

# Trampling the Serpent

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## Children's Talk: Prophecy and Promise

One of the things we talk about a lot around Christmas time is prophecies. What is a prophecy? A prophecy is a prediction of something that is going to happen in the future, something that has not happened yet. In many ways, a prophecy is a kind of promise about what the future will be like. Before Jesus was born, Jehovah made many prophecies about it.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

This prophecy is saying that some day, way in the future, a virgin, or a young unmarried woman, would give birth to a child and name Him Immanuel. And since this prophecy is a promise from the Lord, we know that it will come true. And it kind of did, but maybe not in the way people would have expected:

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:22-25)

So what was the name of the child? Jesus. But didn't the prophecy say His name would be Immanuel? This is the hard thing about prophecies, and really about all promises from the Lord: sometimes they mean something different from what we think or want them to mean. In this case, calling His name "Immanuel" did not mean that would be His actual name. Immanuel means "God with us" and that is exactly who Jesus is: He is God with us.

If people became too attached to what they thought God's promise meant, they might have thought that the Lord had not kept His promise. But this isn't just about a name: it's also about God's bigger promises. For example, God had

promised that Jesus would save people. He promised that Jesus would rescue them from sin and evil and selfishness. Some people thought that meant that they wouldn't have to face evil ever again. Other people thought it meant that they would be rescued by just thinking about and believing in the Lord. And when these don't work, and when they still face hard times, they feel like the Lord has not kept His promises!

This is why we have to be willing to change how we understand the Lord. When He promised that He would save us, He did not mean we wouldn't have to try hard; He didn't mean that life would always be easy; He didn't mean that everything would be perfect. When the Lord promises that He will save us, He means that He gives us the things we need to be able to work hard to become better people; and that if we do work hard, we will, eventually, grow and overcome challenges.

So when things don't work out the way you want, don't think it means the Lord has not kept His promises. Instead, we can try to see how the Lord might be keeping His promises in ways different from what we expected.

## Trampling the Serpent

The whole Old Testament is scattered with prophecies of the Lord's coming. Some of these are so familiar that you can probably say them off by heart: unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and so on. These prophecies gave people hope in a time of darkness and helped them recognize the Lord when He came. That's the point of a prophecy. But if that's the point, why do we keep going back to them every Christmas? Once the prophecy is fulfilled and has served its purpose why can't we then discard it? Prophecies are not just about a prediction. Prophecies tell us something about the state of the world, they tell us something about why the Lord needed to come, and they are not fulfilled once, but over and over again as the patterns of humanity are repeated year after year. If we understand prophecy, then we can understand our own place in the world and why and how the Lord can come into our own lives.

The very first prophecy of the Lord's coming was issued almost at the very beginning, when Adam and Eve were still living in the Garden of Eden. By eating from the forbidden tree, they brought a curse on themselves and on the serpent. Yet in this curse is also embedded the cure: the eventual coming of the Lord to put down the serpent:

So Jehovah God said to the serpent:

“Because you have done this,  
You are cursed more than all cattle,  
And more than every beast of the field;  
On your belly you shall go,  
And you shall eat dust  
All the days of your life.  
And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her Seed;  
He shall trample your head,  
And you shall batter His heel.” (Genesis 3:14-15)

On the surface this prophecy is about Eve's seed, or descendants, being in conflict with the serpent's descendants. But the New Church indicates that there is a spiritual meaning to this. On the one hand is the good seed, the faith and the goodness that the Lord plants within us. On the other is the serpent's seed, faithlessness, the love of self and all selfishness. The promise here is that there will be a constant battle between goodness and selfishness, between what is from the Lord and what is from hell.

But of course, the Lord has dealt with this for us, right? Well, sort of. Around Christmas in particular we have a tendency to look right to the solution. But that ignores the focus on why we need a solution in the first place. This prophecy, as much as it is a promise of the Lord conquering evil, is *also* a promise that we will face conflicts and struggles. After all, Jesus Himself promises that "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). As we have talked about a lot this year- we cannot hide from this reality or pretend it isn't there. The seed of the love of self lives within each one of us, even today.

We cannot understand the Lord's need to come, or Christmas at all, if we do not also understand this reality. The teachings of the New Church contain a good description of exactly what this serpent stands for and how destructive it can be:

'The head of the serpent' is used to mean the reign of evil in general and of self-love in particular. This becomes clear from its very nature, which seeks not merely to exercise dominion but also to exercise it over everything on earth. Yet it is not satisfied even with that, but seeks to rule over everything in heaven. Nor is it satisfied even then, but seeks to rule over the Lord. And even then it would not be content. This inclination lies concealed within every spark of self-love. If it were shown the slightest approval and the restraint on it were slackened, you would perceive it break out instantly and strive increasingly to achieve that end. From this it is clear how 'the serpent' or evil constituting self-love wishes to have dominion, and how it hates the person it is unable to dominate. This is 'the serpent's head' which rears itself and which the Lord treads on, right down to the ground so that it goes on its belly and eats dust, as described in the previous verse. (*Secrets of Heaven* §257)

That is an alarming description of self-love, all the more so because many elements of that exists within all of us. The fear that maybe we are selfish jerks is a far greater fear than a fear of what other jerks might do to us. And so we hide from it, which only serves to keep alive the nagging fear that we are not as good people as we think we are.

The Christmas season has a way of pushing this conflict to the surface. A time when everyone seems to be both stressed and expected to be more generous and kind than any other time of year is bound to bring your sense of your own ability to be a good person into question. Think of the mom who is frantically keeping unappreciative kids entertained and trying to give them the perfect Christmas that they'll remember forever and the kids are showing no signs of gratitude. Or a couple who are desperate to have a magical Christmas together but the strain of the year has left them reactive and argumentative and unable to enjoy or connect over what should be good and easy and fun. Or even something as simple as feeling entitled to a holiday and not lifting a finger around the house to help out or not doing anything whatsoever that would involve thinking of others who might be struggling. And these are just the holiday related examples, throughout our lives we are presented with opportunities to be selfish, and all too often we take those opportunities, in spite of knowing it is wrong, and in spite of the guilt and shame that drag us down after the fact. That is what the Lord *promises* us we will experience. And *that* is the only reason Christmas has any meaning.

Because it is that experience of life that the Lord came into the world to fight against and overcome. The promise is that Eve's seed, her descendent, will trample the head of the serpent. This is the purpose for which the Lord came into the world: to grapple with, fight, trample down, and overcome the love of self, the love of self that pushes us away from our loved ones, away from the Lord, and into our own personal hells. Jesus, throughout His life, fought against this very same love of self. We can see it in His teachings and in His actions. But He did not only fight against self-love in Himself to become an example for us to follow. By living as a person, by fighting against every piece of self-love in Himself, He put Himself in the position of continuing to fight and conquer self-love to eternity.

This is why I enjoy that in the prophecy it uses the term "seed." While seed is a poetic way of describing descendants, it also carries a spiritual meaning of continuous birth and rebirth, an endless cycle to eternity. From a seed, a plant

grows, which then puts out leaves, and eventually fruits. Within each fruit is another seed, which, when planted, begins the cycle once more. Seeds are begotten so that they can beget more. When Jesus was born 2000 years ago, it was the beginning of a cycle. It was not a static event that meant that people would never have struggles. And even when that cycle completed with His death and resurrection, a new cycle was begun, that has continued to churn from that moment until now, and will continue on to eternity.

In this cycle, the destructive nature of selfishness is guaranteed. That seed, once planted, can never fully be uprooted. The promise of this first prophecy of Christmas is not that the seed of selfishness will be removed entirely; the promise is that alongside selfishness there will be the goodness and truth from the Lord to trample down and overcome the love of self. At times that seed will seem small and insignificant. When you are in a dark place, filled with resentment, feeling lost in self-loathing, empty of all hope for your own salvation and goodness, you might believe that there is no goodness within you, or if there is, that it is an insignificant and fleeting thing.

Yet miraculously the Lord preserves some good in every human being alive today. That goodness is there even when you are at your worst: it cannot be removed or harmed. This is the spiritual meaning of the fact that the serpent would only strike the heel: the love of self strikes out the outward, superficial parts of life and causes chaos. But it cannot harm the inner goodness that lies within.

Just to use an example that may be on a lot of your minds at the moment: the commercialism of Christmas can be a huge distraction. It feeds love of self, it pulls you into superficial thinking, it focuses your mind on external stuff that you don't really need, and makes it all seem so important that you completely lose sight of the real meaning of Christmas. Now that is destructive and painful. And it does feel like the deeper meaning has been lost and is perhaps inaccessible or irrecoverable. Yet even in all the distractions, the Lord is still there within. Nothing can take away the fact that He was born, that He did live, die, and rise again, and nothing can change the fact that He lives with and within you. Nothing can take away His potential to be born again into your life. No matter how far away that possibility appears, He can be reborn, infinitely, if you are willing. That is His promise.

I want to end on two notes, depending on where you are this Christmas. For those of you really feeling the hope and joy of the season, reflect on and remember that it is the Lord's doing: that you can be in such a good space is because He has trampled down the love of self within you; and when it rises again, He will be there still to help you. And for those of you sitting in the hopelessness and the darkness of the season, don't think that you are a lost cause. The lord promised that suffering would come. But He has preserved goodness within you, goodness that can and will rise up to put down selfishness. You are capable of growing beyond whatever is holding you back now. Trust that the Lord has kept that potential alive in you this Christmas.