

# Peace like a River

## A sermon about the Christmas prophecies.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, December 1, 2019

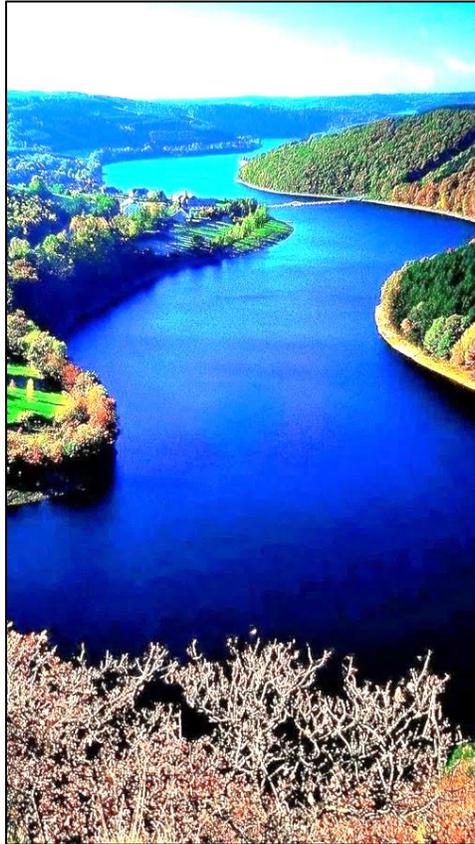
*“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream.” Isaiah 66:12*

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice.” He also said “πάντα ρει (panta rhei)” which means “everything flows”. The world is continually changing, never the same from minute to minute. The present moment flows into the future like a river, and we are carried along in its waters towards whatever the future holds for us.

Most of the beautiful Christmas prophecies that we love to quote at this time of year as we begin this Christmas season, describe the Lord’s coming, and His salvation, as a discrete event, a dramatic rescue from the darkness of evil. But that salvation might be more accurately pictured as the flow of a river carrying all of us to a better future, or as a rising tide that is lifting us towards heaven.

Among the most mysterious and fascinating phenomena of human society are the changes in what people consider to be good, desirable and interesting over time. The river keeps moving and we never know from one year to the next what will be trending. Will belief in God and interest in religion increase or decrease? Will the many factors that influence marriage and happy families lead to improvement or decline? Will racism be overcome? Will morality and sobriety become popular? Will peace come to the world?

Many trends are logical and predictable, and there are people who make their living forecasting them. Many others, though, seem to come out of nowhere and surprise all of us. Hardly anyone imagined, forty years ago, that there would be such a thing as the internet, and the effect that it would have on the world. The question, “What is going to happen?”



has a hold on the human imagination that is as compelling as any other. We read in *Divine Providence* that,

*“Reason's essential delight is to envision from love the effect in thought - not at the time of the effect, but prior to it, or not at the present time, but in a time to come. It is this that gives a person what we call hope, which grows or dwindles in his reason as it envisions or anticipates the outcome.” Divine Providence 178*

That is, there is a deep interest in what is going to happen to the things that we care about. Will they win or lose, succeed or fail, get better or worse? The excitement that gambling has for many people is about the delight associated with predicting and then hoping for a particular outcome.

### The future is like a river.

In most ways, however, the trends that change our society are not discrete events with particular outcomes, but long term developments that move us all in some direction. They are more like a river than a battle, and the factors and causes of their direction are often so subtle and invisible that we who are caught up in them have no idea what they are. Several passages describe it this way:

*“In actual fact there is a kind of field that constantly emanates from the Lord, which pulls all toward heaven. It fills the entire spiritual world and the entire physical world. It is like a strong current in the ocean that secretly carries ships along.” True Christianity 652.3*

*“The Lord does not clearly appear in His Divine providence, but draws a person along by it as silently as a hidden current or favorable stream*

*does a ship. Consequently a person does not know but that he continually has his independence, for freedom and independence are bound up together.”*  
*Divine Providence 186*

The forces that move society along and that affect each one of us are in some ways visible and understandable, but in other ways they are undetectable and mysterious. We seem to ourselves to do what we wish, but we don't realize the extent to which we are born along in the stream of our collective thoughts and feelings, responding to factors that we are not even aware of.

This is not to deny that we are free, but freedom is not a simple yes or no proposition. We can be more free or less free, and many things impact our choices and affect our freedom whether we know it or not.

The field that goes out from the Lord and pulls all towards heaven causes angels to be associated with each person. It opposes our natural inclinations to self-centered behaviors, and it still leaves us in freedom to do what we actually wish to do.

Although we are all free, the Heavenly Doctrine assures us that the Lord knows how we will respond to this field, and the extent to which we will allow ourselves to be pulled into its current. We read:

*“How far someone errs who believes that the Lord has not foreseen and does not see the smallest individual thing with the human race. Or that within the smallest individual thing He does not foresee and lead. When in fact the Lord's foresight and providence are present within the tiniest details of all the smallest individual things with them, and in details so tiny that it is impossible to comprehend in any manner of thought one in many millions of them. For every smallest fraction of a moment of a person's life entails a chain of consequences extending into eternity.”* Arcana Coelestia 3854

Many passages assure us that the Lord does in fact know the future (*Arcana Coelestia 1755, Last Judgment 74, Spiritual Experiences 2271*). The Christmas prophecies are truly prophecies of the future. They are certain to be fulfilled.

### **Does prophecy interfere with freedom?**

**W**e may wonder how this certainty can be consistent with human freedom, but anyone familiar with statistics should be able to understand something of how this works. From the *Centers for Disease Control and*

*Prevention* we know, for example, that on average every day 29 people in the United States die in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. This is likely to happen today. This prediction doesn't interfere with anyone's freedom.

We can't even begin to compare this kind of knowledge with the Lord's, but it does illustrate how something can be predicted with some certainty, without in any way affecting anyone's freedom. The Lord sees every factor that impacts our spiritual progress, He knows what our responses to them will be, and so He knows exactly what truths must be revealed, and what turns of fortune are needed to move us so far as it is possible to move us without impeding our freedom.

### **Christmas prophecies focus on long term results.**

**P**rophecies about the Lord's coming are about the specific event of His birth to a virgin, in Bethlehem, into the house of David, about the appearance of a star, the visit of the wise men, and other details. Their greater focus, though, is on the effects of His coming, as a *“light to lighten the Gentiles”* (*Luke 2:32*), guiding *“our footsteps into the way of peace”* (*Luke 1:79*). Isaiah predicts:

*“The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the earth.”* Isaiah 11:10

These are the kinds of things that happen over long periods of time, as the current of the Lord's providence moves humanity forward.

In many ways it is hard to believe that the hand of providence moves people towards peace and justice when we consider how much of history seems to be the result of violence and evil, or when tragedy strikes people we love.

Or it may be easier for us to see it when we know that despite these things there have actually been dramatic decreases in violence, disease, famines, and poverty over the course of history.

A confusing factor is that progress and declines are not continuous. They come and go, like the way that waves on the shore mask our perception of whether the tide is rising or falling.

### **The Word and the English**

**A** few things seem like direct fulfillments of these Christmas prophecies.

For example, the Word has spread far beyond what anyone in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine might

have believed. Over five billion copies have been printed and distributed in almost every language on earth. No other book has even reached one billion. The Bible has been the runaway bestseller every year for centuries. How did this happen?

The Writings make this prediction of the English:

*“It was perceived that many of the English will receive the Heavenly Doctrine, and thereby come into the New Jerusalem; because they are such that they receive the truths of faith more easily than others and see them in interior light.” Last Judgment (pos) 4; Spiritual Experiences 5577*

Sure enough, the large majority of the people in the world who have received the Heavenly Doctrine are English speaking.

Not only that, it just so happens that, since

*they are able to rise above the literal meaning and see the import of the work. They then apparently gain enlightenment about the topic under discussion. So the recommendation of someone they respect is needed before this enlightenment can occur. As a result, when a book is recommended, they will buy thousands of copies; if a book is not recommended, no one buys it—almost no one whatsoever in the entire kingdom. The British are all alike in this respect.” (Spiritual Experiences 5951; JSR’s translation)*

Seemingly as a result of this understanding, Swedenborg made many efforts to have the books of the Writings reviewed by trusted writers and respected leaders. He sent them to members of the clergy and nobility. While these efforts appear to have been unsuccessful, over time there have been many testimonies about the Writings by many influential English-speaking writers. The results remain unspectacular, but if we trust in the

Christmas prophecies, we can be sure that in time somewhere on earth public sentiment will change.

Swedenborg

wrote those words, English has become the most widely spoken language on earth, used by 20% of the world’s population. Almost a quarter of all books published in the world each year are published in English, two-thirds of all magazines and newspapers are in English, over half of all web pages and scholarly journals are in English, and over one-third of all films.

Not only this, but in sub-Saharan Africa, which the Writings seem to identify as a place where the New Church will take root, and where it is spreading, about 60% of the people are able to speak English.

How did this happen? This is how providence works. Somehow English has spread and is serving to convey the truths of the New Church worldwide, like a river reaching every corner of the world.

This kind of knowledge might inform our marketing efforts. In the *Spiritual Diary* we find this:

*“It is in the nature of the British that if they read a book that has not been recommended by someone they respect, they see in it only the words on the page and their literal meaning, and not the gist of what is being said... But when they read a book that has been recommended by someone they respect,*

### Peace like a river

The point is that these prophecies are not just about the specific event of the Lord’s birth, but about the changes that move forward from that event, like a river that affects everything in its path. Isaiah describes it as a river of peace. Ezekiel, in our lesson, says that *“every living thing that moves, wherever the river goes, will live.”* Isaiah says, *“Before she was in labor, she gave birth,”* which means that even as we witness and worry about the state of things in our world, peace is being established in ways that we do not see. We who love her and mourn for her apparent weakness and troubles can rejoice. The forces that inspire long term trends are invisible to us, but this is how providence works. The seemingly unlikely result is what we celebrate at Christmas. The Lord says:

*“As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me.”*

AMEN

## Readings from the Word

### Isaiah 66

**B**efore she was in labor, she gave birth; before her pain came, she delivered a male child.

<sup>8</sup> Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things?

<sup>10</sup> “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her; Rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her;

<sup>11</sup> That you may feed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom,

That you may drink deeply and be delighted with the abundance of her glory.”

<sup>12</sup> For thus says the LORD:

“Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream.

Then you shall feed; on *her* sides shall you be carried, and be dandled on *her* knees.

<sup>13</sup> As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

<sup>22</sup> “For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me,” says the LORD, “So shall your descendants and your name remain.

<sup>23</sup> And it shall come to pass *that* from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the LORD.

### Prophets and Psalms: Isaiah 66

**B**efore (the church) perishes, it will be founded among others, and will be established. They will drink in Divine truth with joy. They will have all goods and truths. Those who are against them will come to an end. And those will perish who have perverted the holy things of the church. People will draw near to the Lord from all parts, and from every religion. They will be in all truth of doctrine of the church, and in its good. The things of heaven and the church will abide with them and they will continually worship the Lord.

### Ezekiel 47

**T**hen the angel brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the front of the temple faced east; the water was flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar.

<sup>5</sup> Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed. <sup>6</sup> He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river.

<sup>7</sup> Along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to me: “This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea... <sup>9</sup> And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live.”

### True Christianity 303, 652

**I**saiah 66 and other passages treat of the state of peace that people can come into with the Lord's help. The people to be accepted into the new church that the Lord is now establishing will come into this peace.

<sup>652</sup> From the Lord's own words, we can see that He ascribes goodness to everyone and evil to no one, and therefore that He judges no one to hell but instead lifts us all toward heaven to the degree that we will follow along. He said, “*When I am raised up from the earth I will draw all people to myself.*” (John 12:32) When evil individuals are lifted by the Lord toward heaven, their evil drags them downward; and because they love that evil they follow it of their own accord... But when good people are lifted by the Lord toward heaven, they go up seemingly of their own accord and are brought in. [3] In actual fact there is a kind of field that constantly emanates from the Lord, which pulls all toward heaven. It fills the entire spiritual world and the entire physical world. It is like a strong current in the ocean that secretly carries ships along. All people who believe in the Lord and live by His commandments come into that field or current and are lifted up.

