

The Lord Came to Bring Us from Darkness to Light
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The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. (*Isaiah 9:2*)

A story involving a last minute rescue often catches and keeps our attention. Seeing someone face a major problem or serious danger and then be saved from it is gratifying. The spiritual history of the human race includes events with this very nature and the spiritual development of each individual also carries this theme.

One story of a last minute rescue is that of Hagar and Ishmael stranded in the wilderness with no water left to drink. It seemed like a hopeless situation and then an angel gave Hagar words of hope and God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water that would sustain their lives. The teachings for the New Church describe this story as being one many of us can experience. Each of us can be like Hagar wandering in the wilderness when our minds don't focus on what is true and good but instead are distracted by ideas that are illusions about what will bring us happiness and fulfillment (see *Arcana Caelestia* 2679). When Hagar and Ishmael ran out of water this pictures times when we sense that we don't know what it will take to bring us happiness and consequently feel like our future will be grey and empty (see *Arcana Caelestia* 2680, 2682). We are taught:

It is well known that all distress and grief happen when we are deprived of the things for which we have affection, that is, which we love. Those whose affection is solely for bodily and worldly things, that is, who love solely these, grieve when deprived of them, whereas those whose affection is for spiritual good loves and true ideas, and who love these, grieve when deprived of them. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2689:2).

As Hagar wept in despair an angel brought her comfort and hope. God opening her eyes to recognize a nearby well of water is like when our minds go from a time of darkness, doubt and despair to one when we recognize that the Lord can bring us light and direction when we seek to be guided by what He has revealed (*Arcana Caelestia* 2702:1).

Hagar and Ishmael's rescue reflect the state of the human race at the time the Lord was born into the world. Before the first Christmas, the human race gradually, but continually turned itself away from the Lord, away from the true light. If the spiritual quality of human life at this time had shown itself it would have appeared like the increasing gloom of an apparently endless night. If this was the only thing you saw it would be a very discomfoting image. The gathering darkness of evening would be horrible if we had not the confidence that a new day will follow the night. When night does come, we know that it is just a matter of time before dawn and a new day will come again.

We are not so confident in states of mental darkness. At times of trouble in our personal lives, all of the future looks as bleak as the gloom of an eternal weary night. The Lord gives us promises for the future to help sustain us in these times of darkness. He gives us promises for the future to help sustain hope. The Lord gives us prophecies that He will never leave us

comfortless. If we listen to these prophecies it will help us hold onto at least a glimmer of hope no matter what doubts arise to fill our minds.

Throughout history prophecy from the Lord has served many purposes. Primary among these purposes has been to support a sense of hope. Over and over again the Lord gave promises of His coming. Without the prophecies of His birth as a newborn infant, a child born with a Divine calling, hope could never have been sustained throughout the centuries of growing spiritual darkness that preceded the Lord's advent. If the Lord had not given a prophecy of His birth as soon as the first golden age of the Lord's Church on earth began to lose its sparkle, it would have been necessary for Him to be born immediately into the world. (*Arcana Coelestia* 2523:1) When the people of the Most Ancient Church first lost something of their innocence and began to trust in their senses and natural intelligence rather than the Word of God, the tragedy of this choice was all too clear to the angels.

The wisdom of the angels allowed them to see in a general way that once the human race began to turn away from the Lord that nothing other than the Lord Himself could stop this degeneration. The more we trust our senses and natural intelligence, the less we can recognize our need for the Lord and the less we will see the wisdom of God. The angels could foresee that God would gradually become more remote or invisible to all people until His real existence would be entirely denied and heaven and its happiness would be closed to the human race--both spiritual and then natural life would cease to exist on this earth. The possibility of this utter darkness and destruction was more than the angels could have endured. Without immediate prophecy the angels would have been without hope. The angels feel great sadness at the spiritual misery of the human race. Their happiness is so connected to the happiness of others that they would do anything, even willingly undergo the misery of hell themselves if it would help another person get to heaven.

To give the angels a solid basis of hope, the Lord promised that He, Himself, the Infinite God of the universe, would be born as an infant, clothing His infinite soul with a natural human body like that of any other man. If mankind was going to place their trust in their senses, the Creator would manifest Himself before their eyes. The Word would be made flesh and dwell among human beings and they would behold His glory. He would come as a light in the world of darkness.

The angels needed a sense of hope. So did all good people before the time of the Lord's advent. Prophecy sustained this hope and allowed for their salvation. As they were needed, new prophecies were given. The seed of the woman would crush the serpents head and the serpent would bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15) The scepter would not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes. (Genesis 49:10) A star would come out of Jacob and a scepter would rise out of Israel and would smite the corners of Moab and destroy the children of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17) A virgin would conceive and bear a son, and would call His name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14) There were many more specific prophecies than these and the teachings for the New Church assert that all of the Old Testament from Genesis to the last prophet, Malachi, served as a prophecy for the angels, presenting before them in minute detail all the events of the Lord's life even to His very thoughts. The promise of the Lord's coming sustained hope.

We too need hope. The prophet Isaiah foretold, “A virgin shall conceive and shall call His name Immanuel.” The name “Immanuel” means “God with us.” Without the presence and infinitely wise leading of the Lord, any hope would be futile. If we were not free to consciously turn our thoughts to the Lord and His commandments, the delusive light of our natural intelligence would lead us into eternal darkness and misery. We need the son named Immanuel. We need God with us.

Where will the Lord’s active presence in our thoughts and choices come from? In the prophecy of Isaiah, the son was to be born of a virgin. In this prophecy, the virgin represents our consciously chosen concern for living according to what is true from the Lord. The virgin represents the affection for truth. We can receive true ideas as mere facts in our memories at any time we read the Word or are taught, such as in church or adult classes. But, as we know, unless we, as individuals, in the privacy of our own thoughts choose to use this knowledge in living each part of our lives, the Lord will not enter into those parts. We can choose to let the knowledge of what is true affect us and we can choose to ignore it. Self-examination can help us see which of our thoughts and acts are affected by the truth the Lord has revealed. Each of us as individuals must foster an affection for truth. And from this affection a new understanding of truth and a sense of the Lord’s presence will come, at first like a newborn child. Though still tender and in need of protection, God will be with us.

For the Lord’s advent to take place in our lives, we must acknowledge our dependence on Him. True wisdom includes the recognition that without the Lord’s help we cannot lead useful lives and without His help we will not be happy or peaceful. We can look to the Lord and seek His birth and life in all that we love, think and do. The sacrament of the Holy Supper is a divinely perfect symbol to represent a person’s desire to ever more fully receive the Lord’s life. It is called the holiest act of worship because it represents our personal reception of the Lord’s life. The bread represents our reception from the Lord of the desire to do what is good and the wine represents our reception of the wisdom necessary to bring this good about. We need Immanuel, God with us and taking the Holy Supper is the perfect symbol to represent this need and our prayer and hope that the Lord may come ever more fully into our lives.

One of the primary purposes of the Lord’s prophecies of His coming was to give a sense of hope; hope for angels, hope for all people who awaited His advent and hope for each of us. In times of spiritual darkness we need the sense of hope that will turn us with renewed dedication to reading and personal prayer. We need the hope of a promised Savior who will come into our lives and fill the darkness of our minds with a new light. We need the Lord’s presence as a visible Divine man in all parts of our life. We, too, need the prophecies that the Lord Himself will be born. AMEN.

Lessons: Genesis 21:14-19, Isaiah 7:14-16, 9:2, *True Christian Religion* 766

Genesis 21:14-21

¹⁴ Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting *it* on [Hagar's] shoulder, he gave *it* and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba. ¹⁵ And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down across from *him* at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite *him*, and lifted her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he *is*." ¹⁸ Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. ²⁰ So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. ²¹ He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Isaiah 7:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign:
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.
¹⁵ Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good.
¹⁶ For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.

Isaiah 8:19-22, 9:2

And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. They will pass through it hard pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God, and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness. . . .

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined.

True Christian Religion 766

The Lord is present with each and every human being. He exerts insistent pressure on us to receive Him. When we do receive Him, which occurs when we acknowledge Him as our own God, Creator, Redeemer, and Savior, His First Coming occurs [in us], which is like the early light before dawn. From then on, we begin to be enlightened intellectually in spiritual matters and to grow into deeper and deeper wisdom. As we receive this wisdom from the Lord, we move through the morning into midday. The day continues into our old age until we die. Then we come to the Lord Himself in heaven. There, although we died old, we are brought back into the morning of our lives, and the rudiments of wisdom that were planted in us while we were in the physical world grow and thrive to eternity.