

On Eagles' Wings

A sermon about the Lord's protection of the New Church

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, June 5th, 2022

"The woman was given two wings of a great eagle that she might fly into the wilderness to her place." Revelation 12:14

The Woman Clothed with the Sun does not appear on the scene in Revelation 12 with the intention of attacking the dragon. Still, he knows that the birth of her Child, who is to "shepherd all nations with a rod of iron" will leave no room for him in this world. His best option is to put an end to Him while He is small and weak.

The story that this chapter tells is how the dragon's plans are foiled, and how both the Child and the Woman escape and find protection. Our topic this morning is what this means for us and how this story lives on today.

First of all, the Child, when He is born, is "caught up to God and to His throne." There is no delay, no exposure to the dragon, and the protection is absolute.

The Child is the doctrine of the New Church, which is immediately secured in heaven by the angels as soon as it comes into existence (*Apocalypse Revealed* 545). The doctrine itself is invulnerable. Nothing can happen to it. The drama here is not about the Child.

But the woman is vulnerable. She is the New Church itself. From the very beginning of the story, she is struggling. Her cries of pain in giving birth stand for "the difficulty of the doctrine's being accepted owing to the opposition to it by people meant by the dragon" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 535). For the same reason she flees as soon as He is born.

She flees into the wilderness, barren and inhospitable, where she will somehow be sustained.

The meaning is that the people of the church find themselves in a spiritual landscape where people have falsified or no longer believe the truths they have, or have no truths at all, and are not interested in them. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 546).

The story gives the impression that the wilderness is

somehow a safe place for the woman. But it isn't a safe place at all. She is still in danger from the dragon. Her environment offers her no protection. Yet she does find safety, and how this happens is our topic today.



Safety in the Wilderness

How is it that she is in a "place prepared by God, that they should feed her there" even though she is in a wilderness? The answer is given in the events that immediately follow. They describe not only what happens to her but also what can happen in our own lives and in the communities of those who believe in and pray for the New Church.

The moment the woman makes her escape the dragon is attacked and cannot pursue her. Michael and his angels fight with him, and there is "war in heaven."

"Michael" is not an individual archangel but is a ministry in heaven of those who believe in

and follow the Lord (*Apocalypse Revealed* 548). Interestingly, we are told in the Writings that:

"Those who are Michael were chiefly from the ancient heavens. They have all remained in existence and were from them in those heavens who were from pagan peoples, and from children from everywhere now adults." Spiritual Experiences 5747

Wars in heaven, of course, are not fought with weapons but are contests between falsity and truth. Nor are there ever actually wars in heaven, since falsities can't exist there. But the war described here is about what kind of ideas belong in heaven and what do not.

It would make sense that the wisdom of these ancient peoples would come into play, since the state of Christianity was so weak. Over time, however, it seems that the Michaels were increasingly from Christians (*Apocalypse Revealed* 564).

Michael and his angels defeat the dragon “*nor was a place for them found in heaven any longer.*” That is, the things taught by the dragon are shown to be untrue. They do not belong in heaven.

It would be nice to think that this ends the matter, and that the woman is now safe. But the dragon’s downfall means only that he is removed from heaven. Michael does not follow him down to earth to protect the woman. But she has other means of protection, and here is where the story becomes even more interesting for those who love the New Church.

Two wings of a Great Eagle

Being thrown to the earth angers the dragon, and he pursues the woman. She is then defended in two specific ways. The first is with wings:

“The woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time.”

According to the *Apocalypse Revealed* these wings stand for “*the Divine circumspection on behalf of the New Church and protection while it was still among a few*” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 561).

This doesn’t seem to be saying much, other than that the Lord is watching over the church. But there is more to it. The eagle and his wings stand for the Lord’s power, keen sight and understanding. He perceives and guards against what is harmful in that wilderness where few agree with its teachings.

Apocalypse Explained has a slightly different and complementary interpretation. We are fortunate to have both *Apocalypse Revealed* and *Apocalypse Explained* with their slightly varying explanations. *Apocalypse Explained* was written first – six volumes ending mysteriously in Revelation 20, out of 22, and never published even though it was prepared for publication. *Apocalypse Revealed* was then written and published in only two volumes. It is shorter and more direct, whereas *Apocalypse Explained* has long descriptions that bring in passages from many parts of the Word. The two works say basically the same thing. They don’t contradict each other, but there are differences.

The meaning of the two wings is a good example of the differences. Here is what *Apocalypse Explained* has to say:

“The two wings of a great eagle, signify spiritual

intelligence and circumspection which the Lord gives to those who are of the Church.” *Apocalypse Explained* 759

Whereas *Apocalypse Revealed* talks about the Lord’s circumspection on behalf of the church, *Apocalypse Explained* talks about how He gives this circumspection and intelligence to people. It amounts to the same thing, since the wisdom is His alone. But whereas the first assures us of the Lord’s protection, the second reminds us that this reliance involves using the tools that He gives us.

How can the New Church survive in a world where so few seem to love its teachings?

On the one hand, the answer is that those who love the New Church shouldn’t be anxious. The Lord is continually working to prepare the world to receive the doctrines meant by the woman’s Child. The greater cultural movements of humanity inevitably point towards the new spiritual era that the Writings call the New Church. The spread of technology, education, access to information and many other things move in that direction. Although it may not appear this way to us, the world is continually growing more peaceful, less violent, less prone to hunger and disease, and Christianity continues to grow rapidly. The factors that are guiding these enormous movements are so complex and subtle that only the Lord can be making them happen.

On the other hand, the answer is that those who love the New Church should do everything they can to intelligently guide the organizations that promote the New Church in this world. There are always cultural trends that present threats to true spirituality. They need to be seen, understood and defended against. Church organizations such as ours need to use their best judgment to provide for this.

Both of these answers are meant by the wings. That is why wings are so often mentioned in the Word as means of protection. The Lord says to Moses:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.” Exodus 19.4

“As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led him.” Deuteronomy 32

And *“He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge.”* Psalm 91.4

Ultimately, these soft and beautiful feathers stand for the power and protection of the Lord's love.

The Dragon's Flood

Still, it is not so easy to escape from the dragon. Undaunted, he continues to come after her, this time spewing "water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood."

The dragon's flood activates the second form of protection in the story:

"But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth."

Here again *Apocalypse Revealed* and *Apocalypse Explained* have different but complementary explanations. *Apocalypse Revealed* puts it this way:

"This symbolically means that the multitude of reasonings flowing from falsities that followers of the dragon put forward come to nothing in the face of the spiritual truths rationally understood that are advanced by the Michaels of whom the New Church is formed." *Apocalypse Revealed* 564

The flood is a flood of false ideas, and the earth helping the woman refers to the fact that the doctrine of the New Church has answers to every one of them. "The Michaels" here, just as they did before are able to use these "spiritual truths rationally understood" to defend the New Church from these often-confusing assaults and accusations.

The *Apocalypse Explained* has a slightly different explanation, which is that there are "those who are of the church that is not in truths who afforded assistance and did not receive the crafty reasonings of those who were in faith separated from charity" (*Apocalypse Explained* 765).

That is, there are people all over the world who don't buy into the false and harmful ideas that the dragon continually disseminates. Ordinary people

often don't understand the sophisticated justifications of harmful practices that scholars and the media often promote. They rely on common sense and can end up helping the woman. The New Church is protected by people of many different beliefs who resist the flood produced by the dragon.

The point of both explanations ends up being the same, which is that there are answers to the

dragon's flood. It is important for people to know these answers, and to have the wherewithal to avoid falling for the dragon's appealing, seemingly sensible, but ultimately harmful and hateful ideas.

All of these factors come together to protect the Woman Clothed with the Sun. She survives, and she is not spoken of again – although we often think of her as returning as the Holy City New Jerusalem in chapter 21. The dragon continues to make war on the rest of her offspring, until he is locked in the bottomless pit in chapter 20.

This story is about the protection of the New Church while it is still among a few, and it is very relevant to those of us who love it and who identify with the organizations and churches that believe in and follow its teachings.

The Lord gives this church wings and provides for the dragon's flood to be swallowed up. The wings lift it up to see the means for its protection, even as the Lord guides world events and trends in ways that are beyond our understanding. The flood is swallowed up by the *spiritual truths rationally understood* that answer false ideas, while other factors lead people worldwide to resist those same ideas.

These are some of the things that we celebrate as we look forward to June 19th. This is just part of the story of the descent of the Holy City New Jerusalem and the peace that it is bringing into the world.

"I will abide in Your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of Your wings." Psalm 61:4 AMEN



Readings from the Word

Revelation 12

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. ² Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth.

³ And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴ His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. ⁵ She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. ⁶ Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

⁷ And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, ⁸ but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. ⁹ So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

¹³ Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *Child*. ¹⁴ But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵ So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷ And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.



Arcana Coelestia 8764

Ibore you on eagles' wings" means to be raised by means of truths to heavenly light. This is clear from the meaning of "bearing someone on eagles' wings" as being raised on high, even to heavenly light. For 'bearing' means being raised, 'wings' spiritual truths, and 'an eagle' the rational in respect to truth. For eagles fly on high. By the visible heaven or sky the ancients understood the angelic heaven. The simple also believed that angels had their home up there, and in addition that since places on high were nearer the sun and stars, heavenly light itself shone there. So it is that 'being borne on eagles' wings' means being taken on high into that light. The reason why one is raised into it by means of the truths of faith is that the truth of faith is what raises a person right up to heaven, where the good of faith is.

Apocalypse Explained 759

The two wings of a great eagle, signify spiritual intelligence and circumspection which the Lord gives to those who are of the Church. This is evident from the meaning of "the woman," as being the church that is called the New Jerusalem, consequently the people of that church. What this means shall now be told. All who are meant by "the dragon" are natural, yea, sensual, and as such reason from appearances, which for the most part are fallacies, and thereby lead astray the simple. Therefore, it is granted to the people of the New Church that is called the Holy Jerusalem to behold the Divine truths that are in the Word, not sensually, that is, according to appearances, but spiritually, that is, according to their essences. This is why the internal sense of the Word, which is spiritual and is solely for those who will be of that church, has been disclosed.