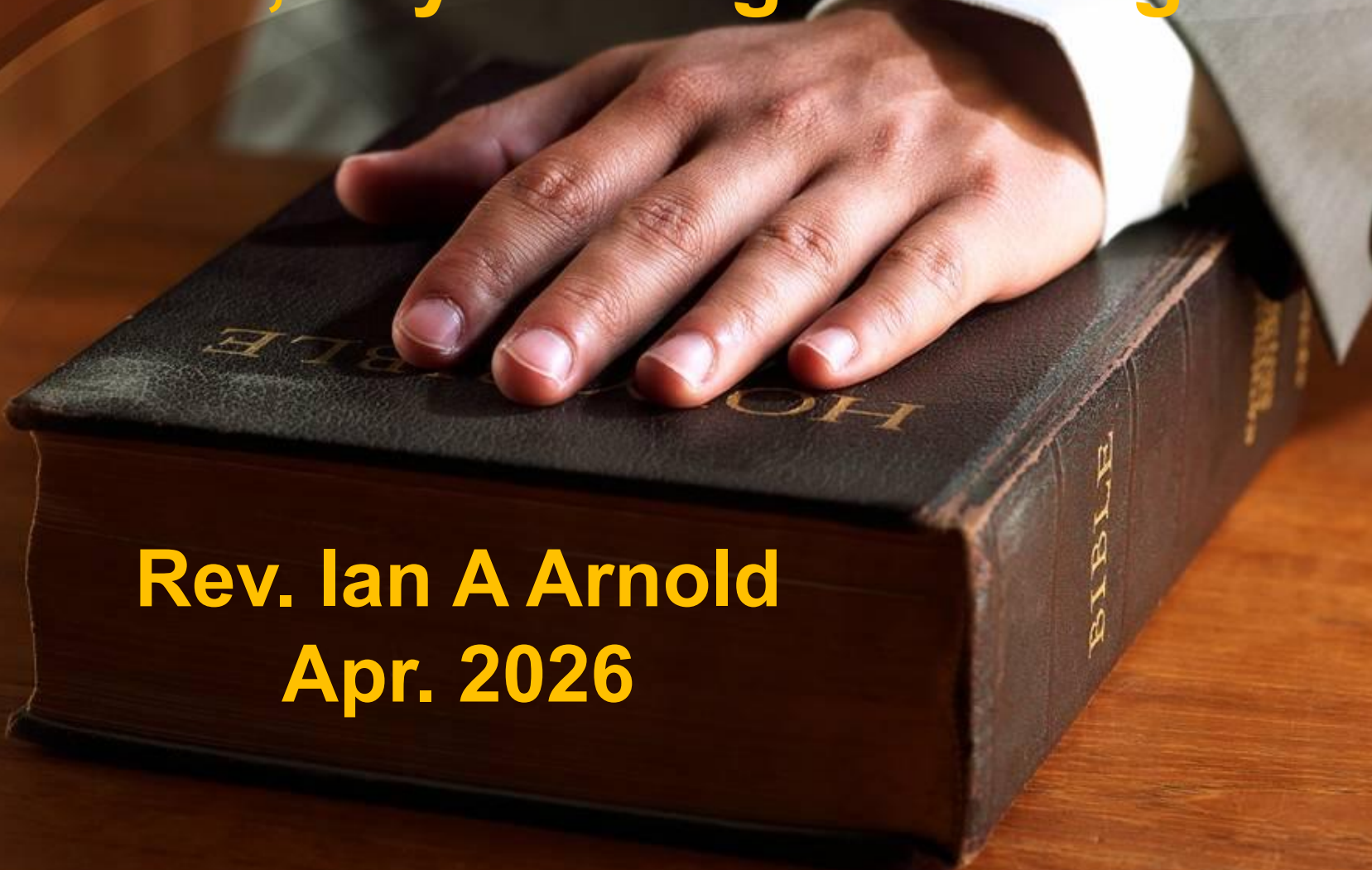


Why does it so often seem easier to think, say or do bad things than it is to think, say or do good things?

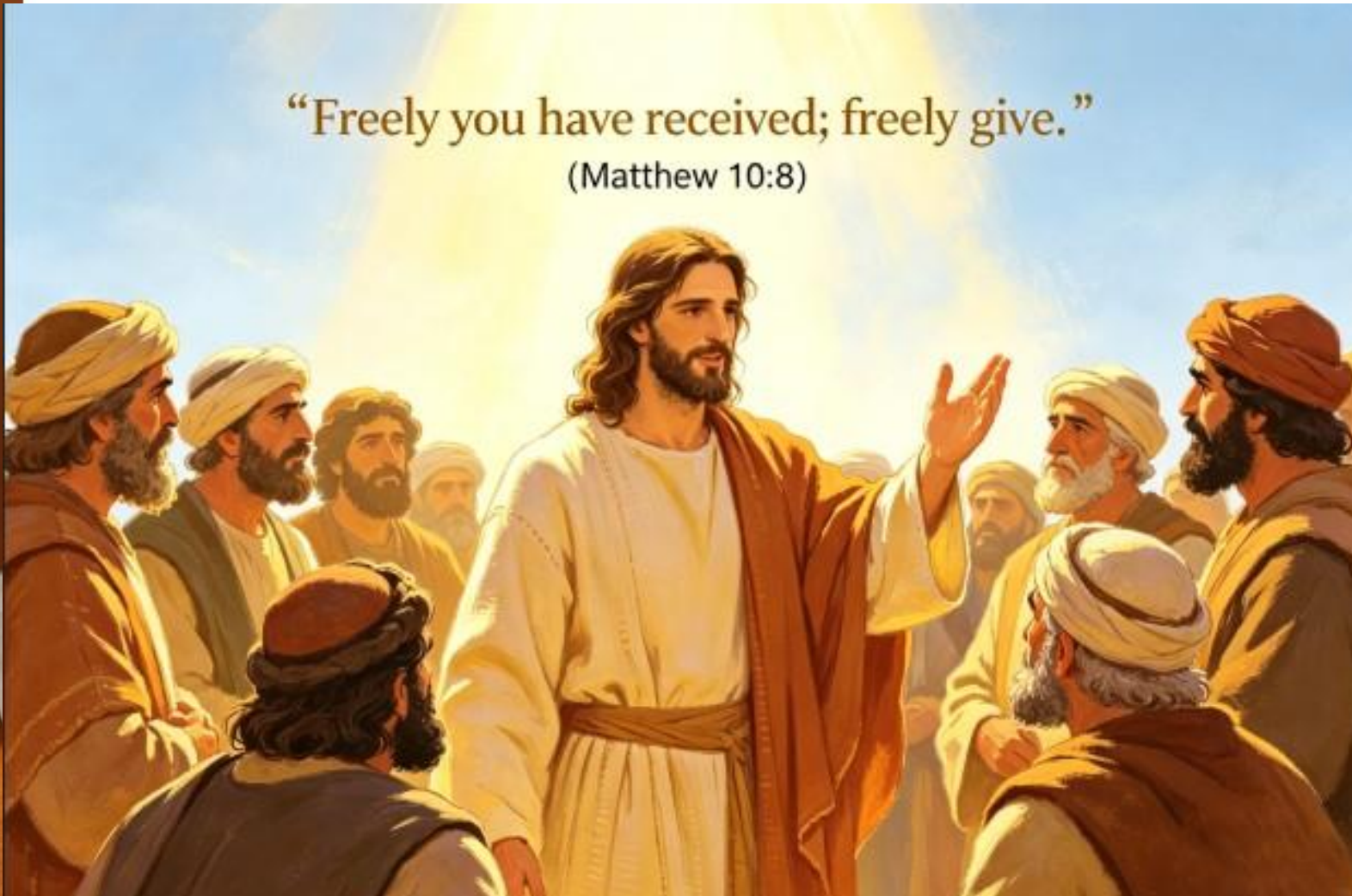
A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a white shirt cuff, resting on the cover of a dark brown leather Bible. The Bible is lying flat on a wooden surface. The word 'BIBLE' is embossed on the spine and the cover. The background is a warm, brownish-orange gradient with a subtle circular pattern.

**Rev. Ian A Arnold
Apr. 2026**

Please read beforehand

Jesus said, “**freely you have received, freely give.**” (Matthew 10:8)

“Freely you have received; freely give.”
(Matthew 10:8)



If you were to ask a group of - say - twenty people what is most important for them in life I wonder what they would say?

It would depend, of course, on whether they have interpreted the question **in relation to worldly things, or whether they have interpreted it in relation to more internal and less tangible things.** If they have interpreted the question in relation to worldly things, perhaps they might say such things as, "A treasured possession passed down the generations of their family", or, "A trophy won in a competition", or, if an outstanding and world class athlete, "An Olympic gold medal". If, however, they have interpreted the question in relation to more internal and less tangible things, perhaps they would say such things as "The memory of a special event", such as their graduation or wedding, or some



But what is more important for all of us, even more than any of these things? What do we prize most about ourselves? Would it be being born into a particular family, or being born with particular talents, or as the member of a particular race or at a particular time?

Now let me put this question another way. What, in the Lord's eyes, is the most important of all the gifts He gives us? Is it good health? Or a sense of purpose in life? These things are important, but the most important of all the Lord's gifts to us is His gift of **freewill**.



It is central to our beliefs, and to the teachings in the Heavenly Doctrines, given through Swedenborg, that **God's purpose in creation is a heaven of angels from the human race.** Yes, we have all been created to one day take our place in heaven as an angel there. And every split second or every day this is God's focus in all His involvement in our lives.

But He knows that it is absolutely essential that **we should want and choose the way of life which leads to heaven.** Such a way of life cannot be imposed on us. As is the case with any love which is truly love, Divine Love does not, and cannot, impose itself on others. It seeks, and cannot but patiently wait for, our freely chosen response. Swedenborg wrote, "The Lord loves people and wishes to dwell with them, but He cannot love or dwell with them unless they receive Him and respond with love for Him." ("Doctrine of Life" 102)



When researching sites on the internet about “freewill” I found it remarkable that even among some Christians the reality of our possessing the gift of freewill is questioned, a few even citing obscure passages of Scripture, wrongly or incompletely understood, to insist that all us, and everything, is predestined. The apostle Paul is wrongly understood to have taught predestination. But the Greek word, translated predestination, and which he used, in fact only means “to direct a person to a particular goal”. (See <https://zondervanacademic.com>>Blog)



The Bible and freewill

The reality is that throughout the Bible we are invited to make choices and we are taught that our choices have consequences. This could not be more obvious than the words which Moses spoke to the ancient people of Israel near the time of his passing from this world and when at last they had arrived after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, ready to enter the promised land:

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and our descendants may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19).



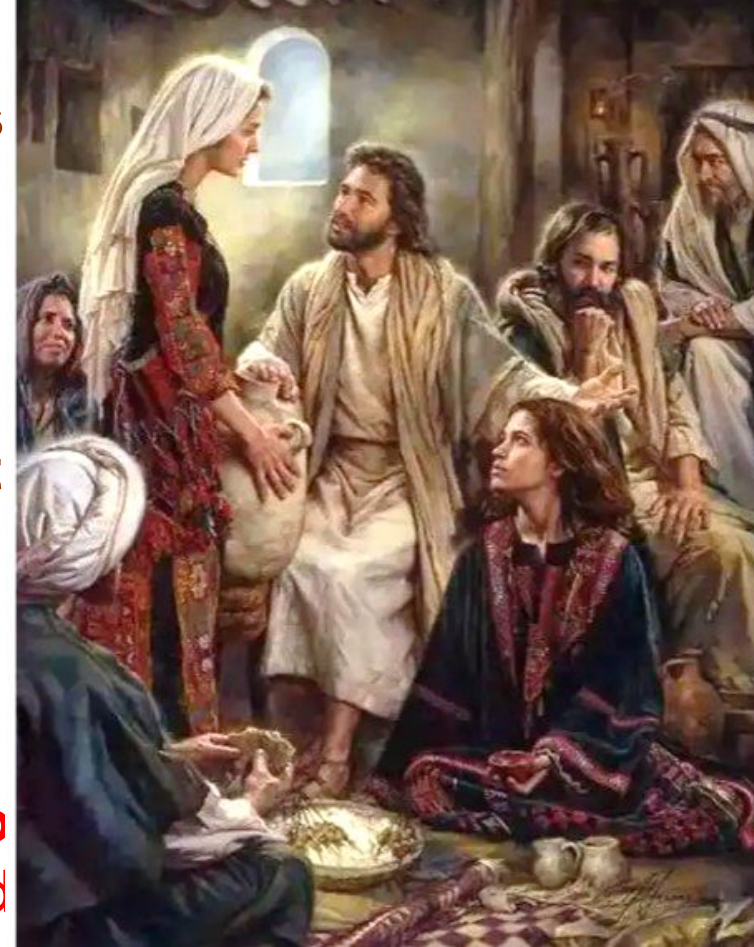
Similarly Moses's successor, Joshua, at the end of his life, challenged the people to **“choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.”** (Joshua 24:15)

Through the prophet Ezekiel God challenges us to turn away from unrighteousness and wickedness and to get ourselves **“a new heart and a new spirit.”** (Ezekiel 18:27 & 31).

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus made it clear that we **“cannot serve two masters”**. (Matthew 6:24). Clearly, we must make a choice.



Then there is the story of two good women, friends of Jesus, Martha and Mary. Whilst Martha worried and troubled herself about external things, complaining to Jesus about her sister, Mary, Jesus gently chided her and commended Mary for choosing “that good part”; choosing, in other words, to make the time with Him, and learning from Him, her first priority.



And what could be a clearer invitation to choose to have the Lord in our lives than His words, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3:20)



How it is that we have freewill?

Whilst, from the outside, it doesn't seem like this, **we live our lives in the midst of influences reaching us from the spiritual world, and these are conveyed to us through angelic spirits on the one hand and evil spirits on the other.** And the Lord's gift of freewill comes about from Him so regulating these influences that one does not outweigh the other. We read in the Writings, "Freewill in spiritual things comes about from the fact that we walk and pass through life in this world in the middle between heaven and hell." ("Coronis" 28)

Every time evil spirits awaken some wicked desire or thought in us angelic spirits respond, counter-balancing their activity.

But is it as equal in its impact on us as this teaching is saying?



At first glance something that Jesus taught seems to say it is not.

“Enter by the narrow gate;” He said, “for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:13,14).



These two gates are inside each of us. One is broad and, so it seems, easily entered. The other is narrow and difficult to find. But is it narrow because God made it this way? No, it is not. At the outset, and in childhood, both gates are the same size. But as we come into our youth and adulthood **we ourselves clutter up the gate which leads to eternal life**. We do things which over the years obscure that gate, making it difficult to find. We ourselves narrow that gate and are responsible for what it becomes. This is not something the Lord has done, as if He puts obstacles and difficulties in the way of our becoming a more spiritual and re-born person.

How do we know this? The answer is because the word translated as being “narrow” is from a Greek word which more correctly means, “**narrow from things introduced**”. And the kinds of things we introduce are things like the memory of reckless, bad and self-gratifying things we have done, along with denials, excuses and justifications.



In the book of the Writings, “Heaven and Hell” there is a short Chapter, near the end of that book titled, “Leading a Heaven-bound life is not as hard as people believe”. And the reason it is not so hard as people think “is because it is simply a matter, when something gets in the way that people know is dishonest and unfair, of choosing not to do it because it is against what God teaches. If people get used to doing this, and by getting used to it develop a certain disposition, then little by little they are bonded to heaven. As this takes place, the higher levels of their minds are opened; they recognize more and more clearly what is evil and wrong; and so the more readily and easily they reject it out of their lives”However, “The difficulty of thinking this way and of resisting what is evil increases as people choose to do evil things intentionally.” (“Heaven and Hell” 533)

Do you see the point? **We make things more and more difficult for ourselves, by our bad choices.**



All evil carries a certain delight for us. For example, and if we are such a person, so long as we remain unregenerate we find delight in getting our own way and in seeing other people - especially other people who are competitors - fail. And **if we don't pay attention to this very early on this becomes a habit and the delight associated with it becomes intensified.** And what is happening is that this intensifying delight embeds us more and more strongly and deeply with some awful, ungodly, community of people in hell. (See "Divine Providence" 296:3)



Upbringing

Reflecting on this teaching we can see **how important it is, therefore, for parents to be vigilant with regard to the cultivation of good habits with their children.** The years of childhood provide vital opportunities for teaching such values as self-restraint, consideration of others, respect for people in authority, healthy self-esteem, gratitude, encouragement of people they may know less fortunate than themselves, and an awareness of God as being a God of love and as the Giver of all good things.



As delight in evil increases so does the difficulty in resisting it.

Resisting an evil **involves temptation**. This is the only way to overcome it. And so it follows that **the greater the delight in some evil has grown to be the stronger and more challenging the temptation will always be to overcome it.**

But what of evil; of ungodly thoughts and feelings; which come to us uninvited and which as yet we have not welcomed to make a home in our lives?

Firstly, one of the really reassuring teachings given in the Writings is that until we invite evil to make a home in our lives it is an outside influence. It is not us. Many people mistakenly believe that because a shameful thought crosses their mind this must mean they are wicked people. No, at this point,



It may not be apparent on first reading it, but this is what Jesus taught when He said: “Not that which goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” (Matthew 15:11) The meaning here is that there are so many things we see and hear, both around us here in this world and inwardly and privately, and these at first are uninvited thoughts and desires. And if we see these thoughts and desires for what they are, outside suggestions trying to break into our lives, they will just pass right through us and be eliminated. However, **if we take them to heart, nurse them and nurture them, and wish we could act on them, it is then that we are guilty and responsible.** “For out of the heart” Jesus said, “proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a



Secondly, influences reaching us from hell are invariably loud and -as we feel the to be- domineering. As is the teaching, “When angelic spirits flow in they do so as softly as gentles breezes””On the other hand, the influx of hell by way of evil spirits brings with it a force and impulsion to dominate.” (Arcana Caelestia” 642 and 905). This is how it seems and evil spirits want us to believe this.

Who of us hasn't known times when we have felt thoughts and feelings from hell to be so pressing and urgent that they seem impossible to resist? Perhaps it was when someone shouted at you, saying untrue things about you, and you have felt a rush of anger and resentment so strong that it has taken great self control not to give into it. **These are times when angelic spirits will be desperately trying to hold us back from retaliation; and we need to make space for this influence to impact on us. We can do this by quietly acknowledging disagreement, offering to talk about the matter another time, and then walking**



Thirdly, and still with this example in mind, when ungodly thoughts and feelings rise up in us **our response needs to be an instant rejection**. If we start having a conversation in our head about it, asking ourselves, “Well, should I or not? or telling ourselves that the person who has offended us perhaps deserves retaliation, we are already in danger of succumbing. As Jesus taught us to do, “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ be ‘No’. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:37). **We need to be direct, immediate, unwavering and absolutely firm in our rejection of anything ungodly.**



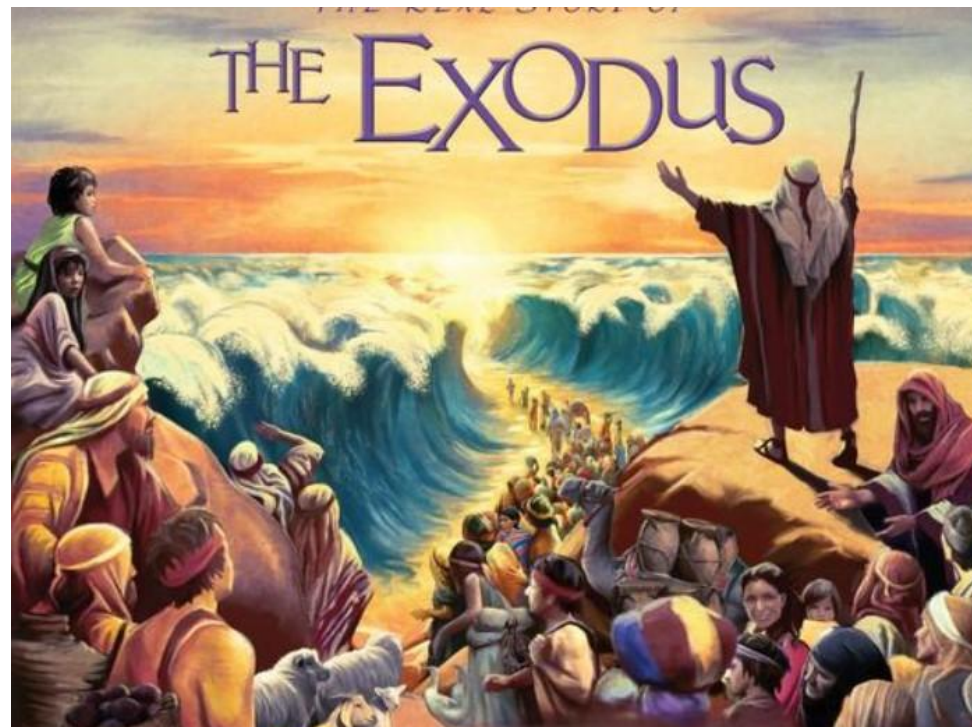
When at last Joseph, now second in command of ancient Egypt, decided to make himself known to his brothers who had treated him so shamefully years beforehand, he had already and firmly rejected any thought of retribution on them. “I am Joseph your brother”, he said, “whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; **for God sent me before you to preserve life.**” (Genesis 45:4,5)



Fourthly, we may, for self-regarding reasons, hide evil or prevent it being apparent to others around us, but **only the Lord can drive it out of our lives**. Here, again, it is a mistake people make and which, almost certainly, we all have made, telling ourselves “I must try harder”. Yes, of course, we need to be focused so that an evil does not put down roots in our lives. But at the very same time we need to acknowledge that of ourselves we have no strength to overpower it, that only the Lord can do this.



It is not surprising that when the ancient people of Israel escaped from slavery in Egypt, Moses having persevered to enable this to happen, when they came up against their first great obstacle they lost heart. What was in front of them was the seemingly fully flowing and deep Red Sea and they were certain that if they went forward they would drown. “And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today you will see again no more for ever. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.’ ”
(Exodus 14:13,14)



Can we be confident that the Lord will fight for us, and that He will be successful?

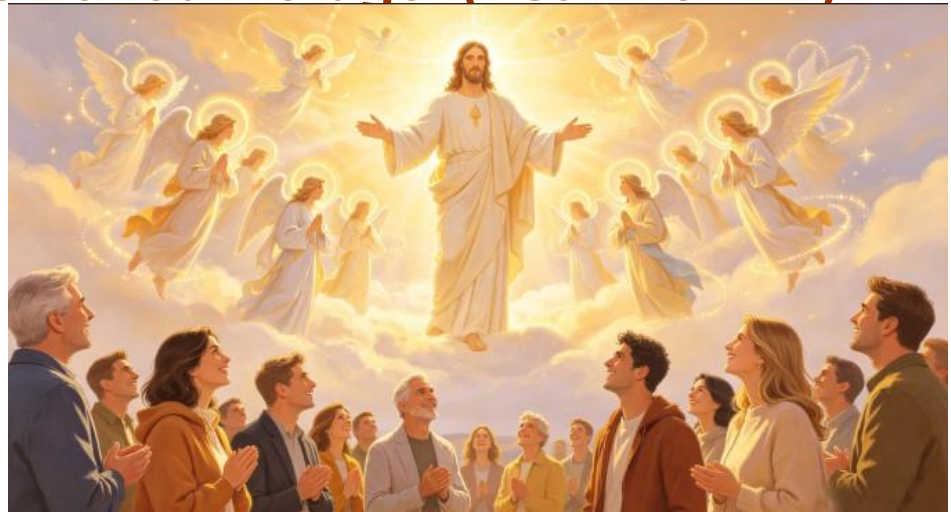
Yes, we can. There is no evil which is urged on us from hell which the Lord, while on earth, did not resist and successfully overcome. How reassuringly we are taught that “He was tempted in all points, as we are yet was without sin”. (Hebrews 4:15). And **as He overcame the whole range of evils from hell which attacked Him He can overcome those evils in us. Jesus urged us to “take courage”, for, He said, “I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)**



The blessings that the come to us from the Lord as the result of standing firm in temptation and resisting evil, are immense. Here is the reassurance: “Once a temptation is completed, contact with heaven, contact which previously was partially shut off, is opened up. Enlightenment and affection, and consequently pleasure and delight result from this, because the angels with whom the one who was tempted is now in contact with enter in by means of truth and good.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 8367:2).

May it be something that we more frequently experience, that the Lord has been our defense and our God the rock of our refuge. (Psalm 94:22)

Amen



Readings:

Deuteronomy Chapter 30: verses 15 to 20

John Chapter 6: verses 66 to 69

From “Arcana Caelestia” 8961:

“The struggle in temptations is over dominion, involving the evil a person has from hell and the good he (or she) has from heaven. The evil which desires to have dominion exists in the natural or external man, whereas the good exists in the spiritual or internal man. Consequently the struggle in temptations is also over the dominion of one over the other. If the evil is victorious, then the natural man has dominion over the spiritual. If the good is victorious, then the spiritual man has dominion over the natural.”



THE END

