sarah, silently mocking her for her barren-ness.

Now feeling despised by Hagar, Sarah implored Abraham to send her away, which is what he did. Soon, however, Hagar found herself in a desert “by a spring of water in the wilderness by the spring on the way to Shur.” (Genesis 16:7)



We will never know how long Hagar was there, desperate as her situation must have been. Remember, she was pregnant with Abraham's child. And, had she continued in the direction to which she had headed, she would surely have died.

Mercifully however, the Angel of the Lord found her, asked her where she had come from and where she intended going, and then ordered her to "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand." (Genesis 16:7-9). Whether this was something Hagar wanted to hear or not, we will never know. But what the angel said was much more than a suggestion. It was **an unambiguous command**. No 'ifs' or 'buts'!

This is interesting that, as is pointed out in the Teachings of the New Church where this story is referenced, the word "submit" in Hebrew means "to



Self-compulsion is all about forcing ourselves to do what we otherwise don't like doing, but we do it for the great good. And so we come to the very point and purpose of this story being included in the Bible.

In the spiritual sense. Sarah represents our knowledge of Divine truth, such as that

◆ there is only One who is good, that is, the Lord.(Mark 10:18).

◆ Also, and another, is the “Golden Rule”, to do into others as we would have them do to us. (Matthew 7:12).

◆ Another, forgive if you wish to receive the Lord's forgiveness. (Matthew 6:14).

◆ Be prepared to go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41)



At times we are not prepared to submit to the authority of these truths and think we know better and that we can trust our own faulty judgement. And so we “run away”. Not only does “running away” bring us into a desert, it means that if we continue in the way we are headed, we will die, spiritually.

It is at this point that the Angel of the Lord appears and speaks to us. **The Angel of the Lord is our conscience.** Our conscience stops us in our tracks, and firmly tells us to go back and “submit” ourselves to the higher authority of the truths the Lord teaches and urges on us. And not just to “submit” ourselves but to apply ourselves, even to forcing ourselves. **Flinging ourselves down, with humility, before the truth** we previously and earlier disparaged and mocked -in secret though in all probability it was.



We have to **surrender our pride and self-certainty** to do so. We may not like what our conscience instructs us to do. But if we fail to listen to it then we will only go further and further into the desert and perish there.

Amen



Readings :

Genesis Chapter 16 (all verses)

Psalm 119: verses 105 to 112

From *Arcana Caelestia*” 1937:3

“Those people who have practised self-compulsion and set themselves against evil and falsity – even though at first they had imagined that they did so of themselves, or by their own power, but after that had been enlightened to the effect that their effort originated in the Lord, even the smallest of all of that effort – **in the next life cannot be led by evil spirits, but are among the blessed.** This shows that a people ought to compel themselves to do what is good and to speak what is true. The Arcanum within this is that in so doing people have **a heavenly proprium** bestowed on them by the Lord.”



THE END

