

The Last Judgment

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, March 17th, 2019

Introduction

There are two reasons for this sermon: first, it's important to understand the subject and see its implications for our lives. Second, as challenging as it may be, the hope is that a clear, simple explanation will give you some confidence in explaining it to friends and neighbors, or anybody unacquainted with the New Church.

Our text is taken from Matthew 24, a long chapter loaded with dramatic imagery, where we read,

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:29-31).

Relax, it's Not the End of the World.

People throughout the Christian world talk about the Last Judgment and the Second Coming of Christ as if they were commonly understood prophecies indicating cataclysmic worldly events. But in fact because it's not perfectly clear in the Scriptures there are major differences in the way various denominations understand these teachings. Often, for example, the day of judgment refers to the fall of particular kingdom, like Israel, Judah or Babylon, and in the New Testament it may simply refer to the end of a person's life in this world and his or her individual judgment on entering the *spiritual world*. This is pretty clearly what the Lord meant when He said,

“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Matt. 12:35-36).

Still, there certainly are passages throughout the Prophets and the New Testament that refer to a calamitous future of wars, plagues, earthquakes and famine at “the end of the age.” This is what *most* people think of as the Last Judgment, and it is perhaps best represented by the cataclysmic events described in *Daniel*, *Matthew* or *the book of Revelation*. Still, the idea that these are going to be physical or geopolitical events is a matter of interpretation – or as we in the New Church would say, *misinterpretation* – at least partly stemming from a mistranslation of a single word 400 years ago when the King James Bible was first published. That word in Greek is *aeon*, meaning an age, as in “the end of the age,” but it was published as “the end of the world.” This wasn't exactly wrong, since the translators may have had in mind the end of the world *order*, or of the world *as we know it*. But somehow the idea of cosmic physical events stuck, and even though the translations are better now millions of people still think the Last Judgment means the end of this world and – perhaps – the creation of a whole new world.

To address this problem of interpretation the first step is to look at the whole context of the teachings carefully. For example, the entire book of Revelation is based on visions seen in the spiritual world. It's not about the natural world at all. As for the dire predictions in Matthew, which include the sun, moon and stars falling from the heavens, clearly this cannot be a literal prediction, since it goes on to say that "then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven" (v. 30). Really?! If the sun, moon and stars all fell there would *be* no earth, let alone tribes *of* the earth to mourn. So this is obviously symbolic of something spiritual. Further, in chapter 25, where we read of the judgment, when the Lord separates the sheep from the goats, it says "all nations will be gathered before Him," but this would not be possible in the natural world; it is clearly a reference to the life after death, where all people who have ever lived on earth are present, *apart from space and time*.

This is the sort of thing we find in the New Church book about the Last Judgment published in the year, 1758 along with the book about heaven and hell and several others explaining all the other major doctrines of the church in summary form. But what is amazing is that this book describes the judgment as *having just taken place* – in the year 1757. How could this be? And what is the significance of this event to *us now* if it's all over?

Well, in order to really understand it we have to realize that although everything said about the judgment refers to spiritual and not natural conditions, these can and do occur in the context of worldly time. They are, after all, human conditions, and humans live in a framework of time. So what is the symbolism? And what is the judgment?

The End of the Spiritual Age Described in Worldly Terms

Let's start, as the Writings themselves do, with the events described in Matthew 24. First of all we read about wars and rumors of wars, then famines, plagues and earthquakes, tribulation, killing, hatred, false prophets and lawlessness. Then comes "the abomination of desolation" mentioned in the book of Daniel. All this sets the stage. These are the signs that the end is near.

But what sort of signs *are* they? Even the prophets spoke of famine as representing a lack of knowledge of the truths of the Word (Isaiah 5:13, Amos 8:11-13, e.g.), and the Lord Himself spoke of those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness." As for the other calamities mentioned they are all fairly common metaphors in ordinary human speech referring to spiritual states. We are often at war with ourselves as to whether something is right or wrong; "earthshaking" news is not usually a literal earthquake, but something that we find terribly upsetting; "tribulation" often refers to mental or emotional grief, and false prophets clearly represent the falsities themselves that are the real, underlying problem.

The simple truth is that all the states described in physical terms about the judgment are actually states of *mind*: spiritual conflicts, a lack of charity, a lack of faith, destructive, upsetting shifts in understanding, doubts, temptations, and so on. "The abomination of desolation" may have been a literal object of idolatry but it also symbolized the evil itself that would inspire people to set up such an object. The long and short of it is that the immediate prelude to the Last Judgment was a spiritual state so bereft of true love and wisdom that human life was threatened with destruction unless some decisive action could be taken.

But again, where is all this action going on? Where is all this chaos, and how is this judgment

accomplished? Surely the world around us is or can be a scary and dangerous place, with incidents of war, famine and all the rest occurring all too frequently *somewhere* if not everywhere. And yes, these conditions are symptomatic of underlying evils and falsities, but if there's ONE PLACE where the love and wisdom of God *should* be known and respected it is in the Christian Church – from which the light and warmth of His Good News can spread throughout the world. So if there is darkness and corruption in the church we are all in deep trouble.

But why would there be darkness and corruption in the church, where the Lord's teachings are clearly laid out? Well, of course, people mess up. They misunderstand. They jump to conclusions. They base their thinking on outward appearances. *And they deliberately pervert the true meaning of the Word to make it say what they want* – to serve their own selfish, worldly loves. Then, either from zeal to share their honest convictions or from really sinister, controlling motives, they teach their false *interpretations* of the Scriptures to others who in their innocence don't have the wisdom to see what's wrong with them. So, gradually, more and more, the simple goodness and truth of the Word is obscured by confused or pointedly misleading human reasoning – even to the point that people think they can be saved by mere faith in some Divine, vicarious atonement without following any of the Lord's Commandments.

Contributing to all this is the fact that people when they pass from this world to the next do not fundamentally change. So if they pass into the spiritual world confused they remain confused until they can be taught the truth. But if their teachers and respected leaders are also confused – or deceitfully perpetuating their contrived interpretations with them – they're stuck. They may sincerely love the Lord and want to know and do what is right, but as long as they continue to be misled by people they trust – and they trust them because they *seem* to make sense and they quote the Word to prove their points – they can't fully enjoy the heavenly life. They are in fact the very people the book of Revelation describes as “the souls under the altar” (Rev. 6:9), protected by the Lord from spiritual harm and yet held back from entering heaven itself because they continue to labor under the influence of falsities, which have no place there.

How the Lord Performed the Last Judgment

Now you may be wondering why the Lord would allow a situation like this to continue even in the spiritual world (specifically, the introductory world of spirits). But the answer is simple: until or unless people are really ready to learn the truth and accept it the Lord knows better than to force it on them, since they would just reject it, profane it, and treat it with scorn – to their eternal detriment. So He waits. He lets the evil and falsity run their course until the innocent can plainly see how wrong it all is, and can receive the truth whole-heartedly when it is presented.

Meanwhile the confusion in the spiritual world continues to influence people in the church on earth, preventing them from recognizing how misled they are. In any case the preachers who are also stuck in their sophistry about faith and life continue to teach bad doctrine, so the evil and falsity continue to grow in the church until the resulting disorders make it painfully obvious and people are really ready for something better.

Then the judgment can take place. But how does it work? Does the Lord simply raise the good up into heaven– finally – and cast the evil into hell? Perhaps surprisingly, *no*. No, He doesn't. Instead, just as He did when He was born into this world in a natural human body, He simply draws closer to the confusion and makes the influence of His love and wisdom more obvious to

everyone, so that the good receive it with joy and follow Him, leaving the evil behind, and the evil, who no longer have any reason to fake their loyalty to the Lord or His Word, since there's no one left to mislead, cast themselves into hell of their own free will.

All this has to be done in the spiritual world, where countless millions of people over many centuries have been gathered from all over the world, to clear the spiritual atmosphere that would otherwise continue to plague people on earth. And THEN this same love and wisdom can be revealed anew to the people of the earth and a NEW CHURCH can be established based on that revelation. This of course is what we know as “the Writings,” or the Heavenly Doctrine, a Divinely Human *body of teaching* to complement the body of flesh He had given to the world 17 centuries earlier. It is in fact the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth that leads to all truth, as promised in *John*, chapter 16. And the New Church is the church based on this revelation.

Prophecies of the New Testament Fulfilled, and Lessons Learned

Speaking of promises fulfilled, it is remarkable to see the laws of Providence in operation as we consider the Last Judgment. First, we note the incredible patience of the Lord, waiting, waiting, waiting – for centuries – until people were really ready to receive the truth in freedom. We could learn a lot from this in our relations with almost everyone in this world.

Second, the incredible foresight of the Lord stands out, as all the predictions of the judgment were given at the very beginning of the Christian Church when the Lord's teachings were accepted – for the most part – with perfect integrity. We say “for the most part” because even in the Gospels, and especially in the Acts and the Epistles we can see the seeds of falsity and disorder that the Lord knew would grow over time. But the prophecies clearly illustrate how the Lord through foresight provides exactly what we need when we need it, and not a day sooner or later.

Further, paying close attention to the symbolism in the teaching about the judgment can give us clear guidance in our own lives from day to day. Remember, the Lord said, “This generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34). What? The original apostles took this literally, and Paul, for example, famously thought that it would be pointless even to commit to marriage, since the end obviously was near. But now, knowing that the word, generation, refers to a spiritual state, that is a state of faith and charity (or lack thereof) we can see that judgment always comes at the end of an age of spiritual integrity, when evil and falsity are so pervasive that they can't be tolerated any longer. In short, we can get away with a lot of foolishness *up to a point*. But eventually, sooner or later, we are going to be called on it and we are going to have to choose between the Lord's Word and our own ideas, between true charity and our selfish loves, and of course finally, between heaven and hell.

“But of that day and hour,” the Lord said, “no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.... Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:36 & 44).

Amen.

Lessons: *Joshua 6*, with a children's talk on hate crimes
and the spiritual meaning of the destruction of Jericho
Matthew 24:1-44 if possible & *Heaven & Hell #1*