

The Sign of the Lord's Coming and of the End of the Age, Part I

Lessons: Exodus 24:1-4, 7, 9-10, 15-18
Matt. 24:3-14, 29-31, 36
Arcana Coelestia 4060

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As (Jesus) sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3)

When the disciples asked the Lord this question, they had already heard him talk on several occasions about the coming of the Son of Man and also the destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding in three days. So it was natural that they would be curious as to when these things would take place and what would be the indications that they were about to take place. We may suppose that they were taking these prophecies of the Lord quite literally. And if we read the answer that the Lord gave them, we can see that it was answered in the literal sense of Matthew in a natural way – in ways that they could comprehend. They could understand what was said concerning wars and rumors of wars, about famines and earthquakes, about false prophets, and also about their own persecution. They could understand also about the gospel being preached throughout the whole world. And then because they did not know much about the realities of astronomy, it even made sense to them that the sun and moon could be darkened and the stars could fall from heaven. They also took literally that people would see the Son of Man coming literally in the clouds of heaven and that Angels would go out with a loud trumpet: gather the elect together. The Lord's disciples two thousand years ago likely took this description quite literally – and even today much of Christianity is still looking for a literal fulfillment of this prophecy – what they call "end time prophecies." Many people believe this literally even when they understand that parts of the prophecy don't make sense, such as the stars falling from heaven.

In the New Church, based upon our understanding of the teachings of the Third Testament, we don't take the descriptions in Matthew literally because the Third Testament tells us what the various descriptions signify and reveals to us the "internal sense" of this part of the gospel of Matthew. So we don't take literally this prophecy as given in the gospel of Matthew. Instead, we tend to take literally its explanation as described in various parts of the Third Testament, such as in the Arcana Coelestia chapter 18 and elsewhere. So many

of us in the new church look at it more or less simply as describing a last judgment on the Christian church and the setting up of a new church, which we have a tendency to think of as the church we are members of.

We know from the teachings of the Third Testament, especially from the *Doctrine concerning the Sacred Scripture*, that the sense of the letter of the Word has many different levels of meaning. In general, we are taught that these levels treated of the Lord, of heaven, of his church, and also of the regeneration or spiritual rebirth of every person. So in regard to this prophecy in Matthew, in a sense we can understand that it treats of the Lord's church – – because the Third Testament tells us so. But how does it also treat of the Lord, of heaven, and of our own regeneration?

In this and a later sermon I intend to take a look at some of the ways in which the prophecy in Matthew, based upon its explanation in the letter of the Third Testament, describes states we may experience in our own regeneration. In other words, how does the Third Testament's explanation of the prophecy in Matthew apply to our own spiritual development?

In general from the literal description of the prophecy in Matthew and in the explanation of that prophecy according to the Third Testament, we can see that it deals with a period of tribulation or distress caused by times of war, famine, earthquakes, and also persecution. This appears to be a description of the states of temptation. So let's first take a look at what is said concerning the subject of temptation. We go to the chapter on temptation that is found in the *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*:

NJHD 187. *Only those who are being regenerated undergo spiritual temptations. Spiritual temptations are periods of mental distress experienced by those in states of good and truth, which are brought on by evil spirits. When these arouse the evils in them a state of anxiety arises due to being tempted. Not knowing this origin, a person does not know where this distress comes from.*

Notice this description of spiritual temptations involves periods of distress and states of anxiety. These would seem to match up with the descriptions of wars, rumors of wars, famines, persecutions, and earthquakes mentioned in Matthew. But let us go on with what is said concerning the subject of temptation.

NJHD 189. *Inward anxiety can also be experienced by those who are not in states of good and truth, but these are natural rather than spiritual anxieties. They can be told apart by natural anxieties having as their subject worldly matters, but spiritual anxieties being about heavenly matters.*

In other words the things that we are concerned about and distressed over in temptation is threatened loss of spiritual things not over the loss of natural things.

NJHD 190. *The dominion of good over evil, or of evil over good, is contended for in temptations.*

NJHD 191. *These combats are waged by the truths of faith which are from the Word. From these a person ought to contend against evils and falsities; he cannot conquer if he combats from any other truths than these, because the Lord is not in any other. Since the combat is waged by the truths of faith, therefore, a person is not permitted to enter upon it, until he is in possession of the knowledges of good and truth, and until by means of them he has acquired some spiritual life*

We can only be admitted into states of temptation when we have some knowledge of goods and truths and have acquired some degree of spiritual life by means of them. In temptation these goods and truths, these knowledges in this spiritual life, are the very things which the evil spirits are trying to take away from us and trying to destroy within us.

NJHD 192. *If a person succumbs, his state after the temptation is worse than his state before it; because evil then has acquired power over good, and falsity over truth.*

This brings to mind the passage in Matthew 24:13 which states that, "... *The one who endures to the end will be saved.*" Here it is necessary to add that even if we give in when in temptations, is not all over for us spiritually. The Lord never gives up on us. He is constantly trying to lift us up even when we are slipping backwards. In the words of the Psalmist: *If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in hell, you are there!* (Ps.139:8)

NJHD 194. *Temptations are of use in acquiring dominion for good over evil, and for truth over falsity; and further, in confirming truths, and in conjoining them with good, and at the same time in dispersing evils, and hence falsities.*

They are of use also in opening the internal spiritual man, and in subjecting the natural man to it: and at the same time in breaking the loves of self and of the world, and in restraining the lusts which are from them. After these things have been brought about, a person obtains enlightenment and a perception of what truth and good are, and what falsity and evil are. By this a person acquires intelligence and wisdom, which afterwards, increase from day to day.

When we overcome in temptations we obtain enlightenment, perception intelligence and wisdom and these are said to increase from day to day. This is in line with what is said in the Arcana Coelestia 4060:8, 9 where it is said:

"He shall send forth His angels with a trumpet and a great voice," signifies election, not by visible angels, still less by trumpets, and by great voices; but by the influx of holy good and holy truth from the Lord through angels; and therefore by "angels" in the Word there is signified something of the Lord here, there are signified things that are from the Lord and concerning the Lord(and) the setting up of a new church. By the "elect" are meant those who are in the good of love and of faith.

A future sermon will consider further what is said in the Third Testament's treatment of Matthew 24, looking to its application in our lives. For the present, let us reflect on the passages which we have read concerning temptation. How can we put them to use in our own lives?

Amen.

Prayer:

*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in hell, you are there!
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness
is as light with you.* (Psalm 139:7-8, 11-12)

Lessons

Exodus 24:1-4, 7, 9-10, 15-18 (ESV)

¹ Then (the LORD) said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.

² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

³ Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.

⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and obey.”

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,

¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 24:3-14, 29-31, 36 (ESV)

³ As He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray.

⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.

⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.

⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

⁸ All these are but the beginning of sorrows.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.

¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.

¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

²⁹ “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, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, 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.

³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

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... immediately after the affliction of those days the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then shall all the tribes of the earth wail; and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send forth His angels with a trumpet and a great voice, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the end of the heavens even to the end thereof (Matt. 24:29-31).

AC 4060. (These words signify) the state of the church at that time with respect to good (that is, as to charity toward the neighbor and love to the Lord)... .

[3] The sun and moon in the heavens (that is, the Lord) is never darkened, nor does it lose its light, but it shines perpetually; and so neither is love to the Lord darkened with the celestial, nor does charity toward the neighbor lose its light with the spiritual, in the heavens; nor on earth with those with whom these angels are, that is, those who are in love and charity. Those however who are in no love and charity, but in the love of self and of the world, and consequently in hatred and revenge, bring that "darkening" upon themselves.

[4] And the stars shall fall from heaven; signifies that the knowledges of good and truth will perish.

And the powers of the heavens shall be shaken; signifies the foundations of the church, which are said to be "shaken" and "made to quake" when they perish. For the church on earth is the foundation of heaven, because the influx of good and truth from the Lord through the heavens finally terminates in the goods and truths that are with the man of the church. When therefore the man of the church is in such a perverted state as no longer to admit the influx of good and truth, the powers of the heavens are said to be "shaken." For this reason it is always provided by the Lord that something

of the church shall remain; and that when an old church perishes, a new one shall be set up again.

[5] And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven; signifies the appearing of Divine truth at that time; the "sign" signifies the appearing; the "Son of man," the Lord as to Divine truth. It was this appearing or this "sign," concerning which the disciples asked when they said, "Tell us when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the consummation of the age" (verse 3). For they knew from the Word that when the age should be consummated, the Lord would come; and they learned from the Lord Himself that He would "come again," by which they understood that the Lord would once more come into the world; not yet knowing that the Lord has come whenever the church has been vastated, not indeed in person, as when He assumed the human by birth and made it Divine; but by means of appearings ... as by inspirations through which the Word was given, and afterwards through the Word; for the Lord is present in the Word This is the appearing here signified by the "sign of the Son of man," which is described in this verse.

[6] And then shall all the tribes of the earth wail (mourn); signifies that all who are in the good of love and the truth of faith shall be in grief.

[7] And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of the heavens with power and great glory; signifies that the Word will then be revealed as to its internal sense, in which the Lord is; the "Son of man" is the Divine truth therein; the "cloud" being its literal sense This is the "coming of the Lord" here meant, not that He will literally appear in the clouds. Now follows ... the setting up of a New Church, which takes place when the old one is vastated and rejected.

[8] He shall send forth His angels with a trumpet and a great voice;

[9] And they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from the end of the heavens even to the end thereof; signifies the setting up of a New Church. The "elect" are those who are in the good of love and of faith; the "four winds" from which they shall be gathered together, are all states of good and truth; "from the end of the heavens to the end of them" denotes the internals and the externals of the church. Such therefore are the things signified by these words of the Lord.