

Fighting Spiritual Battles

A Sermon by Rev. Thomas L. Kline

"Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil" (Luke 4:1,2).

Why do bad things happen? Why do bad things happen in our lives? One person recently made the comment that when he looked at the lives of all his friends, it seemed as if every person was dealing with some big problem or issue in his or her life, now or in the recent past. The problem could have been disease, a death in the family, marital difficulties, or emotional distress. But it seemed to him as if everyone had some big issue to deal with.

Another person made a rather cynical comment. That person worried, not about the people who had big problems in their lives, but about those who hadn't yet faced a major crisis. The concern was that those who still believed that life was peaceful and free of problems would soon have that innocence taken away.

Not all of us face a crisis. And for some of us, the issues that we deal with in life are open and public; for others, the issues we deal with are more private and personal.

But back to the question: Why do bad things happen? One recent best seller was titled, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* And another best seller began with the sentence, "Life is difficult."

Sometimes when a bad thing happens, we can explain it by reasoning that bad things are a necessary part of our spiritual journey. When bad things happen, it is part of that "refiner's fire" that makes us into a stronger person. When a bad thing happens, there is a lesson to be learned, a victory to be won. And this is why the life that leads to heaven not only involves joy and comfort, but also involves pain and the anxiety of spiritual temptation. Spiritual temptation is part of our spiritual growth.

But sometimes things happen in people's lives that are so bad that this explanation doesn't seem to work. One person said over the tragic death of a loved one, "If there is some lesson that I am supposed to learn by something as tragic as this, I'd rather not learn it." There are

events of true tragic proportion: the untimely death of a loved one, terrible and painful disease, emotional disturbance and depression, the dissolving of a marriage, abuse, hunger and famine. If we come to believe that somehow the Lord allows or even causes these to happen so that we can learn some important lesson about life, we end up with a pretty terrible idea about God. One person made the comment about such an idea: "God is a bad teacher if He uses tragedy as His lesson plan."

And so there is one other very important truth given to us in the doctrines of the New Church that helps us to understand tragedy: Bad things, terrible tragedies, are permitted by the Lord, not just so we can learn something new about life; they often happen simply because we are in the midst of a great war between heaven and hell. We happen to live on the battleground of a great war, and that war is taking place right now. It is a spiritual war between heaven and hell. It is the very war the Lord came on earth to fight. And sometimes we, or our friends and loved ones, are innocent victims of that terrible battle.

Imagine a physical war where a bombshell goes off near us, and we suffer pain and anguish, not because of anything we did, but because there is a battle going on and a bombshell went off. The same happens on a spiritual level. The hells do inflict pain and disorder upon us, and we suffer.

Think of a little child who has a painful disease. The disease itself, the pain and suffering, come from hell. That suffering is a physical manifestation of the hatred, anger, and vengeance of hell. And that little child has a painful and disabling disease not because the child was sinful, not because his parents sinned, not because there is some lesson to be learned (although there might be a lesson that is learned), but that child has a terrible disease because the hells are indeed powerful and they wish nothing more than to cause pain and disease and suffering. All bad things physical, mental and spiritual are a result of this great battle between heaven and hell.

We said that we are often innocent victims residing on this great spiritual battleground. This thought can make us feel kind of helpless. And this is why, rather than saying that we are "innocent victims" living on a great spiritual battleground, it is more accurate to say that we are actually "soldiers" who are called by the Lord to be part of the battle. We are soldiers who live on a large battleground, and we are called to fight

in the name of the Lord. And this is one of the most important concepts we need to know about our lives, because it gives us a vision of hope and purpose.

We are in the middle of a great war. (Just look around you and within you.) We are soldiers who are part of this great battle between heaven and hell. Even that little child is a soldier, called into the army of the Lord.

When a bad thing happens terrible disease, a terrible death are we just to remain passive? Are we helpless? How can we fight if the terrible thing has already happened? If a little child dies, how can we be victorious over the hells that caused that death?

And here is another key : We fight the spiritual battle as an individual, but the consequences of our victory, no matter how slight, are global. When we, as individuals, fight a spiritual battle against the hells, we help countless millions throughout this world and the spiritual world who are affected by those same hells. When we are spiritually victorious over a particular hell, we lessen the power of that hell, not just for ourselves but for everyone. When tragedy happens take for example, the untimely death of a loved one we can still fight against those very hells that caused the death. And we do this by continuing on our personal spiritual journey of shunning evils as sins against God, by living the Word of God, by not giving up hope. In this battle we fight for all. And when we fight, we fight for all in the Lord's kingdom now and in future generations.

Why can't our life be free from pain, suffering, and the anguish of temptation? Why can't life just be easy and enjoyable?

It is interesting to ask these questions about the Lord's life. Why couldn't the Lord's life, when He was on the earth, just be peaceful? Why did He have to suffer continual temptations, as the Writings say, temptations from the beginning of His life to the very end? Why did He have to begin His ministry by being tempted by the devil for forty days in the wilderness? Why did He have to suffer the awful pain and anguish of the passion on the cross? Why couldn't His life have been one of simple peace and joy?

When we ask these questions about the Lord's life, the answer is obvious: He didn't come here to have a life of peace and joy; He came

here with a mission to be accomplished. He came here to fight against the hells. He came to fight for generations of men, women and children, generations yet unborn. He came to fight for all of us. There was a purpose to His life, a purpose greater than Himself.

And the same is true for us. We are here for our own regeneration, and we are here for a cause (a battle, if you will) greater than ourselves. And sometimes this battle will involve pain, hardship and temptation.

What one of us would not willingly go forth in the face of danger if it meant that we could spiritually benefit the global sphere of the whole earth? (It is interesting that some passages in the Writings suggest that just one person is all that is needed to effect the conjunction between this earth and all the heavens.)

Now this doesn't mean that our lives are going to be plagued with tragedy every moment. No, there is a lot of joy, happiness, and peace in life. Jesus says that our yoke is easy and our burden is light. But we do need to keep in mind why we are here. We need to have more of a "war-time" mentality than a "peace-time" mentality on the spiritual level. And if we see why we are here, we can know why there is often a lot of pain and suffering in our lives and with those around us. A spiritual battleground is not a very peaceful place. If anything, the Lord gives us an oasis from the battle from time to time, time off from the battle, but the battle is our main purpose in life. In this context, it is useful to think of some of the teachings in the Writings about spiritual temptation.

First of all, we are told that a spiritual temptation is said to be an attack by the hells on some good love that we have. If you have some new, good love in your life, expect it to be attacked by the hells. And if you say to yourself, "Why, every time I have some new love in my heart, it is challenged," you are not seeing the purpose of why you are here. There is a battle going; expect spiritual temptations.

Another teaching of the Writings: Are our temptations going to get easier or more difficult as we get older? The answer: they are probably going to get more severe. And if your reasoning is, "You mean I am going to have to fight greater battles as I get older? How can this be fair? Why fight now?" If that is your response, then you have missed the point of why you are here. There is a battle going on. You are called to be a spiritual soldier. As you grow stronger, more experienced, the Lord will give you greater challenges, greater battles to fight, because strong

experienced soldiers are needed in some of the battles. The Lord is preparing you for great things.

Still another teaching: Spiritual temptations cause utmost despair and anguish. There is no such thing as an easy spiritual temptation. Sometimes you feel that you are going to "lose it" during a spiritual temptation. And again, if the response of your mind is, "Why do I have to have really bad temptations? Why can't they be easy?" then you have missed the point of why you are here.

When Jesus began His ministry, He was baptized of John in the Jordan River. And then He went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil for forty days. He hungered. He hungered so much that He was tempted by the devil to make bread out of the stones. And His hunger was deep within Him. He hungered for the salvation of the whole human race.

The devil took Him up to the pinnacle of the temple, and asked Him to throw Himself down. He was tempted to doubt His own power to save the human race.

And finally, the devil took Him up to a great and high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. All this would be given to Him if He would just bow down and worship the devil.

And after all these temptations, it says that the devil left Him "for a time." The temptations were to continue. They were to continue even to the passion of the cross. And by His victory over temptation, our redemption was effected.

Let us use His victory as strength in our lives so that we may face the challenges that lie before us with courage and strength. Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-15; AC 6829, 1690