

HOW DOES THE LORD LEAD PEOPLE?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

A woman loses her home and lands. The disciple Peter finds himself in a difficult position. The woman and Peter put their trust in the Lord (or His agent) and He guides them to good solutions to their problems. In a similar way, the Lord lays out a clear path for each one of us. He does not force us to take this path. He simply offers us the opportunity to walk through our lives with Him on the path laid out in His Word—making His path our path through our daily actions. At each turn He guides and protects us, bending our choices towards Him and our greatest eternal happiness.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

We experience the freedom to respond to life situations giving us the feeling that we are “in charge” of our destiny. How does the Lord fit into this picture?

Perfect Timing

A woman and her husband added a room to their home for Elisha the prophet to stay in as he passed by on his journeys. In return, she was granted a son. As the boy grew up, he suddenly became ill and died. The woman ran to Elisha, who came and miraculously brought her son back to life. Some time later, Elisha warned her that there would be a famine, and that she and her family should live somewhere else for seven years until it ended. On her return, she found her home and lands occupied. So she went to the king to try to get her property back. Elisha had a servant named Gehazi who sometimes traveled with him. Gehazi also knew the king and happened to be visiting him on the day the woman went to see him. Just as she arrived, the king asked Gehazi to entertain him with stories about Elisha. As he recounted Elisha bringing the boy back to life, Gehazi spotted the woman in the crowd.

And Gehazi said, “My lord, O king, this is the woman, and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life.” And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed a certain officer for her, saying, “Restore all that was hers, and all the proceeds of the field from the day that she left the land until now” (II Kings 8:5-6).

What are the chances that Gehazi, who knew the woman, would be talking about her at the very the moment she arrived? Would the king have seen her in the crowd of people seeking justice that day? Would he have given back her property and all of its proceeds if Gehazi had not been there that day? We cannot know the answers to these questions, but the timing of these events provides an opportunity to think about whether there might be a larger plan—a Divine plan.



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Money for Taxes

During His life on earth, the Lord demonstrated the extent to which He foresees human needs and provides for them. When asked if his Teacher paid temple taxes, Simon Peter said “Yes.” He then went to Jesus, and Jesus, *anticipating* Peter’s question, said,

“What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?” Peter said to Him, “From strangers.” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for Me and you” (Matthew 17:25-27).

The Lord not only knew Peter’s question, He had also knew that a fish had swallowed a coin whose value was worth exactly the amount needed for the temple taxes, and that Peter would catch *that* fish when he cast in a hook!

How Does the Lord Lead?

In both situations a person succeeded in a difficult situation with the Lord’s help directly or through others. If we believe that success in life comes from our *own* efforts, we will eventually be disappointed and experience the emptiness that this kind of thinking brings.

The Lord continually offers help. He lays out a path to happiness in His Word. By choosing Him as our Guide and freely following Him, we can hear His voice in various ways—through friends or a person we really respect, through our conscience, through an inspiring book or through reflecting on an event or pattern of events in our lives. But it is the principles we learn from the Word that build a mental framework against which we can accurately measure these other influences in our lives.

Without the knowledges of truth and good from the Word the Lord cannot be present with a person and lead him, for when a person knows nothing of the Lord, of heaven, of charity and faith, his spiritual mind...is empty, and has nothing from the Lord in it (*Apocalypse Explained* 112:3).

Having the truths from the Word in our minds does not mean that we have to memorize all of the stories or facts in the Word. It does mean that we have a strong foundation knowledge of what the Lord teaches and that we consciously use this knowledge regularly in our decision-making. Occasionally we may experience an “Aha” moment—when a truth that we have known for some time suddenly speaks to us in a clear and new way. The Lord leads us through the delights we experience at moments like this.

Can the Lord Tell a Person Exactly What to Do?

Sometimes people think that life would be easier if the Lord would just tell them what to do. But this is not how He works. If He did this, we would lose our freedom to choose whether to follow Him or not. We would feel forced into doing things we don’t yet see the benefits

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of or just apathetically accept what happens. The Lord leads us when we reach out to Him by going to the Word and making an effort to put it into action through our daily choices.

Every Step We Take Affects Our Future

People may not choose the Lord's path. And those who often choose the Lord's path experience times when they are side-tracked. But regardless of what people choose, the Lord constantly guards every person's path of life, bending each daily choice towards the greatest possible happiness. In fact,

Unless people were led by the Lord every moment, yes, every tiniest fraction of a moment, they would perish. Every change of state of the human mind makes some change in the series of things present and so of things that follow. What, then, must it not do in the progression to eternity? It is like an arrow shot from a bow which, if it made the slightest deviation from the target at the moment of being aimed would deviate immensely at a distance of a thousand feet or more. So it would be if the Lord did not lead the states of human minds every fraction of a moment (see *Divine Providence* 202).

The Lord's leading is so complete that "a person takes no step into which and from which the Lord does not lead" (*Apocalypse Explained* 1174:2).

The Stream of Providence

When a person is trying to follow the Lord, he or she is carried along in the stream of providence.

[People like this] remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss. They are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infatuated with wealth. If they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8478).

We can listen for the voice of the Lord's leading in His Word. When we try to follow the path He sets out, we will be led toward eternal happiness in heaven.

OPTIONAL READING

Divine providence works so subtly because if we sensed this, we would be outraged and enraged against God, and we would die.... This is why the Lord in His Divine providence is constantly leading us in our freedom, and to us it seems as though this freedom were our own. Leading us against ourselves in freedom is like lifting a massive and stubborn weight from the ground with jacks and not being able to feel the weight and the resistance because of their strength. Or it is like people surrounded by enemies intent on murder, unaware that a friend is leading them out by unknown paths and will later disclose the plan of their enemies (*Divine Providence* 211).



FOCUS POINTS

Circle the answers that you think are true and discuss.

1. If I want to be led by the Lord, I need to
 - a. listen quietly for His voice.
 - b. think about what other people I admire are doing.
 - c. read the Word.
 - d. go to church.

2. The Lord can speak to me
 - a. through the examples of people I know.
 - b. through good books.
 - c. through the Word.
 - d. through my conscience.

3. If the Lord told me exactly what to do, I might
 - a. get to heaven more easily.
 - b. be angry with Him.
 - c. feel frustrated because I couldn't do what I wanted.
 - d. be happy, because my life would be perfect.

5. The choices I am making today will
 - a. have no affect on things I might choose in the future.
 - b. determine my future.
 - c. move me one step closer to my eternal destination in heaven or hell.
 - d. change my life in subtle and/or major ways.

6. Having the Lord's Word in my mind means
 - a. knowing all the stories in the Word.
 - b. living from the guiding principles in the Word.
 - c. thinking about the Word all the time.
 - d. reading the Word often.

7. People who are in the stream of providence
 - a. don't care what happens to them.
 - b. don't worry about whether they have enough money.
 - c. trust that the Lord will take care of them no matter what happens.
 - d. are more concerned with eternal things than worldly things.

8. The Lord
 - a. protects me from evil forces all the time.
 - b. leads each person at every step.
 - c. gives some people an easier life
 - d. than others.
 - e. wants every person to go to heaven.



There is a sphere elevating all people towards heaven, which proceeds continually from the Lord. It is like a strong current in the ocean, which with hidden force bears a ship along. All those who believe on the Lord and live according to His commandments enter that sphere or current and are raised upwards; but those who do not believe on Him, have no desire to enter that sphere, but turn aside and are caught up by the stream which flows into hell (*True Christian Religion* 652:3).

Ocean currents are affected by a variety of factors. This activity takes a look at two factors: temperature and salinity. Try your hand at one of the following experiments.

How Temperature Affects Currents

To do this experiment you will need a glass jar, ice cubes that are frozen with blue food coloring in them, ground pepper, and warm water.

Fill the jar half-way with warm water. Sprinkle some ground pepper on the surface. Put a blue ice cube in the water and watch what happens as it melts. The sinking ice water should move the warm water, pushing the pepper grains to the bottom of the jar. In nature, this situation happens when warm water and cold water move between the poles (where it is cold) and the equator (where it is warm). The changes in temperature cause constant currents in the ocean.

How Salinity Affects Currents

To do this experiment you will need a wide-mouth jar, two glasses of fresh water, table salt, red and blue food coloring, a measuring spoon, and a stick to stir with.

Add a pinch of salt and blue food coloring to one glass. Put several spoonfuls of salt and red food coloring in the other glass. Pour the blue water into the wide-mouth jar, then slowly add the red water.* The saltier red water will sink to the bottom because it has greater density. Oceanographers use salinity maps to predict the movement of currents.

** Hint: Transferring the red salt water into a small pitcher will help control the flow as you pour into the glass. The effect of this experiment is dramatic when carefully done.*

Discuss

1. How did different temperatures and salt levels affect the movement of the water?
2. We are encouraged to think of the Lord's love as being like heat and people who are acting from selfish and worldly loves like cold. How might the Lord's providence and the currents in the experiments illustrate this spiritual reality in our lives?
3. Have you ever had a "sinking feeling" when something is not right? In ancient times enemies would ruin fields by putting salt on them. After this, nothing could grow. This is like evil loves and false ideas that lay waste the love of what is good and true in our lives (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1666). How might the effects of spiritual "salt" affect the turn-over of good and useful ideas in our minds?



TRUST WALK

Activity 2

Trust and confidence mean trust and confidence in the Lord that out of pure mercy He will teach people the way and lead them to heaven (*Apocalypse Explained* 810:4).

Complete one or more of the following trust activities and discuss.

Mine Field

This activity may be done indoors or outdoors. Scatter a variety of objects around the area to create an obstacle field. Pair students. One person in each pair will be blindfolded. Partners hold hands. The sighted partner leads the blind partner through the minefield. When the course is complete, trade the blindfold and repeat.

Blind Millipede

This activity may be played indoors or outdoors. If you are indoors, create an obstacle course by scattering objects around the floor. If you are outdoors, choose a walk that involves navigating around objects. Blindfold all but one member of your group. Players should form a line, each holding the shoulders or elbows of the person in front of them. Place the sighted person at the front of the line. The sighted person leads the group through the obstacle course. Players may agree on directional signals.

Leading the Blind

This activity requires groups of five students to complete (or may be adapted for a smaller group). Scatter a variety of objects on the floor, creating an obstacle field. Blindfold one member of the group. Tie four ropes to the blindfolded person. Four people will take the ends of the ropes and lead him or her through the obstacle course. No talking is allowed.

Discussion

1. How did it feel to put your trust in your friends?
2. Describe how it felt to lead a friend to safety.
3. What does it mean to put your trust in the Lord?
4. In what ways can people be “blind” to spiritual dangers that are around them?
5. How might we experience the Lord’s leading in ways that we can recognize after it has happened?

Activity 3

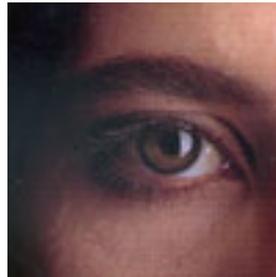
PROTECTION OF THE EYE



Keep me as the apple of Your eye;
Hide me under the shadow of Your wings,
From the wicked who oppress me,
From my deadly enemies who surround me (Psalm 17:8,9).

The Lord provides what is good but foresees what is evil, and since He foresees what is evil He also protects a person from it, otherwise a person could not be provided with good (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6489).

People who have a negative frame of mind cannot easily get rid of doubts. With them one small difficulty is like a grain of sand placed right in front of the pupil of the eye, and although it is only a single grain and very tiny it nevertheless blocks one's entire field of vision (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6479).



The Lord constantly protects us from indulging in thoughts and taking actions that might harm us spiritually. This loving care is beautifully reflected in the ways that parts of the eye protect our sight.

When an idea becomes clear to us, we may say "I see!" A clear understanding of true ideas protects our spirits from the blindness of spiritual ignorance. Similarly, our eyes can protect us from tripping and falling over objects in our path.

Reflect on the ways in which various parts of the eye protect your eyesight. What does each of these do to protect your vision? In what similar ways might our spiritual "eyes" or "sight" be protected by the Lord?

Part of the Eye	Eyesight	Spiritual Sight
eyelid		
eye lashes		
eye brows		
facial bones		
Iris		
tear glands		
membrane over eye		

TAKING IT HOME



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

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

Use one of these journal ideas to help you think about the idea that the Lord is leading you at every step.

- ◆ Write a story about a person your age who has a number of things go better than they expected and in retrospect can sense that the Lord's leading was behind the events.
- ◆ Look for passages in the Word which mention the word "trust." Use the search feature at www.biblegateway.com or a similar search program to help you.

For Reflection

Can you remember a time when you trusted the advice of an older person? How did this feel? In what similar ways might you listen for the Lord's voice and trust in Him?

Quotation Card

Cut out this quotation card and put it where you will see it each day.

Trust in the Lord

The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him,
And delivers them.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good;
Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!
(Psalm 34:7,8)

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
(Psalm 37:3)

Peace has in it confidence in the Lord, that He directs all things,
and provides all things, and that He leads to a good end.
(*Arcana Coelestia* 8455)

Further Reading

HOW THE LORD LEADS US

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

*Show me Your ways, O Lord;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation... (Psalm 25:4-5).*

We all want the Lord to lead us. After all, that is why we are here, isn't it? The Lord has created and sustains us; it is our obligation to discover His will and follow it. And, if He is powerful and wise enough to fashion the universe and the human race, the Lord can surely direct our paths better than we can!

Also, we know what it feels like to be lost. When we wonder if we have any use in this world, or when someone we care for deeply hurts us, our sadness is disorienting, bewildering. Then, like the Psalmist, we are apt to cry out, "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (61:1-2).

We Feel a Pull to Manage Our Own Affairs

But, in spite of our occasional cries for help and a vague sense that the Lord should be leading our lives, we often feel a strong pull to manage our own affairs. Who has not found that a lack of planning results in a frenzied rush just before a trip or the start of school? Even when we have a general idea of what we should be doing, it is amazing how confused things become and how little we get done without a specific plan.

We have also found that we can accomplish a great deal. With good planning and hard work, we can earn quite a bit of money, become successful in our jobs, and be respected by our neighbors. While a flat tire may slightly delay a trip, or a dip in the stock market may affect our finances, good planning can take care of most contingencies!

So, we can be seduced into thinking that we are masters of our own destiny—that while the Lord may be out there, somewhere, doing something, we are really in charge of what happens. It is not surprising, then, that the Lord posed this question to His disciples: "What is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). The question to us is, so what happens if we do get what we want? What if we are relatively successful? Is planning and achieving a set of goals the purpose of life, or is there more than that?

Consider Moses. He was a great organizer and leader of the children of Israel. Even without the Lord's help he might well have been a successful commander. But the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church make this fascinating comment: "Moses knew that he could indeed bring the people into the land of Canaan, but that if this were done

without the Divine leading...they would not come into possession of it” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10561).

In other words, if Moses had led from conceit or self-love, with a sense that the Lord was not necessary, the children of Israel might have entered Canaan, but it would never have been a land flowing with milk and honey. This is why Moses’ sin of providing water from his own efforts, rather than following the Lord’s directions, prevented him from entering the promised land—it showed his desire to elevate himself to a Divine level, supplanting the Lord.

The message to us is clear. If we are so wrapped up in ourselves that we assume our planning, our work, has done it all, then no matter how successful we are, no matter how emotionally confident and secure we feel, there is an inner emptiness which will eventually consume all our happiness. It is only when the Lord has been our guide that we can experience genuine, lasting happiness.

How, then, Can the Lord Lead us?

How, then, can the Lord lead us? In one sense, the Lord is always leading us no matter what we are trying to do. For “a person takes no step into which and from which the Lord does not lead” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1174:2). His Providence is unceasingly with us, allowing us the freedom to choose but never leaving us, regardless of what happens.

However, what we need and long for is something more—an open leading to which we can respond. And, indeed, the Lord does show us His ways and teach us His paths when we look to Him (see *ibid.*). It sounds so simple, and in one sense it is! If we look to ourselves or the world, we will see less of the Lord. It is only when we recognize the Lord as our Savior, our Guide, that we have any trust in what He may say. It is worth noting that the Lord did miracles only for those who had some openness to Him. In His own country of Nazareth, the people could not accept a carpenter with Divine power, so He could do almost no miracles there. Unless we have a basic belief and confidence that the Lord has something to offer, we will not look to Him.

But looking to the Lord is meaningless unless there is also affection for Him. Fortunately, feelings of warmth for our Creator are almost inherent with us. Every child cares for the Lord, and our childlike states are always stored within us. These tender loves call out to the Lord, allowing Him to draw near to us. As the Heavenly Doctrines state, “to him who loves, the Lord enters in and teaches and leads him, and enables him also to love the Lord” (*Apocalypse Explained* 213).

How Does Lord Lead Us?

How then does the Lord teach and lead us? By a voice from heaven? An inner dictate? Advice from friends? An inspired speaker?

The Lord does use an array of means (for after all, some of His truth is present in a greater or lesser degree with everyone). But His primary way to guide us is by what we accept as Divine—His Word. And this is also ultimately the way in which we can evaluate the validity of all other sources of information. The principles and ideals of the Word are the Lord’s. Indeed, “without the knowledges of truth and good from the Word the Lord cannot be present with a person and lead him, for when he knows nothing of the Lord, of heaven, of charity and faith, his spiritual mind...is empty, and has nothing from

the Divine in it” (*Apocalypse Explained* 112:3). The threefold Word reveals the Lord and shows us His ways (see *Apocalypse Explained* 118).

This does not mean that He leads us via a mass of memorized facts from the Word. But, from the true concepts we have learned and embraced, Divine light is shed on our paths. From these truths we are able to identify and rejoice in our good feelings, while rejecting distorted ideas and hellish impulses. We will always have false ideas which, like clouds or night shadows, make it difficult for us to distinguish right from wrong. But the Lord can lead us in spite of our fallacies, when we seek truth from the Word to guide us. From this Divine Source, we can see to avoid some major missteps and to recognize the good counsel others might offer!

The Lord Touches the Good in Our Lives

The Lord wants us to walk in His ways instead of taking enticing but frustrating side excursions into the pain of worldliness and the despair of an isolated self. As we sincerely aspire to follow Him, and as we turn from an unhealthy love of self and the world, the Lord touches the good in our lives and leads us (see *Arcana Coelestia* 7761). For “by so doing, a person’s internal is purified, and when this is purified he is led by the Lord and not by self; and so far as he is led by the Lord he loves truths, and receives them and wills them and does them” (*Apocalypse Explained* 808:2, 825:3, 979e).

Does this mean that at some stage in our regeneration the Lord’s leading becomes clear and open to us? In some ways, yes it does. Some truths from the Word almost shout out to us. For example, we may see the commandments in a new light—you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Some truths may be less obvious—angels see only the good of others, God is omnipotent, friendship is the clothing of conjugal love. Whichever truths we see, they speak to our hearts, and we know that the Lord has surely been in this place.

This open leading is described in the Heavenly Doctrines, which declare that a person who is regenerating “is daily taught by the Lord what he must do and what he must say, also what he must preach or what he must write; for when evils are removed he is continually under the Lord’s guidance and in enlightenment” (*Apocalypse Explained* 825:2, emphasis added). Do we sense such immediate direction from the Lord? Does He speak to us in this way? We may think not, for how many of us have heard the Lord’s voice or clearly known His will? And when we pray for guidance, how often have we heard a specific answer which solved the problem?

But consider how the quote continues: “Yet a person is not led and taught immediately by any dictate, or by any perceptible inspiration, but by an influx into his spiritual delight, from which he has perception according to the truths of which his understanding consists” (*ibid.*).

The Lord Does Not Command

Even the direct leading of the Lord is not a voice from on high nor a perceptible hand grasping ours. For the Lord “does not command, but leads” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6390). He “does not openly teach anyone truths,” for to do so would deprive us of our freedom of thought and action (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5952). But through the good we have come to love, through the delight we have in heavenly things, the Lord leads us to see His ways.

His presence gives us a perception of what is true, of what we should do. Even when He is openly leading us, we need to engage our minds to see and move our feet to act.

Will We Know for Certain Exactly What the Lord Wants Us to Do?

But will we then know for certain exactly what the Lord wants us to do? Will we be able to avoid the pitfalls of life in this world? Is this how He will lead us? Unfortunately, no. His leading is to guide us away from evil. To the extent that we follow the Lord, we will be kept in good. But His leading cannot insulate us from all problems. For when we are selfish, we reject the Lord's leading and protection. And in this world the disorders of the hells can reach us no matter how regenerate we are.

What the Lord's leading will do is ensure that as we look to Him, He will be with us and bring good into our lives. "For when the Lord is with anyone, 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). The Lord is our sun and shield not by eliminating all difficulties, but by guiding us through all problems. His leading enriches and strengthens us, so that the heavenly states He is creating will be happier and fuller than we could ever imagine.

This is how the Lord leads us—not in a deeply shrouded or mystical fashion, not by a living voice or forceful hand, but by *our* reaching out to Him in affection, learning His ways, fleeing from evils, doing His goods. Then He can lead us each moment of each day, always guiding us to the heavenly happiness for which we were created.

We are to ask for the Lord's guidance so that He may show us His ways. We need Him to teach us His paths. For, as we turn our faces to Him, He can lead us in His truth and teach us all that we need to know and do. And, as we use our minds, increasing our understanding and freely walking in His ways, the Lord will indeed become the God of our salvation.

Lessons: Psalm 25; *Apocalypse Explained* 1174:2-3