

WEEK THREE

Confidence over Arrogance

*He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of
righteousness for His name's sake.*
—Psalm 23:3

ARROGANCE

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of the greatest empire in the world that he knew. He had unimaginable wealth and supreme power. He lived in a beautiful palace. He enjoyed the finest foods. If there was anything that he wanted, any wish or whim, thousands of servants rushed to fulfill his desire. He had every apparent reason to be happy, yet in this story he becomes insanely angry because he still can't have everything.

Most of us are like Nebuchadnezzar in that we crave to have our own way. We see how people who are famous and wealthy live, and we fantasize about being rid of worries about money, work, or putting food on the table. We covet what the wealthy have, so we buy lottery tickets just to keep alive our dream. Yet sometimes we can be just as annoyed as we are envious, for some prosperous people flaunt their status, think highly of themselves, and expect everyone else to obey just because they have the money to pay for it.

Nebuchadnezzar was one of those people. To show off his resources, he built a great golden statue 90 feet tall. To flaunt his power, he commanded that all the promi-

nent people in his kingdom must come and worship his statue, and fall down whenever his musicians played. Now most of us are not that much different from King Nebuchadnezzar in that we want to have our own way. We would love to have others dance to our tune, and praise us for our wisdom.

The difference between us and King Nebuchadnezzar is that he got almost everything he wanted, while we find ourselves limited every step of the way. We struggle to earn a little bit of money. We beg, bargain, and compromise in order to lure people to do what we desire. When we get frustrated, as we often do, we tend to get angry, look for someone to blame, and make things as difficult for other people as they make it difficult for us.

When Nebuchadnezzar commanded subjects to bow down to his image, there were three men who refused to do so. They were the friends of Daniel: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, renamed by the Babylonians as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. When Nebuchadnezzar heard that they would not bow down at his command, he was enraged and threatened to cast them into a blazing furnace.

It's remarkable that these three friends of Daniel responded to the king's anger with complete calm and confidence in the Lord's protection. They said to the king, "We don't have to answer you in this matter. If you throw us into the blazing furnace, our God will save us from you. And even if he doesn't save us, we will not worship your gods or the golden image you have set up."

WHAT DO I WORSHIP?

But do people today actually worship idols? Aren't we more enlightened than that? Is there anyone today who would expect a statue to answer prayers or work miracles? Part of the answer is that idolatry is not so widely practiced today as it used to be. Another part of the answer is that the actual god that we worship is whatever we love the most, and whatever controls our thoughts and decisions.

If the most important thing in our lives is pleasure, then we will do anything to feel good. We may turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, food, or anything else that we find pleasurable. When selfish pursuits become more important to us than our relationships, we may lie, cheat, steal, and become violent.

If we love wealth above anything else, then money is our god. We decide what is right and wrong for ourselves in terms of what brings us the most profit. We make or break friendships based on financial advantage. We are very like idolaters worshipping their golden and silver images.

If our god is our own ego, then we want others to admire us and give us attention. We want them to stop and listen when we talk. We are proud of what we have accomplished, and want others to recognize our importance and our superiority. If someone criticizes us or gets in our way we react antagonistically. We expect them to go out of their way to help us without getting any help from us in return.

One way I can recognize my ego at work is to notice what makes me angry. Would I get as angry if the victim was not me but someone else? And what if I were on the other side, causing distress to someone else?

If King Nebuchadnezzar represents our selfish rage when we don't get our own way, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah represent the part of us that trusts in the Lord, and stands up for what we believe in. It maintains an inner calm in the face of anger and chaos. The story of the fiery furnace, on the surface, is about a conflict between Daniel's three friends and the king of Babylon. But when we look at this story on a deeper level, it is really about the conflict between two parts of ourselves, that is, a conflict between the vindictive part of ourselves, and our compassion.

DEALING WITH ANGER

When I was a young man I saw myself as being very patient. I had grown up in a household where we didn't talk about feelings much, especially not about anger. If people expressed anger towards me I would just close my mouth and walk away.

Years later, I had children, and my patience was tested beyond what it had been. When one of my children started hitting another of them, I would yell at the offending child and punish him. Hitting another child is violent. It's uncalled for. My job as a parent was to put a stop to that kind of behavior. Yet it seemed that no matter what I did, the misbehavior continued. I made the punishments more severe, thinking that this was needed to stop the behavior. With sufficient punishment, I could extract an apology, but the next day or the next

hour the child was hitting again. It took me years to realize that spanking was not an effective way to teach a child that hitting people doesn't solve your problems.

It took me another good while to realize that my child's anger towards his siblings was less of an issue than my own anger about it. We got a book titled *The Difficult Child*. Our "difficult" child crossed out the word "Child" on the cover and wrote in "Parent." I laughed it off but at that time I didn't realize how difficult it was for my son to live with me. Gradually, my perspective changed. Instead of yelling at my son for not managing his anger, I began to see that I too had issues with rage. Eventually, instead of saying, *Stop being angry with your brother!* I could say, *I'm angry about what you did!* Later, I learned to say, *I'm feeling angry; it's my feeling, and my responsibility to deal with it. It's not your fault that I'm angry.*

HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY ANGER

One reason why I found it difficult to deal with upset is that I was not able to sort out the difference between healthy and unhealthy anger. New Church teachings say it results from something we love being hurt or threatened. If I love my family and someone threatens them, I will become angry towards the perpetrator. My anger is then zeal for protecting my loved ones. If I prioritize my own importance and someone insults or dismisses me, I will become angry.

Whether the feeling is helpful or hurtful depends on the nature of the love behind it. The difference between anger and zeal is mostly what is on the inside. "The zeal of a good love harbors in its inner aspects friendship and love, but the zeal of an evil love harbors in its in-

ner aspects hatred and vengeance." (*Married Love* 365) Outwardly they look similar. "Zeal appears in outward respects like anger and rage, both in those who are prompted by a good love and in those who are prompted by an evil love." (*Married Love* 365) This passage goes on to outline three key differences between positive and negative zeal.

1. "The zeal of a good love. . . never leaps out to attack another, but only defends itself."
2. "The zeal of a good love immediately dies down and softens when the other desists from the attack; whereas the zeal of an evil love persists and is not extinguished."
3. On the inside, the zeal of a good love "is in itself gentle, mild, friendly and kind" even if outwardly it is hard and harsh. A bad person is inwardly "hostile, savage, harsh, seething with hatred and vengeance" even when it seems mild and friendly on the outside.

I have a tendency to shrink back when people get upset with me. I don't like confrontation, so it is easier to be a doormat and let someone walk on me than zealously stand up for justice. Even though the Lord told his disciples to turn the other cheek when someone hits them (Matthew 5:39, Luke 6:29), He also told them to speak out fearlessly against injustice (Matthew 10:16,19-20). He told them to be courageous in the face of adversity.

They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. . . . [But] I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will

be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls.

—Luke 12:12-19

It is remarkable that Jesus said, “They will put some of you to death . . . but not a hair of your head will perish.” The Lord promises to protect us, not from physical death, but rather from things that are worse. We are not to fear those who can destroy the body, those but who can demolish the soul. The Lord promises,

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.

—Isaiah 43:2

One of the ways the hells attack us is by making us angry. When someone hurls rage and abuse at us, it is easy for us to also become angry, to vindictively lash back, defending our ego against attacks. Or, if we are afraid to speak up, we may swallow the anger and hold it as simmering resentment. But if we can really trust that the Lord will take care of us and protect everything good in us, we become invulnerable to anger and hatred. Our bodies can be destroyed by fire, but rage can't invade our hearts. It doesn't even leave the smell of anger on us. Swedenborg describes how the Lord protected him from the venom and fire of hell:

If the Lord did not protect us moment by moment, and in every shortest instant, we would immediately perish, for there is such murderous hatred reigning in the world of spirits against all forms of love and faith in the Lord as to defy description. I can positively declare that this is so, because for several years now, although still in the [physical] body, I have also been in the next life in the company of spirits. I have been surrounded by evil spirits, even the worst of them, sometimes by thousands, who have been allowed to pour out their venom and molest me in every possible way, but who nevertheless could do no harm to the tiniest hair on my head, so well did the Lord protect me.

—Secrets of Heaven 59.2

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

It takes years of practice to develop the courage to confront injustice and at the same time the patience to not respond with vengeance. When we can look at ourselves and see the fear of what others might say about us or do to us, we can ask the Lord to take away the fear and self-concern. When we see a desire for our adversaries to suffer, we can ask the Lord to help us let go of the resentments. Hate kills a part of our soul every time we throw it at others. Every time we resist revenge in ourselves we become less vulnerable to attacks on our ego.

The part of us that is like Daniel and his three friends becomes stronger and wiser as we gain the ability to trust that we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. We know that the Lord is with us and that His rod and staff will protect us.