

## WEEK ONE

# True Identity

*The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want.*  
—Psalm 23:1

### THE ILLUSION OF EGO

The world's promise—that by aiming to make yourself a great person you can become successful and happy—is an illusion. For a long time most people believed that the sun goes around the earth. As we see the sun, moon, and stars move across the sky, it seems obvious that the whole universe revolves around us. But with a more mature point of view, we come to realize that we are just a speck of dust floating in an unimaginably large universe.

In my own personal world I may believe that everything revolves around me, but to understand reality more accurately and spiritually, I have to realize that most of what I imagine myself to be is just my imagination. The more I focus on myself, the more difficulty I may have with my ego. What I want for myself may conflict with what you want for yourself. The more importance I put on my own priorities, the less room there is for compromise or cooperation.

If I put myself first it may lead me to make some improvements, but when I think someone else is getting in my way, then I become demanding, angry, self-righteous, grasping, and cruel in order to get what I want. Taking care of myself can be an excellent starting point

that prepares me to take care of other people. But as a final goal, it doesn't actually make my life better. It makes my life worse. Putting myself first can lead to misunderstanding, anger, rejection, addiction, and conflict. If we look carefully at the world's wars, murders, violence, abuse, cruelty, and oppression, we can usually see at the root of it a conflict between one person's desires and another person's desires, where one of them is—and usually both are—putting self and ego first.

We are all born with a tendency to see our own needs more clearly than we see the needs of others. We are born with an ability to feel our own pleasure and pain, so we naturally do the things that make us happy and give us pleasure, and when anything causes us pain or displeasure, we try to make it go away or change. We come to identify anything that gives us pleasure as good and anything that causes pain as bad.

So our self-concern motivates us to develop and grow. Our developing ego is critical to our sense of identity, our freedom, and our full participation in life. In the first part of our life ego takes charge—and has to. In the meantime our ability to have love, compassion, and integrity matures in the shadow of ego like Daniel in the shadow of Nebuchadnezzar. And if we courageously follow the path of love, it can outlast ego.

True happiness lies in setting aside ego and listening with love, experiencing other people's joy and pain as if it were our own, being thoughtful of others, willing to help, grateful, and ready to admit mistakes. For ultimately love is the only thing that makes life worth living.

At the root of ego is the need to be in control, so we can have what we want. In a more spiritually advanced state we recognize that God is in control and provides us with everything we truly need from His bountiful love for all people. "The Lord is my Shepherd. I have everything I need."

## **THE TOWER OF BABEL**

Over the next six weeks we will be exploring ways to overcome ego and let love govern our lives. Our focus is on Daniel and the kings of Babylon, as their story is our story. Throughout the Bible, Babylon or Babel is a symbol of selfishness and ego. It begins with the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

In this parable, there was a time when everyone in the world communicated well and got along with each other. People valued love over ego. Then they decided to build a tower that would reach to heaven, to make a name for themselves, but it ended up that everybody came to speak a different language and they could no longer work together. This Tower is our ego.

We try to build ourselves up, and we think that putting ourselves first can make us happy or get us to heaven. The more self-centered we become, the less we can understand and empathize with others. We see things only from our own point of view. Each of us is speaking a different language, and we can no longer work together.

## **BABYLON**

Many centuries after that story was written we come

to a time when Babel or Babylon became a very powerful nation. Nebuchadnezzar swept through the Middle East, conquering country after country, building a mighty empire. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem, looted the city and the temple, taking most of the people back to Babylon as captives and slaves.

Among those taken back to Babylon were four friends: Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael, bright, courageous young men with leadership potential. As we see in the story, they always wanted to do what was right and good. They were honest and kind and showed more concern for the needs of others than for themselves. These four, and especially Daniel, represent the best parts of us: love, compassion, humility, trust, courage, patience.

Teachings for the New Church tell us that in the Bible story whenever the people of Israel fell into some kind of wickedness, they would become vulnerable to defeat by whatever nation was involved in the same kind of wickedness (*Divine Providence* 271). For example, Manasseh king of Judah did many wicked things. He built shrines for multiple gods, altars for Baal, wooden images or asherah, worshiped the sun, moon and stars, even bringing their altars into the Lord's temple built by Solomon.

He practiced witchcraft and consulted mediums, and even sacrificed his son in fire for Molech the god of Ammon (2 Kings 21). It was in part a result of this extreme selfishness that the nation of Judah was taken into captivity by Babylon, which represents that same kind of selfishness.

## WHOM DO I WORSHIP?

The story of Daniel portrays Jehovah as the one true God, and Judaism as the one true religion. Other religions, particularly the worship of idols and kings in Babylon, are condemned as false and perverted. In today's world we prefer to be multicultural and inclusive, respecting each person's freedom to worship and believe as they choose.

According to New Church teachings, people of all religions can be saved if they live by their conscience and have good will towards other people. The Bible teaches this, too, as Jesus said that He would accept into His kingdom all the Gentiles, people of all nations, whoever shows compassion on the least of our fellow human beings (Matthew 25:31-46).

So why is there such condemnation of idolaters in Daniel and the rest of the Old Testament? The short answer is that those idolaters were quite selfish and cruel. They were *not* kind, innocent simple people who worshipped idols out of ignorance and mistaken beliefs. Rather, they were so absorbed with worship of themselves and their own artwork that they wanted to throw any dissidents into the fire or the lion's den.

The kind of religion condemned in Daniel promotes supremacy for one's self and one's own people, while holding intolerance, hatred, subjugation and extermination of all others. Just as in every religion there are innocent people who can be saved, there are also in every religion selfish people who use their religion to gain dominance over others. The key is to judge everyone's

religion not so much by whether their beliefs are mistaken, as by whether their actions are hurtful or helpful.

People like Manasseh and Nebuchadnezzar did not worship idols with goodness in their hearts. Their goal in setting up idols was to gain power for themselves. Just as Nebuchadnezzar took valuables from Solomon's temple and put them in the temples of his own gods, we might take truths from the Bible and use them to manipulate or gain some advantage from others, to make ourselves look good and right and other people look bad and wrong, or to make people we hate suffer. It is then that we are practicing religious abuse.

Taking Daniel, Azariah, Hannaniah and Mishael away from their home and bringing them to Babylon has a similar meaning. Suppose a religious cult convinces someone to leave their family and friends, and to devote all their money and effort to building up the group. It's as if that cult has carried that person into captivity, away from the good relationships and useful activities in their lives.

The true purpose of religion is not to gain people's money or make them slaves, but to heal their relationships and reconnect them with God and with each other. "Religion" literally means "reconnection"). Loving God and loving our neighbor, our promised land. Being drawn away into self-importance, greed and addiction is captivity.

Hypocrisy is another abuse of religion. Suppose we talk about religion or go to church just to make other people think well of us, all the while thinking only of what we

get out of it and not caring if we hurt others, as long as we can keep our selfishness hidden. In that case we are just using religion to take advantage of others.

### **NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S WEB**

Nebuchadnezzar wanted to surround himself with the best people so they could help him maintain and increase his empire. He wanted to make Daniel and his friends serve his own purposes instead of God's purpose, so he gave them names from his gods in place of their own names from the True God. Their names were Daniel ("God is my Judge"), Hananiah ("the Lord has been Gracious"), Mishael ("One who is from God") and Azariah ("the Lord is my helper"). The names end with "el" meaning God; or "Yah," short for Yahweh or Jehovah. Nebuchadnezzar renamed them Belteshazzar ("the Treasure of Bel, or Protect the King"), Shadrach ("the Inspiration of the Sun"), Meshach ("from the goddess Sheshack"), and Abed-Nego ("Servant of Nego, the sun or morning star").

To draw Daniel and his friends into his decadent circle of power, Nebuchadnezzar offered the finest foods and wines, most likely from his feasts honoring the many gods he worshiped. The Bible forbids eating meat which has been sacrificed to idols (Exodus 34:15, Revelation 2:14, 20, *Apocalypse Revealed* 114). Daniel and his friends refused the king's delicacies, asking for simple vegetables and water. They did not want to be drawn to other gods by the King's corrupt pleasures.

Another example of selfish love taking advantage of good people is a company or boss that is focused on profit and consequently cheats the employees and cus-

tomers. There was a bank that pushed its employees to open extra bank accounts charging customers extra fees without their consent. The bank was stealing from its customers, devouring their money to satisfy its own greed. The leaders of the bank invited the managers and employees to feed at the same trough, as if they were saying, "We're sacrificing our customer's bank accounts! Come join the feast by signing up more customers! It's delicious!" Employees with more integrity would refuse to participate in such immoral and illegal gains. They would say, "We don't want your excessive customer fees. Just give us the simple job of serving our customers' needs for a fair price."

It is challenging to recognize that both Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar are parts of ourselves. We all have a "Nebuchadnezzar" ego that wants to be successful, loved, respected, satisfied, and powerful. We all have the "Daniel" ability to love, which allows us to be reverent, trusting, humble, content, innocent and grateful. When ego has the upper hand, it can capture our conscience.

In hopes of becoming great we bend the rules and push the boundaries, not realizing that behind our drive for success and superiority lies a power that can quickly become demanding, angry and cruel. This in turn leads to misunderstanding and conflict. But the power of love is in its ability to accept and to reconcile. Love doesn't grasp for more and more of the finest pleasures in life, but is happy with the simple pleasures that God gives. "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing."