

The Last Judgment: Out with the Old

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

9 June, 2024

Children's Talk: Endings and Beginnings

Is an ending good or bad? Happy or sad? What is a sad ending? What is a happy ending? When something bad ends, that's good. When something bad ends and it makes it so that something good can begin, that's even better.

New Church Day is about the end of one way of doing things and the beginning of something new:

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. (Revelation 21:1-7)

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Every June we celebrate the birthday of the New Church. Not New Church Westville; this church is only one small part of a much larger church, a church that spans the world, and is made up of everyone who worships the Lord Jesus Christ directly and strives to keep His commandments. This New Church has its roots in the 1700s and represents a drastic break from what had come before. And in fact before this church could be established a lot of preparation had to take place: no less than the Last Judgment itself, the event predicted in the Word that would herald the sweeping away of the visible heaven and earth and usher in a new era of eternal peace and goodness. So if that already happened... why didn't anyone notice? I don't know about you, but this world does not seem to be existing in an era of peace and goodness, with all that is evil and destructive having been swept away.

I'll come back to that in a moment. But let's talk for a moment about how the Last Judgment is supposed to look, at least just one piece of it.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, 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. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31)

This cataclysmic prediction of the end of the sun, moon, and stars is only one small part of how the end is described in the Word. In other places, as we saw in the children's talk, it says that the first heaven and earth will pass away entirely. The whole natural order will be upturned and destroyed.

So that clearly hasn't happened. And I would say thankfully. But I actually want to spend a bit of time thinking about why this idea is so appealing. Because I

think it actually is when seen from a certain point of view. When a particular issue becomes fraught enough, messy enough, hard enough, it is much easier to think of sweeping it all aside and starting fresh. The most basic example of this is old buildings. When a building is run down enough it is actually easier and cheaper to simply demolish it, remove the rubble, and build a brand new building in its place, rather than renovating. Renovating is challenging and expensive; demolishing and rebuilding is easy and cheap.

That's what is so appealing about a Last Judgment that sweeps away everything we know in this world. Here in South Africa we are still unpacking the trauma and scars of apartheid thirty years on. Thirty years. Not to mention the rampant corruption that is so entrenched there is little hope of reform anytime soon. Violence and crime and poverty abound. If we look further afield we see wars and conflicts and famine and poverty around the world. Fixing any of these things will take years, decades, generations. The task of reform seems beyond us. Wouldn't it be better if the Lord came again and reduced all our petty quarrels and squabbles to nothing, broke us free of this cycle, cast the evil down into hell, and gave us a fresh start. A start so completely separate from what went before that no memory of it would even remain. That is the hope that the idea of the Last Judgment gives: you do not need to reform that which is broken; you can start fresh.

The same thing is true of the challenges we face in our personal lives. Imagine a couple married for ten years who have had a rocky relationship. The fights and scars have built up, and make every new conflict that much more complicated. They are trapped in the habits they have formed and the past simply gives ample ammunition to use against each other. There are hurts and betrayals that never quite heal. This couple may look at the challenge of working together, and despair;

wouldn't it be so so much easier to go their separate ways and find someone new, someone with whom there is no history of pain? Reform seems so much more difficult than destroying what you have and starting over again.

The Teachings of the New Church offer a related but different point of view. According to the New Church the Last Judgment will not, and in fact cannot, take place in this physical world. It is a spiritual event. For all that what we see is the problems of this physical world, the real problem is the spiritual state of humanity; and so the solution or the fix has to come spiritually as well. Emmanuel Swedenborg, who wrote the Teachings of the New Church, explains that by the 1700s the light of the sun and the moon had indeed gone dark, and the stars had fallen from heaven. Not, of course, in the physical world but spiritually: the sun of love had faded in the church, the light of faith had diminished, and any awareness of good and truth was sparse. The false idea that we are saved by faith alone had come to dominate the church; and to the extent that people used that as an excuse to neglect love and charity and commit evil while remaining confident in their own salvation, the church was devastated and evil and hell dominated the spiritual world (*Last Judgment* §33, *Secrets of Heaven* §4060).

It was in this context that Swedenborg made the astonishing claim that, in the year 1757, the Last Judgment actually took place:

...it has been granted me to see with my own eyes that the Last Judgment is now accomplished; that the evil are cast into the hells, and the good elevated into heaven, and thus that all things are reduced into order, the spiritual equilibrium between good and evil, or between heaven and hell, being thus restored. (*Last Judgment* §45)

A huge, cataclysmic event did take place, but in the spiritual world. In other parts of the Teaching of the New Church Swedenborg explains how the spiritual world has a profound influence on the natural one; and that as the church had declined, so too

had the positive influence of heaven. Hell dominated the minds and hearts of people gathering in the spiritual world, and so it began to have the same effect on humanity. In order for a New Church, a new era of true faith and genuine love, to come onto earth, all that gunk in the spiritual world had to be swept aside, so that the Lord could start fresh, with a true heavenly influence. The reset that we so want did happen.

But unfortunately, (at least from our limited, human point of view) that spiritual reset did not automatically fix all the problems of the world. Notice how that passage I just read mentioned not the total removal of evil and hell, but the restoration of equilibrium or balance between heaven and hell, between good and evil. But that does not mean that the world suddenly looked radically different. In fact the Teachings of the New Church explicitly say that the world will look much the same as ever:

The state of the world after this will be altogether similar to what it has been up until now, for the great change which has taken place in the spiritual world, does not bring about any change in the natural world as to the external form; so that after this there will be civil affairs as before, there will be peace, treaties, and wars as before, with all other things which belong to societies in general and in particular...

But as for the state of the church, this is what will be dissimilar after this; it will be similar indeed as to the external appearance, but dissimilar as to the internal. As to the external appearance divided churches will exist as before, their doctrines will be taught as before; and the same religions as now will exist among the Gentiles. But from now on the people of the church will be in a more free state of thinking on matters of faith, thus on the spiritual things which relate to heaven, because spiritual freedom has been restored to them. For all things in the heavens and in the hells have now been put back into order, and all thought about Divine things and against Divine things flows in from this. (*Last Judgment* §73)

In 1758 things looked much the same as they had in 1756. Daily life carried on as before. Churches continued as if nothing had happened. There was no reset that was visible to any observer.

But something truly had changed. Spiritually heaven and hell were in balance again. That simple fact is something that may not seem huge. But we benefit from it

every single day. When you notice a selfish thought, and analyse it, and reject it, you benefit from the balanced influence from the spiritual world. When you feel enraged, but stop yourself, and get control, and choose a better path, you are benefitting from that balanced influence. When you give serious thought to a problem, and bring together various points of view, and apply your values carefully to resolve the problem, you are benefitting from that balanced influence. When you strive to love people well, and figure out better and better ways to serve them, and you grow spiritually, you are benefitting from that balanced influence. The Last Judgment utterly and completely changed the spiritual landscape, paving the way for our very way of life. Any and all freedom in spiritual things can only exist because the Lord restored that spiritual balance.

What do we actually do with this? I would suggest two related things: do not take for granted what you can achieve, and do not become complacent waiting for the end of problems, rather dive in with all you've got. Let's go back to that married couple. Ten years of hardship. And the temptation is so clear to end it and start fresh with someone else. But what if there actually are spiritual principles that can lead them through their issues rather than avoiding them? What if they actually do have the capability, granted from the Lord to all of us, to figure out a way forward, a way forward that will actually transform their lives? There is no final end coming that will save us from ourselves, no Last Judgment that will dissolve all our problems. What we do have is the gift of freedom in spiritual things, the gift of confronting our challenges and growing through them.

This is a hopeful notion. But it can be a challenge. There are some scars that don't fade. Some relationships that are irrevocably broken. Some situations that will not be resolved in our lifetimes. It is bleak to think of again and again coming back to

these things, trying to apply the Lord's love and wisdom, and yet never fully escaping them. And for these things there is hope. Even if something has no happy resolution on earth, there is a kind of reset in the next life. In fact, each and every one of us has our own personal "Last Judgment" (see *Secrets of Heaven* §2119). We come as we are, a mixed bag of good and evil. But if we have lived devoted to the Lord and living a good life, the evil is removed to the side; the hardships are removed; the scares fade and are healed. We remain the exact same person in one sense; yet we truly do get to have that long sought opportunity to be born anew without the brokenness that plagued us. This restoration and new beginning is what the Lord promises through the New Jerusalem, His New Church on Earth, and especially in heaven, where we can let go of so much that we carry with us now. This is what awaits us, if we are willing to follow Him in our lives:

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful." (Revelation 21:3-5)