

Counting Our Blessings: Readings

Genesis 15:1-6: After these words, the word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram; I am a shield for you, your reward is multiplied exceedingly. And Abram said, Lord Jehovah, what will You give to me, seeing I am walking childless, and the son, the steward, of my house is Eliezer from Damascus? And Abram said, Lo, to me You have not given seed, and behold a son of my house is the heir with me. And behold the word of Jehovah came to him, saying, This one shall not be your heir; for he that shall go out of thy bowels shall be your heir. And Jehovah brought Abram forth outside, and said, Look now toward the heavens, and number the stars, if you be able to number them; and He said to him, So shall your seed be. And he believed in Jehovah, and He reckoned it to him for justice.

Arcana Coelestia 8939: “During a person’s life in the world, the things which he calls blessings are those which render him blessed and happy in time, such as riches and honors. But the things which are meant in the internal sense of the Word are not temporal things, but eternal things, compared with which temporal things are of no account. For there is no ratio between what is temporal and what is eternal, not even if the time be extended to thousands or myriads of years, for temporal things have an end, but that which is eternal has no end. Therefore that which is eternal is, for that which is without end is, because it has being from the Divine....But that which is temporal relatively is not, because when it is ended it is no more. Hence also it is plain that ‘blessing’ in the spiritual sense is that which has within it being from the Divine, thus the things of eternal life, consequently those which are of charity and faith.

That worldly blessing is nothing in comparison with heavenly blessing, which is eternal, the Lord thus teaches in Matthew: What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul? (Matt. 16:26). But the person who is in worldly and earthly things does not apprehend this saying, for worldly and earthly things suffocate it, and cause him not even to believe that there is an eternal life. And yet I can declare that as soon as a person dies he is in the other life, and lives as a spirit among spirits, and that he then appears to himself and to others in that life in all respects like a person in the world, endowed with every sense internal and external; consequently that the death of the body is only the casting off of such things as had served for use and service in the world; and moreover that death itself is a continuation of life, but in another world, which is invisible to the eyes of the earthly body, yet is there seen in a light exceeding a thousand times the midday light of the world.

As I know this from the living experience of so many years, which is still continued, I solemnly declare it....Wherefore let him who wishes to be eternally happy know and believe that he will live after death. Let him think of this and keep it in mind, for it is the truth. Let him also know and believe that the Word is the only doctrine which teaches how a person must live in the world in order to be happy to eternity.”

Counting Our Blessings

A sermon by Rev. Matthew Genzlinger

Counting your blessings, is a phrase that we have all heard before. Perhaps as children, and even as adults, we've made lists in Sunday school or around Thanksgiving of all the blessings – of all the good things – the Lord as bestowed upon us. In the Scriptures the Lord teaches us that His blessing cannot be counted they are so numerous. And this is important for us to remember. Especially given the fact that the hells would rather us focus on everything that is wrong with ourselves, with others and with the world around us. We can surprise ourselves if we make the effort to really count our blessings; focusing on all that we have, instead of on what we don't have; on the abundance of blessings instead of their perceived absence. As we read in the Psalms: "If I should number them, they would be more in number than the sand." (Psalm 139:18)

This morning, I would like to invite us to look at this phrase "counting your blessings" is a slightly different light. Because on a spiritual level, when the Lord speaks of counting something, He's not literally inviting us to count up their sum total. On a spiritual level, counting things – including our blessings – means that we should give thought to their true quality.

When we realize that on a spiritual level counting something means recognizing its true quality, we can better understand why in the Scriptures the Lord Himself is often said to be counting His people. (see AE 453) Of course, the book of Numbers is so called because in its very first chapter Jehovah commands that His people be counted. In the book of Isaiah, we read of the Lord numbering His army. In the Psalms the Lord counts the stars, knowing them all by their names. (Psalm 147:4) And think about in the New Testament where we find those comforting words that, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered." (Luke 12:7) In all of these places, the Lord numbering or counting represents His Divine ability to see the true quality of our hearts and minds; to really know us on a very intimate level. Because only the Lord can see the true quality of people's thoughts and affections, there is a wonderful story in the second book of Samuel where king David is severely punished for trying to count or number the people without the Lord's permission and guidance. (2 Samuel 24) This is an image of us overstepping our bounds by assuming that we know more than we really do about people's internal states and qualities. Again, we are counting the people, when really only the Lord can do this.

Coming back to this idea of counting our own blessings, we can now see that on a day like Thanksgiving the Lord does not simply want us to make big long lists of all the different things we are thankful for. What the Lord wants is for us to spiritually count or reflect on the true quality of the many blessings He provides. And so, what does this mean? What does it mean to reflect on the quality of the blessings we have been given?

When you receive a gift from someone, its real worth and quality comes in part from the person who gave it. And so first and foremost, counting our blessings involves recognizing that everything we receive has been provided by a God, the Lord, who loves us and who wants us to be blessed. Whether it is some of the more internal blessings we receive, like our understanding of what is true and the love we feel for our true friends and family, or some of the more external blessings, like a roof over our head and the very food we put in our mouths, all the things that

have been provided for us on all levels of creation in part gain their quality from the fact that they have been provided by a God who loves us. They are gifts of love. Psalm forty, which was our recitation this morning, speaks of reflecting on the loving God from whom our blessings come: “Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works, which you have done; and Your thoughts which are towards us cannot be recounted to You in order. If I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered.” (Psalm 40:5) Because the Lord’s thoughts are always towards us, He not only blesses us with belongings that we can put on a list, He blesses us through His providence in ways that we cannot always see. We read in the Arcana Coelestia: “With every person there is a concurrence every moment of more things of providence than can be comprised in any number. This I know from heaven.” (AC 5894) So in some ways the simple question is, do we believe this? Do we believe that every moment we are being provided with these countless blessing, and that the quality of these blessings comes from the fact that they are provided by a Divinely Human God and the infinite love He has for us? It is with this understanding and appreciation that counting our blessings must begin.

In addition to seeing our blessings as being received from a God who loves us, it’s also vital for us to appreciate that His gifts are given with our eternal happiness in mind. The Heavenly Doctrines often focus on the fact that as finite human beings we tend to think about and define blessings in some pretty external ways. The things we call blessings are the things that we think will make us blessed and happy in time, such as riches and honors and various types of worldly successes. And yet, the Lord’s goal is to make us eternally happy. His Divine love wills to bless us with internal or spiritual gifts that will last forever. And even the more external blessings that He does provide us with – like food and clothing and shelter – are still provided for the sake of these eternal ends. He wants us to use, even the more natural stuff that we are blessed with, as tools that can help us focus on and prepare for the lasting gifts of eternal life.

In the book of Exodus chapter twenty, just after the Lord has given the Children of Israel the Ten Commandments from the top of Mount Sinai, the Lord says that He will, “Come to them and bless them.” (Exodus 20:24) It’s while explaining these words that we read the following from the Arcana Coelestia: “I can declare that as soon as a person dies he is in the other life, and lives as a spirit among spirits, and that he then appears to himself and to others in that life in all respects like a person in the world, endowed with every sense internal and external; consequently that the death of the body is only the casting off of such things as had served for use and service in the world; and moreover that death itself is a continuation of life, but in another world, which is invisible to the eyes of the earthly body, yet is there seen in a light exceeding a thousand times the midday light of the world. As I know this from the living experience of so many years, which is still continued, I solemnly declare it....Wherefore let him who wishes to be eternally happy know and believe that he will live after death. Let him think of this and keep it in mind, for it is the truth.” (AC 8939) What a beautiful passage. What a beautiful reminder. This might seem like a subtle distinction, but notice that the point the Lord is making in this passage is not that we are eventually going to die, and that we should keep this in mind. What the Lord is imploring us to remember and to think about every day as we count our blessings, is the fact that we are going to live. That when we leave this world after, relatively speaking, a very short amount of time, we are going to continue living forever, in a spiritual world whose light exceeds a thousand times the midday light of this world. Yes, the Lord wants

us to live a full and active life in this world; but He also wants us to stay focused on this higher reality. He wants us to count our blessings, by recognizing that everything He provides for us – even something like the fruits some of you brought forward this morning – has this quality of looking towards our eternal life and supporting our preparation for it.

So far, these teachings we've been looking at all revolve around this idea that spiritually speaking "counting" something means recognizing its true quality. Very much related to this, we are also taught that "counting" things means setting and disposing them into their proper order.

Once we realize that all our blessings come from a God who loves us, AND who has our eternal happiness in His heart and mind, this gives us the opportunity to begin the process of reordering our lives. We can begin to reprioritize various aspects of life based on this new perspective we have gained.

Now making the choice to actually do this isn't necessarily easy. Both in the Scriptures and in the Heavenly Doctrines the Lord recognizes how hard it is for us to make these kinds of changes. For various reasons that we can go into on another day, reordering a life that we have become comfortable with, reprioritizing our efforts, and allowing new perspectives to lead us to real change, is not going to be a walk in the park. It can be really challenging and uncomfortable as I'm sure we all know from experience.

But one of the reasons I really like this teaching that on a spiritual level counting your blessings means setting those blessings in order, is because when you put things into their proper order, you're not necessarily being asked to get rid of anything. Part of the process of spiritual regeneration certainly involves our need to simply get rid of certain things that are standing in the way of our relationship with the Lord. But often the Lord isn't really asking us to dispose of something in the sense that He wants us to get rid of it. He is asking us to dispose various things in the sense that He wants us to rearrange them. Recognizing that we have been created by a God who loves us and keeping in mind that we will live after death, the Lord invites us to count or reorder our blessings. To take some of the things that have been taking up a lot of our time and occupying the center of our lives, and move them more to the sides. And to take some of the more important things that have been on the periphery and on the fringe of our consciousness and focus, and bring them into the middle. The Lord wants us to count or reorder our lives so that what is really important is at the center and has our full attention; while those less important things are still there and even useful, but they're more on the outside; they're lower down on the totem pole. Bringing order to our lives in this way is in part what is meant by the simple request of the Psalmist to the Lord: "Teach us to number our days, that we put on a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)

This Thanksgiving the Lord wants us to count our blessings. He wants us to recognize that at any given moment the blessings He is affording us and the ways His providence is holding and leading us, truly cannot be numbered: "Look now toward the heavens, and number the stars, if you be able to number them...so shall your seed be." (Genesis 15:5) But within this phrase, counting our blessings, the Lord is also inviting us to reflect more deeply on the quality of these blessings. A quality that in part comes from the fact that a loving God is providing us with these blessings, and He is provided them with our eternal life and happiness in mind. Really understanding this and acknowledging it from the heart, can allow us to recognize that the phrase, counting our blessings, is also an invitation to prioritize or order our lives and these

blessings in new ways. To change the things we give our time and attention to. To change the way we treat each other. To count or to reorder our priorities so that the Lord really can more fully come to us and bless us with His eternal life. Reading from Psalm 139: “I will confess You, for I am fearfully, wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your deeds, and my soul knows this exceedingly. My bone was not concealed from You, when I was made in hiding, I was embroidered in the lower parts of the earth. Your eyes saw me rolled up, and on your book the days were written, all of them. They were formed, and not one among them was absent. How precious are Your thoughts to me O God! How numerous is the sum of them! If I should number them, they are greater in number than the sand.” (Psalm 139:14-18) Amen.