

Confessing the Lord from Joy of Heart

Adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Norman H. Reuter

“Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! Sing to the Lord, all the earth” (Psalm 96:1).

Psalm 96 is a “celebration of the Lord by His church.” Spiritually, it teaches us that “to Him alone belong power and glory” (*Summaries of the Internal Sense of the Prophets and Psalms*, Emanuel Swedenborg. London: Swedenborg Society, Inc., 1960, p. 119).

Acknowledging and confessing that all power and glory belong to the Lord alone is the first essential of the church or religion, for where there is no acknowledgment of a God, there can be no religion. In the New Church, such an acknowledgment means that the Lord Jesus Christ, as He now reveals Himself in His glorified Human, is God: at once the Creator of the universe, the Regenerator and Savior of humanity, and the Giver and Sustainer of all things to eternity.

Those who have been raised with a knowledge of God can see the wonder of that knowledge, and the blessings that come with it. With reflection, they may recognize that their entire lives are molded by this knowledge, for their every thought and action shows its influence. The knowledge of God is the rock upon which their faith is built. Because of it, a certain feeling of peace and security is possible, due to the recognition of the omniscience of Divine love and of Divine wisdom which prepares the way for all who seek their God.

Compare such an outlook, full of hope and the promise of eternal life, with the state of mind of those who know nothing about God, or who deny His existence and thus deny heaven also. For such people, the future holds no hope, only uncertainty. In place of God many see only the inevitable working out of laws and forces, which neither see nor care about mankind’s needs. To them, death, instead of being the beginning of eternal life, appears only as the tragic and sometimes cruel end of a futile existence. To those who do not know God, every person is like a chip tossed on the ocean of nature’s forces, with no special use to perform and no destiny to fulfill except to be buffeted this way and that until his short span of life is spent.

But in Psalm 96 we are urged to “sing to the Lord a new song,” rather than to worry about the future. By a new song is meant the knowledge that there is a God, for this knowledge, as in times past, has again been obscured and must be proclaimed anew. Only through the knowledge of the Lord can the fallen state of human beings be raised. So we are told, “Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples.... For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens” (Psalm 96:3,5).

In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, we are told when people think naturally, they believe that the Lord desires worship and glory and for thanks to be given to Him, just as people do. But we are taught that this is not so. What pleasure could the Creator have in the adoration of His creatures? Is He a mortal being that He should find pleasure in such a thing? God is Divine love; He gives everything of His own to His creatures and desires no return for His own sake. Yet, people are commanded to worship Him and to give Him thanks, not only in the literal sense of the Word but also in its spiritual meaning. The reason and necessity for worship must be in the nature of human beings, and not in any desire for worship or satisfaction on the part of God.

The explanation of the human need for worship is found in the law of influx and reception, which says that a person receives the inflowing Divine (influx from the Lord) only in so far as he turns to the source of that influx. Worship was established through Divine revelation so that all those who desire to turn to the Lord for knowledge and wisdom can do so. Consequently, it is by active participation in an orderly sphere of worship that a person prepares his heart and mind to rise into the heat and light of heaven and so to receive Divine influx.

Of special interest is the teaching that we should come before the Lord with singing. “Sing to the Lord a new song! Sing to the Lord, all the earth.” For a person to receive the full benefit of worship, he must open not only his mind but also his heart to the Lord. This opening is signified by the act of singing. For we spontaneously *sing* when our hearts are full of *affection*, even as we *speak* when our minds are full of *thoughts*. Singing expresses our affections, as speaking expresses our thoughts. So, the great value of singing in the sphere of worship is that it provides an ultimate plane for a person’s affection for the things of the church and his love for the Lord.

Heavenly songs, we are told, are nothing but sonorous affections—affections expressed and modified in sound. In the Heavenly Doctrine, we read,

In heaven every morning, out of the houses around the public places, are heard the sweetest songs of virgins and young girls with which the whole city resounds. Each morning there is some one affection of spiritual love which they sing, that is, which is expressed by modifications and modulations of the voice in singing; and so the affection is perceived in the singing as if the song were the affection itself. It flows into the souls of the listeners, exciting them into correspondence with it. Such is heavenly song (Conjugal Love 17:2).

The passage continues: “Those who sing say that the sound of their singing inspires and animates itself as it were from within, and is joyfully exalted according as it is received by the listeners.” Elsewhere, we read that

“to sing a song” signifies confession from joy of heart, because joy of heart, when it is in its fulness, expresses itself in song.... [W]hen the heart, and in consequence the thought also, is full of joy, it pours itself forth through singing.... The kind of joy in the thought is expressed by the words of the song...the kind of joy in the heart is expressed by the harmony, and the measure of this joy is expressed by the exaltation of the sound and the words in it (Apocalypse Explained 326:1).

Such musical expression of the spiritual love of the church for the Lord is possible on earth, as in heaven. When people acknowledge God and recognize His infinite mercies, their affections may be moved to ultimate themselves in songs of gratitude, as a free offering of their hearts to God.

We are told that such songs filled ancient people with heavenly gladness because of the holy and blessed influx that flowed into them, so that they seemed to themselves to be lifted into heaven. Songs in worship can still have such an affect, for

spiritual angels are especially affected by songs which are about the Lord, His kingdom and the church.... [T]he songs of the Church had this effect...not only

because by them gladness of heart became active, and burst forth from within even to the utmost fibers of the body, and set these in motion with a glad and at the same time a holy tremor; but also because there is a glorification of the Lord in the heavens by means of choirs, and thus by the harmonious music of many (Arcana Coelestia 8261:3).

So, the power of song lies not only in its ability to open individual human beings to spiritual influx, but also in its ability to put congregations of people in direct communication with angelic societies that glorify the Lord in choirs. This is especially true when the text of the song is taken from the letter of the Word. The *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* reveals that the reading or singing of each part of the letter of the Word brings people into communication with some particular society of heaven. The Word creates a conjunction of earth with heaven, for as the words are stirred and made living in the minds and hearts of people on earth, their spiritual meaning can flow in from heaven.

Thus, the value of singing in worship is not only external but also internal, for a song may become the basis for receiving spiritual gifts of delight and happiness. Through the expression of affection in song, the Lord is able to give us a perception of the sweetness of the joys of heaven. If the singer's heart is in the singing, and his affection is aroused by the spiritual things involved in the song, then the opening of the lips is only representative of a more interior opening of the spirit to the Lord.

By entering into the first essential of the church, which is to acknowledge the Lord as God, and by expressing that acknowledgment in song, a person may be inspired to enter more and more into the second essential of the church, which is to obey the Lord's Word and to shun evils as sins. This second essential is in reality a deeper confession of the Lord, in the acts of one's life. The individual then offers not only the words of the lips and the grateful affections of the heart in praise of the Lord, but also the purified actions of life, the free will giving of oneself as an instrument of service to the Creator and Savior.

For in the spiritual sense, to worship, praise and glorify the Lord means "to bring forth the fruits of love, that is, to perform the work of one's occupation faithfully, honestly, and diligently...this is the effect of love of God and love of the neighbor, and it is what binds society together and makes its goodness. It is by this that God is glorified, and afterwards by worship at prescribed times" (Conjugal Love 9:4).

"Give to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts. Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!" (Psalm 96:8-9).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 96; Revelation 14:1-13; *Arcana Coelestia* 8261.