

The Last Judgment, the Implications

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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About three months ago at least some of you heard a sermon here about the Last Judgment predicted in the New Testament – especially in the gospel of Matthew (ch. 24). The explanation at that time focused on the event itself as a spiritual and not a natural phenomenon, that is, an event that took place in the spiritual world where ALL who had lived since the beginning of the Christian Church could benefit from it. Copies of that sermon are available for those interested.

Today we will be considering in further detail some of the images of that judgment in the book of Revelation, and its implications in our lives today.

First, as you know, most Christians are expecting the Last Judgment to be a catastrophic natural event, and they draw this conclusion, if they think about it much at all, from the imagery that is used to represent it in the Word, especially in the prophetic books like Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation. But we now know that all that imagery is symbolic, and refers to the spiritual states of Christians particularly who for centuries had passed into the spiritual world without a clear understanding or commitment to the genuine truths of faith. So it was a judgment on the Christian Church, but still, that church among those in the other world. These people needed to be sorted out, and that sorting was effected by a stronger, nearer presence or influence of the Lord among them so that those who really loved Him could see Him truly and be conjoined with Him, while those who didn't really care were put off by His presence and found their own way into hell.

This is all described in the graphic imagery of the Lord in a long white robe with a sword coming out of His mouth, a lamb that was killed and restored to life, an enigmatic scroll sealed with seven seals, angels, trumpets, horses, locusts, plagues, a bizarre seven-headed dragon, a woman clothed with the sun, crazy-looking beasts and even a monstrous harlot with “a golden cup full of abominations.” Of course it all ends well with the descent of the golden city, New Jerusalem, but even that image is preposterous if taken at face value. So what are we to make of it all?

Well, again, it's all symbolic. Every part of it speaks to the revelation of interior human thoughts and feelings in response to the Word. The four horsemen, for example, represent four different ways of understanding the Word, the white horse a true understanding, the fiery red horse an understanding colored by selfish loves, the black horse a complete lack of understanding, and the pale horse a completely false understanding. Just as people of all these kinds exist in this world, so they continued to exist in the spiritual world after their earthly life was over – until the Lord made His presence so strongly and so clearly felt that they could not resist exposing their true, inner feelings about it. So those who really loved the Lord were drawn toward Him and conjoined with Him, while those who really resented His presence turned away.

The judgment, then, was not a matter of saving or condemning people by command, rather it was a self-sorting process brought about by a revelation of the truth, exposing the falsities and lies that conflict with it and that have no place in heaven.

Visions that follow in the book of Revelation speak of spiritual suffering, destruction, famine, plagues, locusts and weird creatures, all of which refer to falsities and evils that afflict us when we're misled or confused. The two contrasting women, a stunning mother clothed with the sun

and a disgusting harlot riding on a seven-headed beast, represent two churches or belief systems, one true and good, the other false and evil. And the Lord appearing once again on a white horse with an army on white horses represents His power to address all the corruption and restore order in human spiritual life.

And so it goes. But the overall point is compellingly simple: bad doctrine concocted out of self-ish and worldly preoccupations involves terrifying spiritual consequences, and good doctrine drawn from a true understanding and love of the Lord leads to incredible spiritual blessings.

In the New Church we believe that the events of the Last Judgment all took place within the span of a year in 1757. This in itself may seem preposterous, since the effects in this world were barely visible, and certainly nothing like what appears in Revelation. But the fact is that the late 18th century was an age of tremendous evolution in human learning, understanding and freedom, an evolution that has only accelerated since that time and that has affected the entire world morally, spiritually, scientifically, politically, and just about every other way you can imagine.

Just think: although the so-called age of enlightenment actually began a century earlier it really took off with the likes of the French philosophers, Diderot, who published the first real encyclopedia of universal knowledge, and Voltaire, who wrote biting satire criticizing the church and anything else that seemed to him to be oppressive or irrational. These people were contemporaries of Swedenborg and instrumental in the French revolution, which began with the storming of the Bastille in 1789, just 32 years after the Judgment. And let's not forget the American Revolution, with its Declaration of Independence less than 20 years after the judgment. Since then the march of science, discovery and the struggle for freedom has progressed with an incredible *rush* compared to all previous ages. WHY?

We believe it is because of the nearer, stronger influence of the Lord in the spiritual world that cleared the intellectual air and allowed people on earth to think more freely for themselves and so to act more freely according to their own desires rather than being manipulated by so-called authorities, whether in the church or in civil life. This of course doesn't mean everything suddenly got better. It didn't. Plagues, wars and various forms of oppression continue to this day, but what has changed is that people *in themselves* are more free and *much* less inclined to believe or do *anything* just because someone else says so.

Take for example the Catholic Church. Millions of people still adhere in a general way to the tenets – or at least the rituals – of that faith, but how many Catholics do you know who adhere to everything the Pope says? He can preach about the evils of contraception all he wants, but the people do what they believe is best for themselves and their families. As for his being the infallible Vicar of Christ having the keys to the kingdom of heaven, well, a lot of people *like* the Pope and appreciate his social conscience, but even so, people do what *they* believe is right. This is exactly the sort of thing our third lesson this morning was addressing.

Another example is the proliferation of what is sometimes called New Age Spirituality, which really began – believe it or not – with a whole string of charismatic leaders in Europe and the United States taking bits and pieces of what they found, either directly or indirectly, in the books written by Swedenborg. Shakers, Quakers, Unitarians, Christian Science, the Unity School of Religion, the Church of Religious Science *and many others* all owe their beginnings to the teachings of the New Church, though they all deviate in significant ways from the integrity of what

the New Church actually stands for¹, which is a firm commitment to the Divine Humanity of the Lord and a life according to His Commandments.

But what does all this mean for us in the New Church today?

Well, for one thing, as you heard in our third lesson, “It is because people have had their spiritual freedom restored that the spiritual sense of the Word has now been disclosed, and by this means Divine truths of a more inward kind have been revealed. For in their previous state people would not have understood them, and if anyone did so, he would have profaned them.”

This is a curious statement because, as you may be aware, the spiritual sense of Genesis, Exodus and many other parts of the Word had been disclosed to Swedenborg and published in the *Arca-na Caelestia* over a period of at least 8 years *before the Last Judgment* (from 1749 until 1757). So why would the very person who did all that work declare when it was finished that it could *now* be disclosed? There would seem to be two or three main reasons:

1. Although the books had been published they were not being widely read or accepted. Here the hope is expressed that they would be more fully received in the years following the judgment – which of course they were.
2. Along the same lines, it seems clear that the unstable influence of the spiritual world prior to the judgment was preventing people in this world from seeing the value in these books even if they did read them. In this case it is at least interesting that the Latin word for being disclosed is *detectum*, which can mean *observed* and not just disclosed.
3. And finally, since the judgment on the Christian Church was most fully represented in the imagery of the book of Revelation, and the spiritual sense of *that* book had not yet been explained, this could be seen as a specific reference to that work, which was done in detail in the years between 1758 and 1766, culminating in the publication of *The Apocalypse Revealed*.

In any case we now have both the revelation itself *and* the rectified influence of the spiritual world to guide us in our love and understanding of the Lord as God of heaven and earth, not to mention the laws of His Providence, the spiritual basis of marriage, the life after death and every aspect of our personal regeneration as it is represented in the literal sense of the Word. So we are in the unique position among all the people in the world to benefit from this enlightenment *if we will only apply ourselves to it*. But we must apply ourselves.

That said, there is a startling statement in *The Apocalypse Revealed* #965 to the effect that anyone “who from love is willing to learn truths and appropriate them to himself will receive them from the Lord *without any work of his own*.” This appears in the explanation of the words in Revelation 22:17 about the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven, where we read, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.” As the explanation goes, anyone who does anything from love does it freely, and so it isn’t work in the usual sense, it’s a pleasure. And if a person seeks the heavenly life sincerely, the Lord provides it freely.

¹ See the book, *New Thought*, by Martin Larson, published by *The Philosophical Library* of NY in 1985 (399 pages plus appendices), the first chapter of which is titled, “Swedenborg, the Fountainhead.”

This is the same passage, by the way, that says “By ‘Let him who hears say, “Come,”’ is meant that he who hears and thence knows anything of the Lord’s Coming, and of the New Heaven and the New Church, thus of the Lord’s kingdom, *let him pray that it may come.*” But as we all know, prayer is perfectly meaningless if we don’t engage in the effort to fulfill it, which in this case is not only to live it but to share the knowledge of it with others,” for,” as we read elsewhere, “of what use is knowledge unless it be communicated? What is it, but like collecting and storing up riches in a casket, and only looking at them occasionally and counting them over, without any intention of applying them to use? Spiritual avarice is nothing else” (Influx 18:2).

Now imagine you have just a TON of money. It is *no problem* to give away millions, maybe even billions, as far as your own needs are concerned. In fact the only challenge is to determine who or what cause is worthy of your support. But again, suppose that’s no problem either since you have a favorite charity that you know is reliable and worthy. You even have administrators who can do all the paperwork for you. Now: is it work to share your wealth, or is it a pleasure?

It may not be the best analogy but when we consider that we have more than all the wealth of the world in the knowledge of the spiritual sense of the Word, if we have any interest in the New Jerusalem we should pray that it may come by communicating about it – in short by talking it up, writing about it, sharing our experience with it, and so on. Of course we don’t want to annoy people or pressure them. But it’s easy to share without imposing if it’s a natural part of our lives and conversations. And what the Lord provides in return is even greater insight – about ourselves, about the people with whom we engage, and best of all about the truth itself, all insights that the Lord provides “without any work of our own.”

So again, what are the implications of the Last Judgment for us, some 260 years after the fact?

1. We have an unprecedented opportunity to learn the truths of faith with clarity and integrity if we simply apply ourselves to the task.
2. When we do this from love it is easy, and the Lord provides the knowledge freely, without any work of our own. In fact He does the work for us.
3. The world is much more receptive of these deeper teachings than it has ever been before, since people are in greater spiritual freedom than ever before, and less likely than ever to be spell-bound by traditional religious authorities.
4. Now that we know about these truths we have an obligation to share them in the hope and prayer that the holy city, New Jerusalem will come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Of course we can’t expect everyone we meet to be interested. And we can’t expect the falsities and evils of the world to suddenly, magically disappear. Greater freedom doesn’t necessarily mean greater acceptance of the truth, but it does provide opportunities every day if we’re prepared. So let us pray that the New Jerusalem will come, and let us pray as well for the affection and for the courage of our convictions to participate fully in that process.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 18:16-32
Children’s Talk on How the Lord Judges Us
Matthew 7:1-6 & 15-20 and *The Last Judgment* #73