

How Are We To Understand What The Lord Said About His Second Coming?

Near the end of His life on earth, and only days before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus spoke at length to His disciples on the subject of His Second Coming. Referring to something Jesus had said earlier in the day, which they knew to be a reference to it, "the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (Matthew 24:3).

By way of an answer, the Lord spoke not only of the signs which would precede His Coming, but of the actual Coming itself. "Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.'" (Matthew 24: 29-31).

Understandably, the hope of the Second Coming figures very prominently in the thinking and teaching of the early Christian Church. It was at first expected to occur within the lifetime of all those who had heard the Lord utter His prophecy. In one place He seemed to indicate that that would be so. (Mark 9:1). The expectation of an imminent return of the Lord delayed the writing of the gospels. And Paul was confronted with a difficult situation in the Church at Thessalonica where at one stage members there had 'downed tools', so certain were they that the Lord was about to come. In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians he wrote, as at chapter 2 "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come."

It was years, indeed it ran into generations, before that certainty began to falter. But since that time, though belief in the Second Coming has never died out completely in the Church, it has faded from prominence; at least so far as orthodox Christian teaching is concerned, and today is of little real interest to a great many people. There have been too many false alarms in our own day and age, and with some Bible scholars it has got to the point where the authenticity of these promises concerning the Second Coming is questioned and brought into doubt. Perhaps the Lord didn't say these things and others ascribed these words to Him.

However, this overlooks and ignores the emphasis which Jesus elsewhere gave the subject. It is not as if He is said to have spoken on the subject on only one occasion. There are the parables He spoke concerning it, like the parable concerning the sheep and the goats, emphasising the need for watchfulness and preparedness, and all the teaching concerning the Comforter in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of John's Gospel. The closer we look, and the more we read, the more difficult it is to disregard this anticipation of the Second Coming.

This is not to say that such teaching is without its difficulties. Unfulfilled expectations concerning the Second Coming, as there have been down through the centuries, have naturally bred disillusionment. And the catastrophes which are anticipated in connection with it, if they actually took place, would mean the end of the world as we know it. There would be nothing left here.

But did the Lord mean His words to be taken literally? This is a question that needs to be asked and examined in all seriousness. As His words stand in Matthew 24, and in the parallel passages in Mark and Luke, they seem to speak of certain cosmic catastrophes affecting the physical world "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven". What we are asking is whether Jesus meant this in reference to the world as we know it? This world of land and sea, heat and light, trees and flowers, rain and sunshine? The more we look into this the more we come to realise that the answer must be 'no'.

I want just for a moment to go back to the Old Testament and to look at a prophecy we find there, in Joel Chapter 3, concerning the Lord's First Coming, His birth into the world. We read there, "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel."

What is remarkable about the prophecy is that though it was never fulfilled literally yet, as is obvious, the Lord called upon its imagery to speak of the conditions which would precede His Second Coming. Here were words which had been applicable where His First Coming was concerned, and they would be, similarly, applicable, in describing

conditions at His Second Coming. The Lord wouldn't have used them again unless they were true, though their truth is seen not in relation to the world or our worldly environment but in relation to the mental world in which we live and the moral and spiritual environment which prevails.

This is how the words of Joel's prophecy are to be understood, as speaking, not of the conditions of the physical world at the time of the Lord's First Coming, but of the conditions which would exist spiritually, and with regard to the Church. The language of the prophecy is symbolic, as is the language of so many of the Messianic prophecies, and as is so much of the language of the Scriptures, pointing to spiritual realities. The sun and the moon are Scripture symbols, of love and faith, and Joel's prophecy concerning them means the loss of love and faith at the time of the Lord's Coming. Stars are a symbol of the knowledges of truth which guide us in our darkness, and when it said that they would withdraw their shining what is meant is a loss of those knowledges so that they were no longer seen, even taught, (which was the case) or understood.

These words of Joel, understood symbolically, clearly had their fulfilment at the time Jesus was born on earth. All that is said by them concerning the state of the Church (the Jewish Church at that time) was indeed found to be so. A state of spiritual darkness had descended. The sun and the moon, or as is meant by them, love and faith, were obscured, as it were not to be seen; and the stars had withdrawn their shining. From what Jesus said of the Church of His day, religion had become a sham, and observances had become meaningless rituals. Even the Commandments of God, He said, had been made of no effect through human traditions.

Intending that they should be similarly understood, symbolically that is, the Lord called upon the words and imagery of Joel's prophecy concerning His First Coming to speak of the way things would be at the time of His Second. He anticipated and said there would be a state of spiritual darkness; of empty, meaningless religion; of the corruption and falsification of Divine truth; of people groping and not knowing where to go.

"Immediately after the distress of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky," These words of the Lord refer in fact to the state of the Christian Church in the eighteenth century; a time when, as is

widely recognised, had reached its lowest ebb, doctrinally, and in every other way. Superstition had come to replace belief and conviction. The religion of love to God and charity towards one's neighbour had been totally eclipsed and in place of it there was persecution and political manipulation. The teachings of the Church had become as unlike those which Jesus had taught as can possibly be imagined. It was then as it had been when the Lord Himself was on earth.

It was to be following upon such a situation that the Second Coming would take place. In the Lord's own words, "they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" And here again it is a matter of careful thought being given to what is meant. The term 'Son of man' refers to the Lord as He, in Whom Divine Truth, was incarnate. As mouthpieces of God and messengers of His truth the Old Testament prophets were called 'Son of Man'. It is the Lord as the embodiment of Divine Truth which is meant by the title, 'the Son of Man'.

And here is our clue to understanding these words concerning the Second Coming. The Lord promised He would come again in a new disclosure of Divine Truth about Himself. It would be a Coming not before the physical eyes of people but a Coming to their minds in a new revelation. He had said on another occasion, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:12-13). And here is what is meant. The Lord would come again as a Revelation of Divine Truth, revealing the inner glory of the Sacred Scriptures; the deeper, spiritual meaning, which lies within the clouds of its literal sense.

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Here is additional information to help us understand the Second Coming, and Swedenborg's claim that he was a human instrument for a new revelation of Truth. Swedenborg through an understanding of correspondences revealed the deeper, spiritual meaning of Sacred Scripture, which lies within the clouds of its literal sense.

Clouds: One of the most important representations appearing many times in the Word is that of clouds. In the natural world clouds are the carriers of water from oceans and lakes to the land, and as thunderclouds they are generators of electricity which leaks into the earth and the upper atmosphere and so maintains a fundamental difference of potential between atmosphere and earth. Clouds appear in the spiritual world also, but there they have a quite different function for they are correspondences of celestial and spiritual things as will now be shown.

Even as clouds in the natural world often obscure the sun, so clouds in the spiritual world conceal the Spiritual Sun - especially the Divine Truth proceeding from the Spiritual Sun. Those who live beneath clouds in the spiritual world are in an obscure state of reception and cannot discern the living truth as it emerges from the Lord. Clouds commonly signify the outer, literal sense of the Word, for truth lies hidden and concealed behind the literal form of the Word. In Matthew it is written:

"And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory". (*Matthew 24:30*)

Also,

"Hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven". (*Matthew 26:64*)

The 'clouds' are the literal sense of the Word which conceal, and so protect, the spiritual truth which it contains; the 'glory' is the spiritual sense of the Word, which is the new outpouring of the Divine - the second coming of Christ - disclosed through the revelation of correspondences and the opening of a person's spiritual senses; and the 'power' is the transforming action of the Divine upon men and women through the Word when they read it, discern its internal sense, understand it, and live in accordance with its indications.

In the Psalms the power of the Word is explained through the representation of clouds:

"Ascribe strength unto God: His excellency is over Israel, and His strength is in the clouds". (*Psalms 68:34*).

Again, the strength of power of God is contained within and effected through the Word even in its concealed, literal sense. And what is the Word but God, as so clearly shown in John:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us". (*John 1:1*)

In the description of the transfiguration of the Lord a cloud is used in the language of correspondences to make known the truth behind appearances:

"While He yet spoke, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him". (*Matthew 17:5*)

The transfiguration reveals the Lord as the Word, and as the 'son' he is the infinite Lord God Jehovah visible and present in the world as the Divine Man. "A voice out of the cloud" signifies the spiritual truth concealed within the written and spoken forms of the Word.

So long as we only see the *sense* of the Word and confine ourselves to the apparent meaning of the letter we remain in spiritual obscurity and live under a cloud. When we discern that a profound, living, spiritual sense actuates and forms the Word, then truth flows into us and we virtually see the Lord descending upon clouds. For each person, the Lord has "caused the light of his cloud to shine" (*Job 37:15*). But for most people it is as true today as in former times when it was said: "and now men see not the bright light which is in the clouds" (*Job 37:21*).

[Dr Philip Groves, *Spiritual Foundations*, Ch 5 The Starry Universe.](#)