

Living within the confines of what our senses tell us, and dictate to us, causes us to become spiritually paralyzed



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May 2026**

Some years ago a young mother came to my home with her three children, the youngest of whom, a little boy of just three years old, was born blind. This moved me very deeply and though my heart ached for him his mother was positive about it, and very grateful for, the help that is available to equip such people to live a purposeful and satisfying life. And I am given to understand that for people who are born blind, or become blind, their other senses to some extent compensate, becoming more sensitive than would otherwise have happened.



This experience reminded me how vital are senses are. They are what connect us with the world around us. They are the gateway through which we go out to participate in the world around us and the gateway through which the world impacts on us.

But our senses are very limited and can be unreliable, and we need to be aware that they cannot tell us everything. Dogs, for example, have much more sensitive hearing than humans, hearing sounds four times further away than we can.

(<https://hearingssense.com.au/dogs/cats/even/better/than/humans>)

And another example: “eagles can see, on average, four to eight times further and more sharply than humans, allowing them to spot prey like rabbits over three kilometres (two miles) away.” (AI Overview).



Such facts as these should cause us **to be cautious about over reliance on what our limited and unreliable senses can tell us**. This has real consequences for us, firstly, on a worldly level. Recently I walked in a local park with a friend and hearing what I thought was a bird up high in a tree overhead I looked up. Just as I did so I struggled to quickly get out of the way of a man riding a bicycle coming from behind and whose warning alarm on his bicycle had sounded like a bird. My sense of hearing had not properly identified the alarm and so the danger.

Secondly, and in a way much more seriously, **our over-reliance on what we take to be the evidence of our senses can lead to our questioning and denying spiritual truths and realities**. For example, if we consult our senses, beginning and ending with what they, alone, reveal to us and believing that they are the arbitrator of what is believable or not, then we are most likely to reject the existence of God, of God as the Source of our

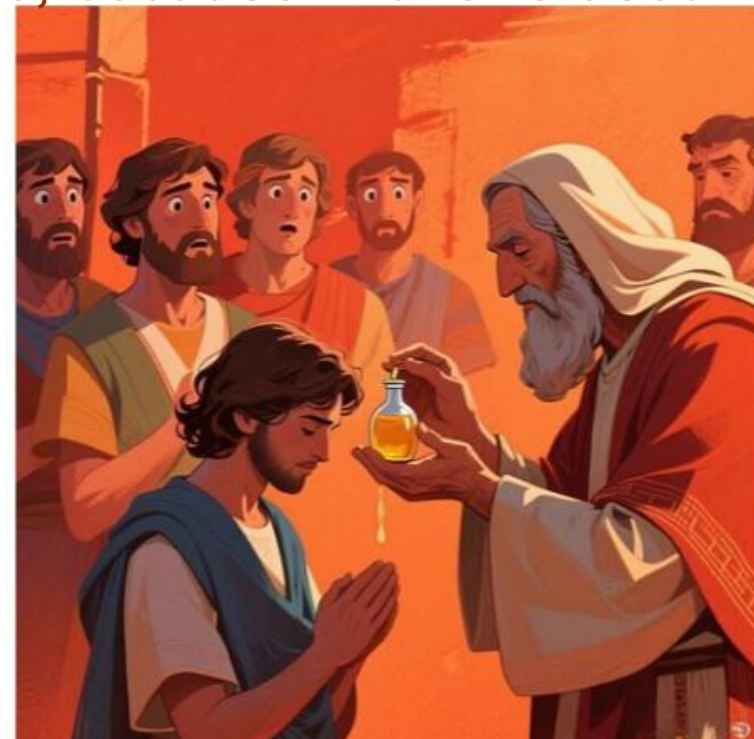


This was the error Eve made in the Garden of Eden. It came to the point that her senses, pressing in on her, convinced her that what God had told her and her husband, was not believable. “And the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” (Genesis 3:5). Can you hear what **the serpent, the symbol of our senses**, was saying to Eve? It was like, “Do not believe in what God said. Just think about how delicious the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is, and how wise it will make you”.



It also serves as a warning about over relying on our senses, what God said to the prophet Samuel when he went to anoint a successor to the king, Saul. He was led by God to the house of Jesse who caused the first seven of his eight sons to come into Samuel's presence. "So it was, when they came, that (Samuel) looked at Eliab" (the oldest son), "and said, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; **for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.**"

(1 Samuel 6:6, 7)



Then there is the story which involved the apostle Thomas. Clearly, he too was over reliant on his senses. Do you remember when? On the evening of His resurrection Jesus appeared to the eleven remaining apostles who had locked themselves in a room in Jerusalem “for fear of the Jews.” While there “Jesus came and stood in the midst of them, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’. Now when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:19, 20). “But Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, ‘We have seen the Lord’. But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand in His side, I will not believe.’” (John 20:24,25)



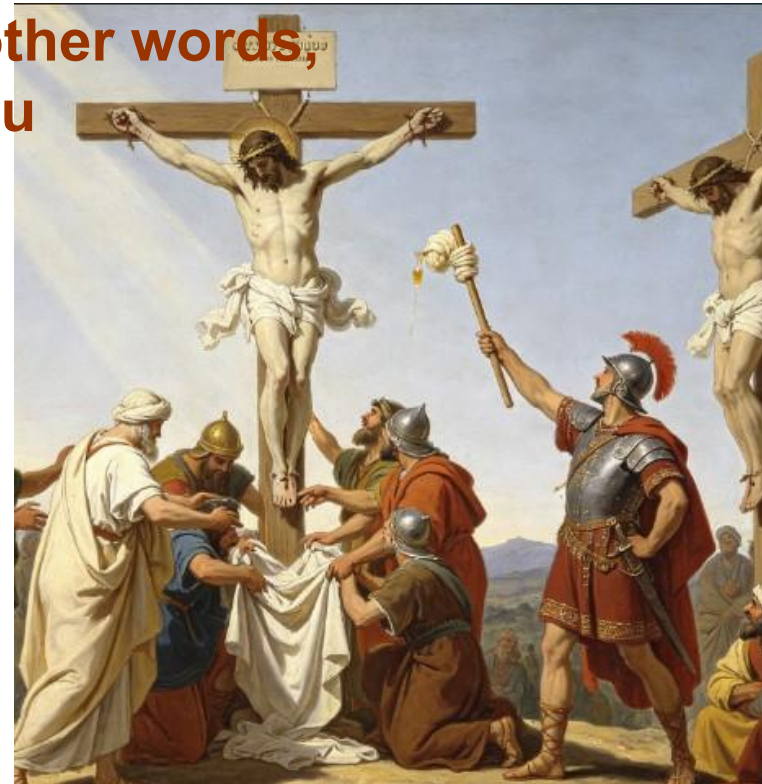
At this point, Thomas was only prepared to believe what His senses verified. And for reasons best known to the Lord, He (Jesus) complied with what Thomas insisted on. Eight days later and after first appearing to the other ten disciples, Jesus appeared to Thomas, inviting him to touch Him as he had insisted, and he believed. “And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen Me and yet have believed.” (John 20: 28, 29).

The indications are that Thomas was not as hardened in his thinking or as close-minded as some people are. Nevertheless he fell short of how the Lord wishes it to be.



There was an occasion when certain scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus “saying, “Teacher we want to see a sign from you. But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given unto it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” (Matthew 12:38, 39)

Similarly, at the crucifixion, “the soldiers also mocked Him, coming, and offering Him wine, and saying, ‘If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” (Luke 23:37). In other words, “Give us a sign”; “prove you are the king of the Jews”.



Jesus told a parable about a rich man and a poor man, named Lazarus. Both died, and the poor man went to heaven and the rich man went to hell. And in hell the rich man pleaded that Lazarus be sent to warn his five brothers, still alive in this world, “lest they also come into this place of torment”. “But he (Abraham) said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.” (Luke 16: 28-31) **Signs never permanently persuade people. Belief must be from within; from the heart.**



What follows here is teaching from the Writings that we all need to take to heart that, “Investigating mysteries of faith by means of facts (gained through the senses) is as impossible as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (“Arcana Caelestia” 233). From elsewhere, **“The spiritual surpasses the natural in quality to such an extent that there are few things which can be perceived by natural senses.”** (“The Last Judgement” 27:3). Again “There are very many people in the world who reject spiritual things because they do not comprehend them by the senses. With such people spiritual things are dispersed (rejected) like cloud or smoke.” (“Spiritual Experiences” 2930).

This, too, gives us much to think about, where we read: **“Not believing in the Lord or the Word but themselves and their own senses was the evil** not only of the Most Ancient Church before the Flood, but also of the Ancient Church after it. It was also the evil of the Jewish Church, and later on of the new or gentile Church established after the Lord’s Coming, (the Christian Church) as well as the evil of the Church of today. Consequently no faith exists; and when no faith exists neither does any love of the neighbour.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 231)



In addition to beliefs mentioned earlier in this sermon, such as belief in **God**, or belief in **the spiritual world**, or belief that **life flows into us**, we are also **challenged by the so-called evidence of our senses when it comes to belief in the Lord's divine Providence**. We all know that life doesn't unfold as we wish it would, either on the larger, cosmic scale, or with regard to our own, individual lives. There is much innocent suffering around the world; children are born with illnesses for which they cannot, of course, be responsible; bad, sinful and destructive behaviour is often rewarded, and the weak are so often at the mercy of the powerful and strong. So it all seems. This is what our limited view of things is telling us. And some people become so convinced of this they abandon belief in God. There are several times when I have heard people say that because of the suffering in the world there is "no way" they can believe in God.



What we see and hear and so understand from what our senses are telling us, however, is far from being the full picture. Jesus told us that even the very hairs of our head are all numbered. (Matthew 10:30). And in the magnificent Psalm 139 we are assured that God knows absolutely everything about us. “For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.” (Verse 4).

Our senses have their place, but their role is to support what is spiritual. What is spiritual needs always to come first and the natural after. As I hope you agree, “Thought from the eye closes the understanding, but thought from the understanding opens the eye.” (“Divine Love and Wisdom” 46). Belief in a loving God Who created the world, Who cares for us every moment of every day, Whose goodness and mercy follows us all the days of our lives (Psalm 23:6) comes first. And then, from this standpoint, we look out over the world and over our lives, and see evidence that this is so.



There are bound to be times when we need to remind ourselves of this, that is, of **the need to hold to our beliefs when they are being challenged by how things seem**. And, there may be times, too, when we can help others to hold to their belief in the Lord, and their confidence in His Love and care, when they are being similarly challenged.

This is not to say that asking questions or expressing doubt is not allowable. Far from it! Healthy doubt is positive and has its place. The teaching in the Writing is that something is not true simply because someone in authority has said so. (“True Christian Religion” 42:2)

And it is not a matter of uncritical acceptance of some truth of which we have become newly aware. (See “Arcana Coelestia” 7298:2) But **we need to approach it with an open-mind and a preparedness to believe it**, not dismiss it because it runs counter to what our senses would have us believe.



“Now there was in Jerusalem by the sheep gate, a pool which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water.” (John 5:2, 3).

**Does this begin to suggest something to you?
Something that happens within us all, or so often
threatens to do so?**



The five porches mean our five senses. And this story is included in the Word to highlight for us the hold that our senses can have over us; just as they threatened to do with Thomas, just as they did with the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, and just as they do with people everywhere who demand “evidence” before they are willing to believe. And when this happens, although it does not usually show on the outside, but **within there is spiritual lethargy, sickness, and spiritual immobility.** Remember, the man who is the centre of this story was crippled and mostly unable to move.

Can you picture this scene in your mind? And can you see it as reflecting back to you, as in a mirror, the situation which arises within us when we allow ourselves to be caught up in the clamour for “evidence”.

There is, however, a way out of this. In the spiritual sense, by **the Pool of Bethesda is meant the Word of God.** And not just the Word of God outside of us; something we read; or are taught from; but the Word of God as we have so far received it in ourselves. Wonderfully, **what we have learned of the Word is stirred and awakened by the angels**



But with the crippled man it was different. He told Jesus he had stayed close by this pool of Bethesda for all of thirty-eight years, hoping to be healed. But, he said, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.” (John 5:7)

But was he as willing to exert himself as he might have been?



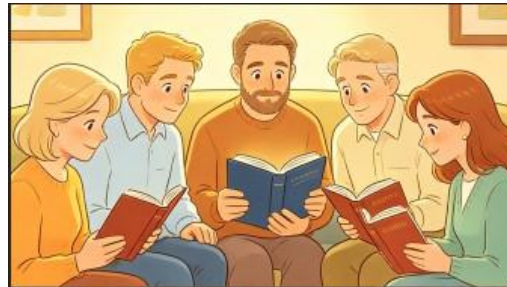
We rightly ask this question because over thirty-eight years surely he might have developed a strategy to be first into the pool and to be healed. And this takes us to the heart of his problem. Was he not doing enough for himself? The answer seems very much to be, 'Yes'.

There is a teaching in the Writings that even though we feel helpless in the face of problems, difficulties or challenges, **if we take action then support from the Lord through heaven can come cascading in.** “Action comes first”, we read, “then the desire for it in the person’s will follows. For when a person is led by his understanding to carry out any action, he is at length led by his will to do it.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 4353:2)

We could all easily be overwhelmed by what our senses seem to be telling us. As we noted earlier, our senses insist there is no God, no survival beyond death, no spiritual world, no God watching over and working within human affairs. We can get to the point of feeling



We need to read the Word and take more of it into ourselves. When we look out on the beauty of creation we need to lift up our thoughts in gratitude to God. When we read and hear about suffering we need to affirm to ourselves that this is not God's way or desire. We also need to affirm God in the love we have for each other. When we see a newborn child we need to allow ourselves to marvel at this new little miracle who has arrived in the world. Instead of focusing on bad things happening we need to focus on good things and celebrate God for His goodness and mercy. We need to remember times when we are sure God has helped us and answered our prayers.



Remember: **Action comes first, and then influx follows.** And when it does falsities and appearances which seemed so formidable melt away and our inner, spiritual, energy is healed and restored.

Amen



Readings:

Genesis 3: 1-9

John 4:1-11



Arcana Caelestia 6479:

“Some not so upright spirits who were once with me for quite some time were constantly introducing doubts that were based on the illusions of the senses and went against the idea that all things can flow in from a single source, and so from the Lord. But I told them that so many doubts could not be removed in a short space of time, on account of the illusions of the senses which had to be dispelled first and on account of their lack of knowledge of countless things which they needed to know. I told them that with people who have a negative frame of mind, that is, who are ruled through and by a negative attitude, doubts cannot by any means be removed; for with these people one small difficulty has more validity than a thousand proofs....But people who have an affirmative frame of mind, that is, who are ruled through and through by an affirmative attitude, turn away small difficulties which are based on the illusions of the senses and go against truths, and any things they cannot grasp they cast aside, saying that they do not yet understand them, and in doing so they hold fast to their belief in the truth.”



THE END

