

# IMPORTANT QUESTIONS OF FAITH

by

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\* ) Although the original book is not divided into sections, the translation was divided for easier handling.

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## ***SECTION V***

[275]

SANCTIFICATION

Answer to a letter: In case my writings (specifically my commentary on the Sermon on the Mount) gave you the urge to sanctify your life as a disciple of the Lord, let me assure you that it was not his intention that in order to gain his approval, holiness, above all, should be demanded of his disciples. The entire Sermon on the Mount, which tells the disciple so clearly how he must be, does not have the character of law, with the threat which the Law of Sinai carried.

Not law, but grace, comes first in the New Covenant. Jesus offers grace, grace and redemption to those who labor and are heavy laden. The Savior wants first of all to bring new life to sinners through the assurance that they have a Savior who will deliver them from all sin's misery. Thus his loving words: "*Blessed are the poor in Spirit.*" So the Savior does not expect the sinner to become a saint in order to receive grace, but he offers blessedness so that the sinner might be sanctified. For weaknesses can not matter so much where there is complete singleness of mind.

In other words, the Lord desires only that we feel our poverty, our nothingness and our emptiness before God, as is consistent with *faith*. Certainly the Sermon on the Mount can serve to strengthen this feeling; for at every point it touches on, it makes us aware that we are nothing. However, it is just this feeling of being nothing which should bring us not further from our Savior, but nearer to him. I must not think: "*Because I am not as he says, I am still far from him.*" Rather I must think: "*Because I am not what I should be, I need him and I must hurry to him eagerly. As a person who has absolutely nothing to prove me righteous, I can be thankful that I am allowed to grasp hold of his grace, his reconciliation and forgiveness.*"

[276] Therefore, the harder the fight the more you should rejoice that you have a Savior who does not forsake you.

The struggle need not be so terrible as is often made out. The fighter who loses heart on account of his weaknesses,

thinking that the Savior probably expects still more of him, has the wrong idea; that is not in accordance with the Gospel. For the Lord loves each one who accepts that he is nothing, and this can only apply to the sincere disciple. The deeper his feeling of being nothing, the more agreeable it is to Jesus, as long as the disciple does not lose his trust and his earnest striving to do right.

So we should not get in such a tension, but be more childlike and less anxious about our situation. The feeling of being poor, of being nothing, which leads a person toward grace, also leads him automatically to the right attitude without giving rise to anxiety and tension; one need only become aware of what it means to stand upright before God, to be able to do that immediately. God's Spirit, imbuing his children ever more deeply with his grace, makes everything easy; and so the disciple of Jesus rejoices to hear the truth he proclaims, and feels not the least anxiety despite a natural habit of dissembling. It does him good just to know it. For if he truly wants to be nothing, what can hinder him from beginning on the way, and bettering himself?

Therefore allow yourselves to live truly, according to grace. As one who has nothing and who is nothing, hold on to Jesus who has bought you at the price of his blood, and *learn* of him who says: "*Take my yoke upon you*" (the yoke of your nothingness and of my grace), "*and learn from me*" (Matt.11:29). Thus we shall do everything in the pure joy of having a Savior who is our assurance, both now and for all time, in spite of our weakness and stupidity.

However, [note that] this daily-renewed justification of which you speak comes about only with the daily-renewed acknowledgement of our nothingness.

You go on to say that your Christian character is still not outwardly recognizable; you would like to appear "*changed*" to others since your awakening. Well, I tell you, you cannot go by your own feelings in regard to "*being changed*"; that would be unchildlike, put on, almost pharisaical, even offensive. Already before, you were not any more angry or touchy than others outwardly, [277] and you may continue to ignore the somewhat

offensive and provoking things just as we all have to do. Gradually, knowing your own inner poverty, you will be able more and more to let go of such things as selfishness, obstinacy, contentiousness, egoism, touchiness, envy and other such distasteful things. Even then people will not immediately say, "*Oh, how this person has changed!*" It just is not so obvious. But you yourself will soon notice that people will gladly associate with you and feel something beneficial coming from you without it being intentional on your part. You also need not spend too much time thinking about it, as long as it is pleasing to others. All those who are not prejudiced against anything godly sense it then in you without holding your past against you.

So you should simply continue in this way. Thanks to your feeling of being nothing you shed light wherever you go, whereas people who think they are somebody bring only darkness. Thus you shine with no effort of will, and without talking about it. You spread your radiance, and you can no more hinder it than you can prevent a light shining once it is kindled. Just trust this quiet light of yours to illumine all with whom you associate. The more you believe: "I am nothing, it is my Savior alone," the brighter will this light shine. It has the effect of burning away everything unbecoming in you, so that you will look down on no one in any way whatsoever, not even with your piety.

Moreover, whether the other person gradually draws nearer must be left to the Lord and to his Spirit, for whom you can quietly open up the way to help others through your mere presence before him. Thereby, believe with me in a coming time of healing in which everything will be made easier, everything which is now so difficult because of the dominion of darkness which can be felt everywhere.

May the Lord give you grace and help and also joy in the midst of your weakness!

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[278]

PERFECT AND HOLY

*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (I Pet.1:14-16).*

Here we must bear in mind above all that it is all Christians who have been baptized who are to be called "*holy*", since through baptism they have been cleansed from their sins. Wherever it is found, the word "*holy*" can apply only to those Christians who are indeed holy, not to those who only wish to be; only those Christians who have been cleansed should call themselves holy.

This is different from what we have come to understand today, and what we take to be the Christian ethic. I do not wish to criticize, but for the sake of [my] conscience, we do have to bear in mind the scriptural texts which deal with this matter.

In the first place, "*holy*" means only "*withdrawn from*"-- "*chosen out of*"--the world, those whom God has preordained to eternal life as his own people, as opposed to the world, which faces only condemnation (cf. I Cor.11:32). Whoever belongs to Christ is holy, for the reason that he is reconciled to God through the blood of Christ.

Thus at one time the whole of Israel was called *the holy people*, God's possession, not because they were altogether good and pleasing to God, but solely because God had adopted them for his own, chosen them from the rest of the nations for Abraham's sake. It is we Christians who are now this holy nation; we are God's people through faith in Christ (I Pet.2:9).

I don't need to say much about this; for everyone knows that throughout the Epistles the Christians, including the women, are called "*holy*", even if they had to be warned often and admonished as a reminder that it was through grace alone that they had been chosen out of the world for eternal life. It was through faith in Christ that they had been reborn to a living hope, and become

"*holy*" (I Pet.1:3). We should therefore be very careful not to overstress the word "*holy*" in our imagination, and not to be alarmed at the challenge to be holy. This is so that we do not underestimate the fact that it is through grace that we are saved.

[279] If we are holy people since we belong to God, however, our whole conduct in life, our whole demeanour, should be in accordance. Peter says, "*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance*" (I Pet.1:14); further, we should see ourselves as "*ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers*" (v.18). Just as we are chosen from the world, so we should separate ourselves from the world, and shun, above all, all that is worldly and profane.

Paul, too, says that the loving brothers who, according to him, are *chosen* (v.6) *to be the holy ones*, are themselves to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom.12:1). Just as a sacrifice which is without blemish is selected, so we should be a blameless offering, giving ourselves as a sacrifice to the Lord, conforming no longer to the pattern of this world, but letting our whole nature be transformed and our minds be renewed (cf. Rom.12:1-2).

This can only take place after we have become God-centered. To be God-centered means, first of all, to act as *befits holiness*. Therefore Paul says that such things as sexual immorality in all its forms, and the itch to get your hands on what belongs to other people, should not even be discussed among us; they are no fit subject for Christians. There should be no nastiness or silly talk or flippancy, which are also unfitting (Eph.5:5). Paul likewise bids the older women to "*be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink,*" and so on (Titus 2:3). Peter says the same: Obedient children should be good always, not misbehaving as they used to. How much more scriptural and fruitful it would be if we stopped analyzing the meaning of "*holy*" and took more to heart what is recommended in the above passages. Also, we have to recognize that "*holiness*" as it is meant in the Scriptures is almost taken as a matter of course, at least by many of our Christians, without pushing it to the point where it becomes a hindrance to the salvation of grace.

And if we read further, *"This is the will of God, that you should be holy"* (I Thess.4:3)--I implore you, for the Lord's sake, not to stop there but to go on reading:--*"that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has [280] not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness"* (I Thess. 4:3-7).

So let us begin to apply ourselves in the way we are shown, and not live in the clouds wishing we were holy, lest we fail completely to notice what is demanded of us and are led away from the inner life. If we read further, we see clearly what is required for holiness: *"Since we have these promises (as temples of the living God) let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God"* (II Cor.7:1); and who, among serious Christians, will find it difficult to follow this?

And if it is said of a woman, *"Yet a woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty"* (I Tim.2:15), this means that she too may be called a saint, and she must only see to it that she acts as is fitting to holiness.

So we see there is no scriptural reason to make anything remarkable out of being holy, anything to worry about, or to see as something unattainable and strange about which we must have information. It is true, however, that we would often prefer to leave the obvious and strain after the unknown, with the result that the Scriptures recede into the background. We don't want even to listen to what they tell us, let alone obey.

Jude writes his Epistle to--*"those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ"* (Jude 1:1). Here we are shown what the words *holy* and *sanctified* mean in the Scriptures: They signify that one has been chosen from the world because, due to one's faith, one is consecrated willingly to God, and belongs to him. Both the choice and the sanctification are God's affair, not man's.

We find the same in the Epistle to the Colossians; here Paul says, "*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience*" (Col.3:12). Even before they have put on these virtues, they are already the holy and beloved of God--those who have been adopted through grace on account of their faith, not on account of their faultless behavior. To deserve this acceptance, however, they must let themselves be changed and renewed more and more.

[281] Also, when it is said, "*Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him*" (Eph. 1:4), this makes it clear that to be *holy* and *blameless* as discipleship demands is a gift of the Father's love (vv.5-8), not something gained, or to be achieved, through struggle.

Even so, in order to remain constant, one must conduct oneself appropriately, staying away from everything ungodly. We become *holy* and *blameless* through faith: When God is for us nothing can be against us, no one can accuse us, for God justifies us; no one can condemn us, for Christ himself pleads our cause (Rom.8:29-34).

Similarly, we shall be *consecrated and cleansed* by water and the Word, "*That he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*" (Eph.5:26-27). Here too, it is not a case of our struggling and fighting, but rather of consecration and cleansing by water and the Word. From then on the fight will never cease in which we, on our stumbling way, have to let ourselves be cleansed again and again through Christ, so that it remains the gift bestowed through grace. It is in this way that we should understand "*holy*" and "*sanctified*" wherever these words occur in the Scriptures. Whoever belongs to God through faith and has been adopted by him through grace is holy, however weak he may still be, in contrast to all that is unworthy and ungodly, and separated from God.

We shall touch still upon several other passages in which the word *sanctification* is used. These passages are often brought forward to put especial emphasis on a sanctification that we are told we should achieve. Paul says: "*He is the source of*

*your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption"* (I Cor.1:30). Here *sanctification* is to be understood as something Christ urges us to strive for, or as the Christian perfection to which he will bring men.

It is through Christ's person alone that God gives us four things: Through him we have the wisdom that brings us true understanding; through him the righteousness which will justify us, all undeservedly, through grace; through him we are set apart and chosen, consecrated to God and belonging to him, elect from the godless world which is still under the curse; also through him, lastly, we are redeemed when he [282] comes to liberate us fully from all chains and bonds and thus set us free from all evil.

All that has been said until now goes to show that sanctification does not mean moral perfection, although we should strive for this, but rather it signifies an undeserved gift bestowed by Christ. The weak, the foolish, the ignoble, and the despised are chosen, so that "*No human being might boast in the presence of God,*" and "*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus*" (I Cor.1:30).

Let us look at several passages of the Epistle to the Hebrews. There we read that God disciplines us for our good so that we may attain to his holiness (Heb.12:10). However, in the Greek translation, a different word is used from the one used elsewhere for "*holiness*". This word expresses the true state of being holy, which the Christian attains if he holds to that to which he has been called. To that end, God allows no self-indulgence.

Finally we read: "*Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*" (Heb.12:14). This is the same as Peter says: "*But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct*" (I Pet.1:15). The way you act must not be in contradiction to the holiness attained through grace. Since the Christian who is holy through grace is consecrated and belonging to God, so should his whole conduct be the reverse of anything ungodly, irreverent, coarse or worldly; he must put all his zeal into being true to character,

striving for peace and holiness, or for what is befitting to holiness.

Whoever does not do this will not behold the Lord and will not be amongst those who, when the Lord comes, go out jubilantly to meet him, as Paul tells the chosen saints: *"Do not be deceived: Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor scandalmongers, nor robbers will inherit God's Kingdom"* (I Cor.6:9-10). Those who behave in such a way lose their already-acquired holiness, and therefore they will not behold the Lord.

Furthermore, this passage in Hebrews is not only pointing to moral perfection, as does I Cor.6:15-16. These verses say very plainly that we must not forfeit God's grace through our discord or impurity, that, in fact, one may not be an adulterer or a godless person, like Esau.

[283] We see that the word *holiness* is nowhere used to mean moral perfection. If the Bible wants to talk about moral perfection, it expresses it quite differently. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord says that our righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. He does not say that we should be more holy than the Pharisees, who stick to the letter of God's commands, but more righteous than they are. God demands of us no greater or different righteousness than that found in the Sermon on the Mount. And if we take to heart what he says there, it will bring us more surely and unmistakeably to the right goal than if we strive after a so-called holiness that we can't quite identify with, thus easily coming to think: *"Now we have it!"*--when in fact we are only existing in a kind of philosophic tranquillity: not allowing ourselves to get excited, not talking badly about anyone, not letting ourselves get involved in any argument, and so on. By trying to be so holy, one can become a very conceited saint, of whom it certainly cannot be said that he has found the surest way to the Kingdom of heaven.

On this subject Paul says: *"Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupted by dishonest motives, and be renewed in mind and Spirit, putting on the new nature created after the likeness of God in true*

*righteousness and holiness*" (Eph.4:22-24). Paul also tells us not to walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. He addresses the saints (II Cor.1:1), expressing very clearly what lies before them, with the words: "*And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised*" (II Cor.5:15). Is this always the case with those who feel so saintly? There are still many passages in this Epistle that we can take to heart, and that those who aim at saintliness in the higher sense should discuss in every aspect, if their saintliness is to be genuine and not merely skin-deep.

It is remarkable, however, how the emphasis of the Gospel has been shifted nowadays, so that it is *holiness* which is put in the center rather than repentance; also, that we want to achieve saintliness in an instant and to such a degree as to be all at once free of sin--and feel we have attained to the most precious peace, although up to the present we have not done all we should according to the Gospel. Is it not true, actually, that with the kind of peace one already knew, one is led beyond justification [284] by the Crucified One, into the depths of spiritual poverty? --whereas, in one's peace about one's own holiness, one climbs up to a height that makes other people uneasy--And how people like to be high up!

As to what is demanded of us in the Gospel, we need not be afraid. For on the one hand, what is asked of us is quite possible for sincere Christians to achieve and they do achieve it; and moreover, we read: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (I John 1:9).

However, there is still more to be said about the way God uses the word *holy* in the Old Testament. For many are filled with fear when they read: "*But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct*"; here Peter adds to the law with his own word, which says, "*You shall be holy, for I am holy*" (I Pet.1:15-16). We may think, how could it be asked of men, or be possible for them, to be holy as God is holy? Yet we have already observed, by the following verse, that we do not need to be so alarmed: "*You, therefore, must be perfect, as your*

*heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt.5:48), since all that is said there is that we should consider and strive for all that is right and godly, and not compromise by allowing some evil along with the good. So our love should be a *total* love, also toward our enemy, not only toward our friend. But it is not asked of us that we must be able to do what is impossible to us, as if our blessedness depended on our being perfect in everything.

Our hope lies, not in what we are, but only in grace through Christ, if only we are sincere, and strive for what is perfect. Yes, that is the great redemption in which we rejoice--that we need only to keep perfection before our eyes and strive for it; and nevertheless, we attain the goal through the forgiveness of our sins by means of the blood of Jesus Christ, in spite of all our weaknesses and imperfection. Indeed, we have no proper understanding of redemption at all, if, in all our weakness, we do not have God's perfection before our eyes.

However, with regard to the Word spoken to the Israelites: "*You, therefore, must be holy as your Father is holy*", the word "*holy*" is used here both times in a different sense to what we usually understand "*holy*" to imply--that is, perfect holiness, taken for granted in God's person, and [285] therefore also to be assumed in Israel. It implies, first of all, that God is *holy* in contrast to the so-called gods which the pagan people worshipped in such great numbers. God is called the *Holy One of Israel*, that is the One and Only, like no one else, different from all other gods worshipped by the people around about. These peoples all had one unholy thing in common, as is shown in the story of their gods who could give no signs to their worshippers; these people received nothing from their gods except their own mistaken ideas which led them from one depravity to the next. In contrast to these gods, God alone stands as *the Holy One*.

There are many passages which refer to this, such as: "*There is none like thee among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like thine*" (Ps.86:8). In the Book of Isaiah God says, "*To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One*" (Isa.40:25). Regarding his uniqueness among the gods, he says: "*For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of*

*Israel, your Savior" (Isa.43:3); and further: "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (Isa.43:15).*

Just as God is the only God among all gods who is holy, so shall Israel be distinguishable from other peoples as his only people, therefore the *holy* people. Hence the expression: "*You, therefore, must be holy as I am holy*", which is not meant above all to indicate the highest inaccessible holiness of God, but rather to indicate that Israel was to be distinguished apart from other nations, as God from other gods.

We find this assertion three times in the Book of the Law. First, we read:

*For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls upon the earth. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy..... (Lev.11:44-45).*

Accordingly, the children of Israel should be *holy*, in the sense that they must not eat certain animals, in the sense of being the nation chosen before all nations, through particular customs and sacred rites ensuring their purity. Israel was to stand unique among all nations, just as God manifested himself in Egypt as a God of miracles, so that the people said: "*Israel is a quite different people to us, Israel is consecrated to its God in a particular way, Israel is a holy nation to him, just as its God is unique among the gods*". Therefore, also, Israel is to have particular precepts, such as God has given it--which, to be sure, had a deeper ethical significance; yet in the first place [these precepts] differentiate them from other nations in regard to what befits a holy people. [286].

If God is indeed holy in the sense of one who differs from all others, then this word also expresses the highest perfection; for whatever God is, he is without question always perfect.

Elsewhere, we read:

*"Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev.19:2).*

Here also it is meant that Israel is to keep itself apart from the immorality of the heathen, so that it does not present

itself as unworthy of belonging to the One Holy God: Israelites are to fear father and mother; to keep the holy days; not turn to idols; not eat the meat of sacrifices on the third day, in order not to desecrate what God has sanctified; at harvest-time and in the vineyard they are to leave something for the poor and strangers; they must neither steal nor lie, nor act dishonestly by holding back the wages of the day laborer, they must not give false judgment--and so on.

We see that Israel is to avoid all that which in the world may be allowable to the heathen, but is not to be tolerated in God's saints--in order for them to be distinguished from all other nations, just as the saints of the New Covenant have to consider what is fitting for them in order to remain holy.

In the third place, Israel must be holy in that it gives no heed to soothsayers and fortune tellers as do other nations (Lev.20:7; Num.4:23,25).

So we see that the text: "*You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy*" (Lev.11:45) does not need to frighten us. If only we were to keep these precepts in the Old and New Testaments faithfully, every time, as God's saints should, how very pleasing that would be to God! To be zealous in this way will inevitably lead us with increasing certainty to true holiness.

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[286]

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SIN

Question: *I would be extremely interested to hear about those Bible passages that actually tell about the struggle against sin. I simply could not find any, although much is said about the fight. (1876)*

Answer: It almost seems to me as if this enquirer favors a certain new school of thought which has caused such a stir in recent times, and which promised people they could very quickly attain to holiness without too much struggle, if only a so-called surrender to the Lord Jesus had taken place, and one remained in Jesus. I conclude this from his words: That only through our remaining in Jesus, and not through our struggling, are we protected from sin. I do agree with the latter statement, if it is rightly meant. But there needs to be a constant struggle against sin before we are able to surrender to Jesus at all, and still more before we can abide in him for always. For the enticement to sin will prevent both the surrender and the abiding.

But I want to go into the question, whether or not there are any passages in the Bible relating to the struggle against sin. Evidently our questioner found none. Yet in Hebrews 12:1,4 is clearly expressed something which our questioner pushes to one side--that it is not our struggling but rather our resting in Jesus which guards us against sinning. Certainly we accomplish nothing through our struggling, if it is not Jesus who does it through us. But Jesus does not do it alone, rather he uses us to fight against sin. We have to be his hand in the fight; and he gives us the strength. However, we must not be so quick in setting aside the Bible passages that give evidence of this struggle as if they held no proof, which in fact they do; or else we are like the person who insists on being right, even if he or she is wrong. "*We should resist in the struggle against sin*" says the Letter to the Hebrews; what more do we want? So also Paul says: "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*"

(Phil.2:12); then what does "work out" mean if not the struggle against sin?--and indeed, it must be a serious struggle if we are urged to do it with fear and trembling.

Paul continues: *"For it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed for his chosen purpose"* (Phil.2:13). With this is meant *"You can do it!"--or--"You must do the fighting!"*; for God gives you what you need for this. But to do it, that is, to fight it through, you must do it with what is given you; or else you must go in fear and trembling that you will not be blessed.

I would like to comment further, just as it occurs to me, for a thorough exposition would take too much time. Paul says, *"Your lower nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it; they are in conflict with one another, so that what you will do you cannot do"* (Gal.5:17), *"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law"* (v.18).

Certainly, the expression *"struggle against sin"* is not used here. But when two things (here the flesh and the Spirit, which both are in us) are opposed to each other, striving against one another for first place, surely there is a fight. And so, here too (Gal.5:19-21) there is talk of the struggle against sin, namely against *"the lower nature . . . immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, conspiracy, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like; . . . Those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God"*. How can anyone fail to see that here a fight against sin is required, even if that precise expression is not used? Paul also says: *"But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, and it makes me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members"* (Rom.7:23). He is speaking in this way of the human ego, which does not understand the need for the fight; by which the spiritual self that wants to fight must not let itself be enslaved, but rather must *"put to death the deeds of the body"* (Rom.8:13). And this must come through a fight whose only purpose is to bring about redemption from sin through Jesus Christ and God's Spirit, so that it is no longer a case of: *"I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate"* (Rom.7:15).

Paul also writes about a definite fight in the Letter to the Ephesians: *"For we are not contending against flesh and blood (that is, men), but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"* (Eph.6:12). Here again, the struggle against sin is not put in just these words--but what are these principalities and powers, these world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness--what are they? Are they not the representatives of sin? And Paul therefore wants to say that we are to wage a very serious battle all the more earnestly because the principalities and powers of darkness and the evil spirits in the air want to overpower us. Here, too, Paul mentions the whole armor of God that we need for this fight (Eph.6:13-17), and he tells us to *"Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication"* (v.18), since all our fighting can only be successful if we are supported from above. But if we do not fight sin, all can be lost.

We can bring forward more and more Bible passages. In II Tim.2:5 Paul says, *"An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules"*. So here, a Timothy, a fighter for Christ, must fight against sin in the form of allowing himself to become involved in worrying about where the next meal is coming from. No doubt, our correspondent will know the passage in the Letter to the Corinthians where Paul speaks of restraining oneself and keeping within bounds in order to receive the prize; here Paul says *"I subdue my body lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified"* (I Cor.9:24-27). Further, the Lord says: *"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation"* (Mark 14:38). "Watch" means here to struggle against sin within ourselves, and "pray" is a call to watch and fight so as to receive strength and help from above. If we should endeavor to *"supplement our faith with every kind of virtue"* (II Pet.1:5-10), not to be *"ineffective and unfruitful in our acknowledgement of the Lord Jesus Christ, but zealous to confirm our call and election . . . so as to be richly provided with an entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"*--does that not imply a fight against sin?

If Timothy is to shun youthful passions (II Tim.2:22), if we are to endeavor to enter God's rest (Heb.4:10-11), in that we do not harden our hearts (vv.7,11); if, in spite of their being so deeply lodged within us, we are to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against our soul (I Pet.2:11); if we are not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies to make us slaves to their passions (Rom.6:12); if we are to strive to enter by the narrow door, when many who seek to enter will not be able (Luke 13:24); if our Savior commands us so earnestly to remain in him otherwise we will be withered branches--which can so easily happen--does not all of this denote a fight against sin?

Even if that particular expression does not occur as often as we use it, nevertheless it is justified and in the same sense as in innumerable other Bible passages. To cease fighting against sin has always meant the death of our inner life. Let us not neglect to take this serious Word [to heart].

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On reading the above article our anonymous friend, who had been able to find no passage in the Bible referring to the struggle against sin, wrote a long answer which he sent to me.

He tells me that he is united with me in direction, but that he still does not agree with me on all that is set forth there. So I shall try to speak further on the subject, with reference to the details in this [further] letter. First, we must come to an agreement on the nature of sin.

Letter. *Certainly, if we take sin to be only the act of doing evil, then it is possible for us to set another action against it; and these conflicting actions could be called fighting. But looked at more closely, sin is not so much the act as it is a [290] state of being, a condition, a lawlessness within a man freely allowed to take hold of his inner being. Or is it the outward deed which is sin? If I rightly understand the Scripture--No! According to the Scriptures, only that which is within a man can issue forth as sweet or bitter water, or an apparent mixture of both.*

*But you can by no means put up a fight against the state of the heart; the heart itself must be changed and renewed....*

In this letter, it is the natural inborn corruptness of a man which is called his sin, and basically, according to the Scriptures (or so it is written in this letter) only the corrupt state of man should be called sin, and not what issues forth. But actually, quite the contrary is expressed in the Scriptures. We will find no passage in the Bible where natural corruptness is called *sin*; doubtless *sin* always does signify the trespassing of a divine commandment, therefore [it is] a sinful action. But we are tempted to think that the natural corruptness of man, since it is in man involuntarily, cannot be called *sin*; on this account, many find it wrong to speak of *original sin* and not of *hereditary corruptness*. They are not completely wrong, since no one can repent of hereditary corruptness, but only of the evil he has committed. For to the will of the man who does not resist inborn corruptness belongs the nature of sin. One can have in oneself all sorts of evil, and be quite aware of it, so that it causes one torment, but it is still quite against one's will. If it does not come out as an evil action, it cannot be reckoned to one as guilt.

Hereditary corruptness has a voice, as it were, a very real voice, when satanic inspiration is there too, wanting to lead a man astray, enjoining him to kill, to commit adultery, to steal, to commit perjury, to possess what is his neighbor's. However, if a man resists the seductive voice he will not be a sinner, a murderer, an adulterer, a thief, and so on. And the Lord will not reckon his inner temptations as sin--indeed, he praises him as a conqueror if he resists this inner temptation which all too often leads to action--and overcomes it.

Doubtless one is a sinner, even if one has not actually committed sin, if one's will was to sin and yet for some reason one was hindered from doing it. Even if one recognizes that it was God's grace that hindered one from sinning, one still needs to repent. And if a man does not, the Lord may well let go of him. But whoever of his own free will under no circumstances lets himself become involved in something evil to which he is

being inwardly driven, he is no sinner, he does not commit a sin; he stands as a Christian with [291] those of whom John says: "*No one born of God commits sin*" (I John 3:9)--that is, he allows no sin to defile and condemn him, however much he is outwardly and inwardly enticed by that sin; and about this there will still be more to say.

Where *sin* is spoken of in the Scriptures, we must always understand a specific act, an active violation of a divine command; it is never "*a lawlessness within a man, freely allowed to take hold of his inner being*". This is clearly to be seen in the Epistle of James where it is said: "*Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire*" (James 1:14). This desire is shown to be a sinful temptation, but not called *sin*. It is more that temptation leads to sin only when it is given free rein; in other words--when a man gives his will over to sinning.

The text continues: " . . . and *sin* when it is full-grown brings forth death" (James 1:15b). The temptation in itself is not yet mortal sin. The law punishes a man only when he has committed the sin, not on account of his corrupt condition; albeit, in eternity the blood of Christ will fully answer for him with regard to his sinful condition. Thus, in Matt.15:19-20, the Savior tells us the evil thoughts which proceed from the heart, which, when they lead to action, defile a man: "*Evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander*". How corrupt, indeed, must be the human heart out of which such deeds can come! Yet Scripture does not call such people sinners because of their propensities, which are in themselves not sins until they are turned into these sinful deeds. Moreover, if the law forbids a certain covetousness, it is because *sinful deeds* are implied thereby, when the person tries hypocritically, through every manner of deceit, to take for himself what is his neighbor's as if it were his right.

Concerning the thought that the lawless condition of man--or the sinful condition, if it is accepted as part of his inner state--is actual sin: We should turn to the Epistle to the Romans (7:23,25). Here, in fact, a different human principle is involved which is at war with the inner law and which makes men

captive to the law of sin; in short, Paul is talking about the law of the flesh contrasted with the law of the spiritual nature. Yet, when it is a question of the dual nature of the law affecting the human being, the law of God and the law of sin, still the lawless condition defined by the law of sin is not called *sin*. But the desire of the flesh is as bent on sin as the mind is on resisting sin through God's law. *Sin* applies always to the deed only if a man consents to it, surrendering his will to the law of sin, to the sinfulness within him.

Now we are getting even nearer to the question of the *fight against sin*. Here it has to be said that it is not *with* sin that we fight, but *against* sin, with the powers that entice and attract us toward it. These powers are:--in the first place, the evil that is there within us ever since the Fall, and which rules over us, or, as Paul says, wants to make us captive; furthermore, habit, which causes in us an almost insurmountable inclination toward sinful things; finally, thirdly--the dark powers that Paul names: "*. . . against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*" (Eph.6:12). Paul says that it is these against which we have to fight. (What an extraordinary remark our friend makes when he writes that Paul, in the passage which follows--about putting on the whole armor of God--does not mention one syllable about a fight; whereas Paul says explicitly that we are to fight, that we should put on the whole armor of God!).

It is with these powers that a man has to contend in his fight against sin; how else can he prevent the forces of sin from crowding in, except by fighting? He must put up a shield against all the irrational demands and coercion of sin; and because these things are stirring within him, affecting him therefore most intimately, getting hold of his very person, it sets up no mean fight in him. It may cost him a great deal before he has fought through to a decisive stand. Even though he has often been victorious, he may yet still succumb to dark powers.

The fight--I cannot avoid using that word--is against certain sins that should not exist. The fight against sin consists in struggling with the personal and impersonal powers

that entice one to sin; for no fight can take place with something latent, and sin is that before it turns into deed; so the fight must be against its taking place. Again, the struggle is not against the attitude of the heart, as is meant by our friend who wrote the letter, as though this is what must be changed and renewed to become different, more godly. If we were to have to do this, even if we wanted to win it through our prayers, we could not possibly be led to victory, for this change, this renewal, lies only in God's power and grace [293].

We can only overcome a sin that is manifest. If a sin is only partly overcome, the state of our heart is not changed at all. From this we see how useless and wrong it is to plead with our Lord for a total removal of our corrupt condition. Yes, it is foolish and unattainable to plead over and over that we may never again fall into certain sins. Anyone who, having once overcome a temptation, believes it will never come to him again, is nearer to falling into it than he thinks. Again and again we need to watch and pray that the sleeping enemy will not suddenly wake up and bring us to a great fall.

The following remarks of our friend led me to further thoughts which I found worth considering:

Letter: *The attitude of our heart must be changed or renewed.*

*Even if this rebirth or renewal of our inner being has taken place, it is generally experienced that sinful behavior or actual sinning is still not done away with. However, since it is no longer in harmony with the inner being, it has acquired a different character; consequently, according to Paul, we can rid ourselves of sin only through discarding it, not by fighting it. This is all the more plausible since, in a person who has been converted, sin is no more a part of his spirit, but now resides only in the flesh with its old habits. Now that these habits have been condemned spiritually, it is important to discard them materially also. So here is more ammunition to use as a means to the end.*

I could say much about this. But I must be short. As Peter describes, according to the Scriptures it is a great deception to believe that hereditary corruptness is done away with through the

renewal of our hearts to a living hope; or that our conversion brings a change to our inborn corruptness, since this corruptness is not a matter of our willpower. There are no Bible passages testifying to this belief. On the contrary, in all the apostles' letters it is stated clearly that our human temptations, our attacks of darkness, the tendency to misuse our freedom, are essentially the same as with the unconverted. These temptations may be greater or lesser in degree according to the sincerity of the believer, and according to his faithfulness in watching and praying, and in the fight against sin. If we do become a new person, it is only as regards our will and our ability to put up a resistance. If we fail to resist, anything can happen to us. Desire and lust, dangling as it were from the Cross of Christ, gain influence over us as soon as the Crucified does not stand continually before the eyes of our soul. But how dangerous it is to imagine, and to pass on the idea, that our whole being could possibly turn as quickly as a [294] barrel organ, and become a new being in whom sin suddenly has ceased. To discard sin also needs much effort; for indeed, why was it not then already accomplished in those Christians who received Paul's letters?

Therefore, I appeal to all never to slacken in the fight of professing our faith, yes, the fight to overcome our sinfulness. The sinner may not agree with the sin, but still he sins. What is then so unthinkable about disagreeing with sin? But the time will come when the heart of stone will be changed into a heart of flesh, not through our struggle and fighting, but through God's power. Until then, however, we must be the conquerors, the victors in the *fight* against sin. One thing more: In Hebrews 12: the fight against sin is a fight against *original* sin, to which the Hebrews were tempted, but not to the point which would cause their blood to be shed.

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[294]

OF SUSTAINED REPENTANCEFrom a letter:

*I would so like to know one thing, namely: Are we meant to struggle continually for repentance, before grace can be given us? I believe I could never achieve this.*

Answer: When the word *repentance* is used in the Scriptures, it is never in the sense that we are accustomed to use it; for according to the original text the phrase used for this is *change of heart*. Luther uses the word *remorse* [G.:Reue] in II Cor.7:10. In this passage where it is said, "*For godly grief brings about a repentance (change of heart) that leads to a salvation which no one will regret*", the expression *godly grief* is actually what we call *repentance*. This grief will remain as long as you are not purified of the sin by confessing it and discarding it. This is what David is saying in Psalm 32. And if this has been done, then joy breaks in, and one may encourage others with Paul: "*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice!*" (Phil.4:4). Therefore, a continuing grief or remorse is not required; and one is led to the comfort of the Gospel.

We must be careful not to see our repentance as something we make for ourselves, from which we will earn forgiveness and blessedness. If it all depends on mercy, the sinner need not try to work it all out. You have now confessed your sin and you seriously [295] want to leave it behind you, so hold on in a childlike way to the mercy that comes through Christ, through which your heart can always find peace. But let yourself be at peace; for if your heart is not at peace through grace you will fall into slackness again, even toward sin.

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[295]

THE NINETY AND NINEQuestion:

*How is it to be understood, in the parable of the lost sheep, when our Savior says of the ninety and nine, that they are righteous and do not need to repent? [Luke 15:7]. After all, they are people who are all sinners before God, and who therefore do need to repent.*

Answer: I will try to discuss this rather striking point of view. Let us consider the parable, as requested:

Tax collectors and sinners came to hear our Lord speaking. He spoke to them in such a friendly and loving way, as if they were not sinners; he even ate with them, a sign of friendship and trust. The Pharisees and scribes make sour comments on this, and the Lord answers them with the parable of the lost sheep.

Since His words point to the tax collectors and Pharisees, we get the impression that he understands the tax collectors to be the lost sheep, and the Pharisees to be among the ninety-nine. Now, that the Pharisees should be named "*the righteous who do not need repentance*" does seem odd to us. Here we have to think that the Savior accepts the Pharisees to be all they believe themselves to be, according them the respect due to them. They see themselves, at least in comparison with the tax collectors, as being the righteous ones who do not need to repent as do the tax collectors, or to change their hearts, as the word *repentance* means in the original text.

The Lord considers it inappropriate and unjustified to take the Pharisees to be people who were not righteous according to the usual standard, and to say, "Do you believe yourselves to be better than the tax collectors? Examine yourselves and you will find that you are sinners as they are, and therefore you also need to repent". He does not want to, and cannot, speak in this fashion to the Pharisees. He must accept [296] them as belonging to the holy chosen people of Israel, as the Jews were altogether assumed to be. If they remained faithful to the commandments and

precepts God had given them through Moses--and the Lord was not to assume anything different--and there were many such Jews, then they could be called *righteous*, according to the language of the Old Covenant; whereas the tax collectors were seen as having fallen away from the God of Israel because they were in the service of the gentiles (indeed, performed the detested duty of collecting taxes, which was considered as quite contrary to the dignity of the people, the people of God)--therefore, also opposed to God. The Savior has to let that stand, and he cares as little to justify the publicans as he cares to debase the Pharisees. So he lets all the tax collectors symbolize the lost sheep--as sinners; and all the Pharisees symbolize the ninety and nine sheep that had not gone astray from their shepherd--as the righteous.

Concerning the statement that the righteous ones--presented as the ninety-nine--do not need repentance: This statement can be justified insofar as it applies to the genuine Israelites who did not disobey God's commandments consciously. They did not need a change of heart, at least not in the broader sense. For by *repentance*, as has been said, we understand a change of heart. It was assumed that their heart was turned already toward God. It was presumed that they followed the precepts that had been given them. The tax collectors, however, had to turn around completely, for it was plain to see that they had fallen away from God, had opposed God in their hearts. If they turn again and become true Israelites, the angels will rejoice more over them than over the ninety-nine who did not need to repent and turn around as the apostates did, because one who is redeemed gives the greatest cause for joy.

It is certainly different if we are talking about a change of heart in the finer sense. Then the Pharisees, or the ninety-nine, would have to confess that in spite of being true Israelites (if they were that) they were nevertheless sinners before God and would have to repent of their sin. From that point of view, publicans and Pharisees are in the same boat, insofar as both must find their way to a new beginning, especially now that the Kingdom of God has appeared through Jesus.

Of this specific and more important change of heart Jesus does not want to speak directly, although he implies it in a more subtle way in his talk. He infers that the Pharisees, or the ninety-nine, were fulfilling all the ordinances as far as is possible for anyone; so in the narrower sense they could be called *righteous*, since at least they wanted to hold to what was right for God and for their neighbor, as *righteousness* is defined in the Old Testament.

[297] Thus Jesus' words could also shock their consciences, for they might feel that after all they were not so righteous that they did not need to repent. The Lord is not speaking directly about them, but about the ninety and nine; and whether the Pharisees belonged to the ninety and nine was something for them to think about themselves.

Above all, I would like to add (for I do think it is important) that the Lord assumes that the hundred sheep are already under higher protection--as long as they remain with their shepherd and do not stray--whether we take them to be the Pharisees or otherwise; yet his words do lead us think that he is referring to the Pharisees, whether they deserve it or not. If the sheep are already in the shepherd's care, counted as his own, then they have already gone through repentance. They stand now before God as the righteous. Why should they need further repentance, except insofar as they still stumble daily?--and this will not take them out of Xtheranks of the righteous. If we have once been converted, we do not on the whole need to repent again. Why then repent again and again as if we had not yet stepped in the right direction? Those hundred were all accounted *righteous* until one of them wilfully strayed and separated himself from the fold. This is the one, then, that had to repent, that is: turn around and be brought once more in frame. The others were seen still to be righteous, needing no such conversion, for they had not made the mistake of straying away from the shepherd.

Therefore, we can see that we surely do not need to find it an obstacle that the ninety and nine are assumed to be righteous people who do not need to repent; neither do we need to think that their righteousness was perfect, nor that they did not, after all, daily need to repent. One is reminded of the elder

brother of the prodigal son. He was also a righteous man who did not need to repent by turning back to his father's house, since he had not left it. Nevertheless, it is obvious to us all that, in spite of having remained the faithful son, he did have to repent of his conduct when his brother came home. It can also be a danger for the righteous to insist on their righteousness. This is then a further rebuke to the Pharisees in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

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[298]

CARING FOR THE CONSCIENCEThree Questions:

(1). *I was shocked over certain instances in which some people, having acted wrongly, supported their position by bringing it before God in prayer. Evidently these people had felt it their duty to act thus wrongly; therefore their consciences led them astray.*

Answer. This question has given me much food for thought. I am simply not sure whether I can write down intelligibly the thoughts that came to me, but I will try to speak to the various questions it contains.

Amazingly enough, it seems to be a thing which happens quite frequently that someone attempts to support his wrongdoing through prayer. At least, it often happens that someone will say (as if, in excusing himself thus, everyone should be satisfied): "*I have prayed about it*"--as if this put everything right. Such people imagine they have received an answer from God as to the rightness of their conduct. Some look up a proverb; and if one proverb does not suit them, they look for another, until they find one which somehow says, "Do as you think best." This poor person is not aware that if someone is bent on receiving a certain answer, something extraneous, something sinister, can whisper in his ear.

I often have to think of *Balaam*, the soothsayer. He asked the Lord one night whether he should go. The answer was "No." Balaam asked a second time. Now the answer is "Yes"; so he goes; but a she-ass had to set him right. In the same way, many people who have to come to a decision--for instance, about marriage--seek to obtain clarity through prayer, almost with the thought that they will be given a sign from above through a certain feeling that comes to them. But their prayer is often centered around their own wish, even if they know very well how much stands in the way of the fulfillment of that wish. But they

carry on praying heedlessly, and suddenly it is as if they knew the answer--and how often they are mistaken! How is this? They receive what they have wished for, but what their inner voice would have liked to forbid them. For good or bad they get what they asked for, and the affirmation must have been given from above.

How often what has been given through prayer is at variance with our conscience. In many cases I even forbid coming to prayer over a certain matter. I say rather: "Think it over! Examine the question with your reason, and then ask your own heart, is the answer 'Yes' or 'No'? If it is 'Yes' then why use so many words in prayer in order to reach a decision? If the answer is 'No,' then why bring yourself into [299] the temptation [of believing] that your inner 'No' will become a divine 'Yes'?--whereas the voice of God in your heart is much closer to you, and much clearer, than your tedious prayer (Forgive the expression, but the Lord himself tells us not to use many words)."

It is the same with *wrongdoing*. A person has the feeling that what he or she wants to do is wrong or even sinful. Now this person prays to the dear God as if to explain that in this case he or she might be allowed to do it. Because of certain circumstances, the dear God is to give permission to such a person to do that which otherwise is against his commandment. At any rate, the man who wants to show his devoutness believes everything will be quite alright so long as he has first prayed about it.

Such a person has truly no conscience. The conscience, which discriminates between good and evil, wants to tell him clearly what is right. But he will not admit it. We argue with our conscience, because all kinds of things tempt us humanly in the opposite direction. Yet because a man wants to appear devout he will pray--he actually wants to appeal to God against his conscience. The thing that is wrong is that only too often he has no fear of God. He acts as if what he does, even if it is not good, is not wrong or forbidden under the circumstances, whereas if he feared God that would forbid him to do it. He does not allow his conscience, the voice of God in himself, to be effective; if he had been in Joseph's place he would have thought

he might as well give way to the wanton woman, instead of saying, like Joseph, "How could I do such an evil deed, and sin against God?" In this way, even a man who wants to be devout can commit murder, adultery, theft or deception; he can give false witness, can even practice magic, and so on, and quieten his conscience with pious words--or, as is to be understood in the question, through praying. But he who seeks to be strengthened through prayer to do wrong does not have an *erring* conscience but rather, no conscience at all, since he knows what God's will is and will not do it.

(2). The next question is this:

*Moreover, where believers acknowledge later that something was really wrong which, at the time they did it, they had thought permissible--was their conscience therefore asleep?*

Answer: It is certainly often the case that a person has believed for a long time that something was permissible, and later had to see that it was wrong. Even so-called believers or converts who have turned to more serious and religious ways have gone on sinning without realizing it. Indeed I know of cases where someone who had long become a convert without, however, having become free from certain sins, would not let himself be convinced that a true [300] Christian should not carry on with such behavior because it was sinful. Many years ago I heard that a slave dealer, three years after his conversion, still continued in this business without feeling inwardly disturbed. It is possible for sins against every commandment, from the first to the last, to be committed by believers quite openly without any misgivings. Generally, of course, the wrongdoing is mostly secretive, yet not without inward excuses and attempts at justification.

It may well be called a sleeping conscience in all cases where a man has not the slightest feeling of the wrongdoing involved in his act. This can only be if the reason why it is wrong is not clear, or not clearly seen by this person. Why should one not practice secret rites, or magic?--or why should one not try to get sympathy, and so on? Many do not grasp this; they do a thing because, apparently, their conscience has nothing against it. But is their conscience truly asleep? It is my

experience that all those to whom I have pointed this out confess to having felt an inner resistance as often as they have done it. So their conscience was awake; but the fear of God was missing. How is it then with the many people who frequent houses of ill repute, and delude themselves that they are doing no wrong even while they drive themselves in the pursuit of all kinds of sensuality?--how much I could say about that--and yet they conclude it is not sin!

Furthermore, how is it, when people use all kinds of deceit and lying to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the other, and it is considered permissible and not the slightest objection is raised? Or how is it if a man schemes to acquire another person's property, in an apparently legal way, believing he can still have a good conscience because he has kept within the framework of the law? Will the conscience be silent in all these cases? No, the conscience is not asleep, the conscience does give warning; but people do not give it credence; they argue with their conscience, and in the end it is stupefied.

Where does the weakness lie? Not with the conscience--but the fear of God is lacking; and if such sinners still reckon themselves with the believers, the converted, and do not hold back from their prayers, their devotions, their churchgoing, even sit themselves on the same bench as the more serious Christians, then these sinners are greatly to be deplored. For, in the world beyond, they are simply evildoers whom the Lord does not know--in that world excuses against our conscience are of no avail.

For all that, a person's sin may be so unrevealed to himself that it does not touch his conscience. But here, too, I would not say that the conscience is asleep. Such a person is lacking in enlightenment and perception. He needs to be shown what is wrong and sinful in his behavior, especially in connection with others. Then his conscience begins to work and, if he wants to be devout, he can never do otherwise than hold to this recognition and act accordingly. But we must take care not to be unjustifiably harsh with ourselves. There are certain things that one may well question whether they are permissible or not. At times we may think a certain thing permissible, and again at other times we may judge this same thing to be sinful. Here, we

must take this to heart: In this situation, only that which is a definite violation of God's commandments should be seen as actual wrong and sin; and we have to judge only whether what we do is contrary to God's commandment. Conscience tugs at one whenever a commandment of God remains unheeded; and if we do not follow the warning of our conscience it is not because the conscience is asleep, but because we do not have enough fear of God. However, if the conscience seems to be disquieted where, actually, no commandment of God is involved, then we must discriminate between our own judgment, counsel and caution, and our conscience.

(3). The question continues:

*The conscience is nurtured and healed through an awakening to the divine commandments, and through the correction of God's Word. How then should we care for our conscience and sharpen it?*

Answer: To say a word about the sharpening and nurture of our conscience: We must differentiate between recognizing God's commandments, and obeying them; both are necessary for the healing of the conscience. The setting forth of God's commandments and especially of his Word, and interpreting them in connection with our life, must be understood and put into practice; this will lead to everything that lies in our conscience coming to expression. The more specific and thorough we are in doing this, the clearer and more decisive will our conscience become.

Therefore, nothing is more essential, in order to acquire a sharp judgment over what is right and good in all directions, than the continual conscious embracing of the commandments of God as they are set forth in the Old and New Testaments. To the degree in which we neglect bearing in mind God's commandments will we also fail to act rightly. However, a man's conscience can still become [302] blunted if he fails to act upon and turn into deed what he has learned from the divine law. So a man can know everything, and yet his conscience remains silent because the fear of God--which demands action, not only an intellectual grasp--is missing. It [his conscience] remains blunted and neglected. The actual nurturing of the conscience consists in

this: That a man seeks to turn to deed all that God has led him to recognize. This lies in the man himself, not in the teacher. There is no one who can care for another's conscience if he himself does not stand in the presence of God and in the fear of God. A man can have access to all the information that should lead to his having the finest, most sensitive conscience; but if he remains irreverent at heart, not bothered whether his conscience is active or not, it will not help him in the least. But whoever practices listening to his conscience, even to the smallest degree, he sharpens it and nurtures it, perfecting it more and more. For this to happen, God still wants to give us hearts of flesh, and also, as we hope the renewed pouring out of his Spirit. How many of us are lost without this, in spite of all our knowledge!

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[303]

LACK OF WILLPOWER

It is a painful experience when, only too often, we see the fall of those serious-minded Christians of whom we would least have expected it; and the bitterness and shame which is involved can be very great. At all events, others must bear a shadow of guilt for not having been sufficiently on their guard against the enemy, both for themselves and for their fellow-believers. These [others] take it for granted that all their companions are such as have come to know the Lord Jesus through remorse for their sins, which means that they have resolved to stand with those who have pledged themselves to go the narrow way. It is quite likely that, as far as it goes, it is a bad conscience that urges them toward brotherly community; but looking at it more closely, it may be that although they find their way to community they do not find it to the Lord Jesus.

Brotherly communities must be very much on their guard that their community is not confused with the Lord Jesus; and this happens if the community does not endeavor to give "Jesus" to those who come, to assure them of what poor sinners can have in Jesus, and to bring them to an intimate relationship with Jesus as the mediator for their sins. It seems sufficient by far, if for now they [the newcomers] just sit among them, at least not making a disturbance. However, this is of no real help to the sinner who feels the urge toward community through his feeling of remorse for his sins; nor will this sinner be able to overcome his temptations.

We can see how mistakes are made already, right from the beginning. The sinner who is seeking peace of mind is reassured without anything further happening to him on account of his sins, if he finds himself too soon accepted and appreciated in an elect circle. This circle rejoices over him who has joined them unexpectedly, without considering the serious inner need such a person may be in, what temptations he has, and the torments of his conscience. Above all, he will need a clear direction for this distress in his conscience. If it is not attended to it may

seem to subside gradually; but the cause of the uneasiness has not been eliminated.

The result is that his former self remains unweakened within him; such a person has undergone no real change, except that he has been accepted; he is actually no different. Only too often, it is the sins touched upon in I Thess.4:3-7 which burn in his conscience; and whoever has committed these sins readily remains a slave of sin, unless he is freed through priestly help, through pastoral care. The enemy does not go away of his own accord; and if nothing happens to release that person from the enemy, in the sense that the Lord Jesus speaks about the freeing which is possible here and now on earth--then the enemy clings to him firmly, and knows well how to seize his chance of showing the would-be saint that after all he is still the slave of sin, and is far from belonging to the Lord Jesus.

As a rule, the community of believers makes the mistake of taking on themselves the pastoral care which should bring about a closer relationship to the Savior. They do this without giving enough thought to the gifts needed for the care of these souls who need to be at peace and reconciled with their conscience. Even if they [these religious groups] have not separated themselves, at least they have often distanced themselves from the service which preaches reconciliation; and so, only too often, their members are without that gift of God which could lead to the stabilizing of the life in faith.

But I know very well that I should not say too much about this.[304] Was I not tempted, when just recently I read a Christian pamphlet which aired similar thoughts! According to this, confirmed servants of the Gospel should not be pushed aside! Moreover, the ensuing scandals are so noticeable only because the persons concerned do not want to be put on the same bench as the world. For as we know, in many respects the world also does not keep its hands clean.

Mostly, lack of willpower has its origin in the lack of fear of sinning. We treat sinning too lightly, even though we do not want sin. But we do not fear sin as though it were something great and significant. We flirt with sin, with our eyes, our hands, our feet. The eye can lead one to secretly Ximmodest

behavior, arousing feelings of lust; the hand also plays its part; and the foot does not shrink from contact. If one were to fear sin, the eye, the hand and the foot would behave quite differently. In Christian circles nowadays the sexes meet more and more intimately than is considered seemly in conventional society. The so-called world, except where it has been given over to sin, keeps cautious rein over eyes, hands, and feet; the individual keeps to himself, and does not involve himself inopportunately and unreasonably in relationships, does not seek that same intimacy which can happen in Christian circles. It is all too easy to tread too near the serpent and get bitten. In many such things, between Christians there should be much more admonition, instruction, warning and discipline; but I know all too well that we do not like being spoken to, and our resentment easily leads to enmity in spite of the brotherly bond. But as I have said, lack of willpower is usually nothing more than a secret agreement with sin, a superficial attitude to God's commandments, in spite of all one's pious appearance. He who pays attention to God's commandments and stands in the fear of God has a strong will and keeps himself from sinning; not like the one who, although he hates sin, nevertheless falls into it when temptation comes. But why do we just let each one fight it out alone, instead of helping each other?

What is the Lord's attitude toward these souls? Here, this Word holds true:

*"For thou art not a God who delights in godlessness; he who is evil may not dwell with thee."* (Ps.5:4 [--in German text, 5:5]).

Or, are those who call themselves Christian and believers to have the privilege of sinning? The Lord will certainly forgive the repentant; but he who remains more or less superficial and does not shun any sin will not go unpunished. If he leaves this life without having been broken, the Savior or his angel will not be there to meet him, rather there will be others who will have claims upon him. Oh, if only new life would come to Christendom through the Holy Spirit, if only especially to withstand the abomination of sin!

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[305]            WHAT DOES IT MEAN, TO ABIDE IN CHRIST?

Through the Savior's words, in which he pointed to himself as the true Vine, he gave the disciples to understand that they were the branches thereof, so that they were grafted onto him, as it were, and the sap of the Vine also streamed through them, the selfsame Spirit flowed through them from him. This was to come about so that, according to the Word that he had spoken to them, namely that he is the Savior, they should become *clean* (John 15:3). His Word was to remove the natural sap which was corrupted, as in all human beings, and it was to make them ready to receive the sap of the Vine. If we, too, follow the words of our Lord, "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you*" (John 15:7) we can see it means everything in growing together with Jesus that we take in his words, and let them bear fruit; for immediately the Spirit of Christ that is carried in his words will follow. He who lets Jesus' words touch him only superficially, so that they do not have an impact on what is human and sinful in him, cannot possibly become a branch grafted onto him because he has not been cleansed by his Word, and so the Word can in no way bestow the forgiveness of his sins nor the grace of repentance. In order to be one with Jesus, nothing less is needed than that one takes his words right into one's heart--be they sweet and serious, or reproving or instructing; and that one is influenced by these words always and everywhere one goes, so as to become ever purer and more godly.

Now, this shows us clearly what is meant by *abiding in Jesus*. Fellowship with Jesus is given when we allow our love for [306] his Word and its influence to go on cleansing us ceaselessly, and never allow ourselves to come under the influence of something alien or opposed to him. If we let what is human become more important to us than what is of God; if we let what is worldly and sinful come into our hearts, then our fellowship with Jesus is weakened; and it may cease altogether if this carries on. Thus would our abiding in Jesus come to an end. The branches would no longer bear fruit; and so it can happen

that the Father takes such branches away from Jesus, and no longer recognizes their fellowship with his Son as valid (John 15:2). When the Lord says, "*Abide in me*" he means, "*Do not conduct yourselves in such a way that my Father has to take you away from me.*" To abide in Jesus we must do only that which makes it possible for us to be branches of the Vine, that is: We must hold on to Jesus' words and all that they imply in such a way that they affect our life and make of us a new person who has a sense of the divine. Therefore, all depends on our not becoming halfhearted, indifferent to the words of Christ that we have heard from Jesus so many times. In this way, we shall not become "*conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*" (Rom.12:2).

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[306]

THE TRUE FIGHT

*"An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules" (II Tim.2:5).*

This saying is directed at Timothy, whom Paul has just called a fighter for Jesus Christ, comparing him to a soldier.

We see that these words are not applied to every Christian but rather to servants of the Word, who have struggles peculiar to their task because they are answerable to proclaim the Gospel before all men; to proclaim it and spread it, and also to strengthen others in it. That Word is indeed something to fight for. But our fight can be a weak and sluggish one, misguided and timid, lacking in fire. In the course of it, one can become too much involved in temporal things, or, as Paul says, *"get entangled in civilian pursuits"* (Rom.12:4), and so damage the very thing for which one is fighting.

[307] Now, since no real help can come for God's Kingdom from such a fighter because so much of his strength goes into unimportant things, this is proof enough that he is not a good fighter and cannot please the One who has commissioned him, namely Christ, whose representative he should prove himself to be. For essentially, crowns are promised to those who further the Kingdom in Christ's name, who take upon themselves Christ's struggle, and lead toward the Kingdom's goal and victory.

To these fighters must be said the same as was said to the angel of the church at Smyrna: *"Do not fear what you are about to suffer . . . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life"* (Rev.2:10). To the angel of the church at Philadelphia the Lord says: *"Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown"* (Rev.3:11)--that is, it means here, under the temptation which will come over the whole world. Of himself, Paul says in our letter [quoted above] that the crown of righteousness is laid up for him, because he has fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith (II Tim.4:8).

Every fighter who has been given the task of fighting for the Kingdom of God can expect that crown. Nevertheless, he will

not be crowned even if he fights, if he does not fight truly, if he does not let the fight be commended to him in full measure. Moreover, we read of the "*great multitude which no man could number*" (Rev.7:9) that although they wore white robes and bore palm branches in their hands, they did not have crowns upon their heads.

This verse (II Tim.2:5) is not generally regarded as relating especially to the struggle in faith for one's own blessedness, which, after all, every Christian has to undergo. If we take it in this way, we lay a burden on the souls of those simple Christians who are living quietly and blamelessly in the fear of God; for then they will be constantly anxious, fearing that they are not the true fighters who will attain blessedness; and they will remain confused and perplexed about what the true fight is, and will not find real peace. Then *crowned* would be taken to signify *blessed*, and thus the meaning of this word would be: "*He will not attain blessedness unless he fights the true fight.*" That would indeed be a harsh word, unlike the Gospel.

The person who asks this question is filled with fear, and would like to know something about the state of heart that would enable one to fight victoriously. Also in the questioner's next words, we have the impression that, on considering this verse, he thinks that blessedness and salvation must be very difficult to attain. The struggle for faith of the ordinary Christian, however, is not so hard [308]; and the Gospel actually demands only a genuine single-heartedness, through which we are not living in duplicity--that is: partly given to the Lord, but mostly to the world.

The pure of heart can overcome the many temptations. The pure of heart seeks to keep his conscience clear; he knows he must keep his eyes on the Lord, and he endeavors to be in unity with the Lord in all his undertakings. If he makes mistakes, he humbles himself but does not therefore get thrown off course. To bring out such ideas tirelessly to his fellow Christians is much better than to torment himself and others with the thought: "*It may all go wrong even if I do fight, if it is not a true fight.*" Fight the good fight, that is, fight in the fear of the Lord, so

that you may be freed from the Devil's traps; you may even after all still win a crown.

But this verse does not mention the struggle of the soul. According to Eph.6:14-17, the whole armor consists further in "*truth, righteousness, love of peace, faith, hope, and the Word of God*". What more is needed than to be zealous in these things before the Lord? I simply have to tackle it, in all seriousness, and with a firm will. I believe I need not speak here about that dissolute state of mind which wanders with the greatest of ease amidst all kind of sin.

Certain apostles and servants of the Word, in earlier times especially, had to take on some very different battles, and everything depended on whether they fought them aright. In general they were caught unprepared, compelled to rely entirely on fighting blindly in faith, through very untoward circumstances. They could very well have been tempted to look out for themselves, at least a little, in outer things--which is not a danger to the ordinary Christian, but was for them; for, before they knew it they would become more concerned about their existence, they would become involved in the cares of their livelihood, "*entangled in civilian pursuits*" (II Tim.1:4), caught up in mammonism and worse; and in this way their struggle for the Kingdom of God would suffer. If they were to think too much about their survival, or were to lose all their energy for the fight of the Lord and his cause, they could have behaved in a foolish, cowardly manner, fearful, timorous, ready to disavow their belief so as to avoid suffering or slander or persecution. For since they were called to be workers for Christ and to give themselves entirely into his service, they would have defrauded themselves, to put it crassly, like dogs that have to be dragged to the hunt, and that would have been the end of their hopes for the crown that they were to receive as conquerors and fighters for Christ. It is not said, however, that they would promptly incur the loss of blessedness, and it might be the same with them as with those workers whose work is proven through fire, and who are saved yet, although through suffering "*as might be from a fire*" (I Cor.3:15).

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[309]

THE SON OF MAN AS JUDGE

*"God has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man" (John 5:27).*

In explaining this text, I start with the thought that it is God himself whose majesty and holiness has been hurt through the sin of men; and that God cannot become reconciled with the human race unless we take the first step. His holiness and righteousness demand that he, in his own Person, can do nothing else but repudiate all sinners and cast them forever from his countenance, if they do not of themselves turn back to him and throw themselves in the arms of his grace in complete self-surrender.

Now, it is through Christ that the actual turning back of humanity is to take place. For men have become incapable of turning back of themselves, since, in spite of their wanting to surrender, their inherent stubbornness has prevented God from allowing their repentance to free them from judgment and repudiation. Therefore, on Judgment Day, God would be able only to condemn them. That is why, in Scripture, humanity as such is called *lost*. In the matter of judgment, there is also the question of whether a person is worthy or not of condemnation, whether a person can be absolved or not. But God, in setting his eyes on sin can only express that all are worthy of condemnation because, in his sight, all are guilty, the only difference being in the degree of guilt.

God, as the Holy One, cannot differentiate between the more guilty and the less guilty, for who trespasses against one part of the law is guilty of the entire law. The thief or the unjust man will not be found more guilty than the adulterer, and vice-versa; the murderer and the perjurer will come under the same judgment. God will not acquit one sinner before another; for, since every sin is unrighteousness and involves a disregard of [310] God, the consequence of every sin is rejection. Therefore, according to God's wonderful counsel, there had to be something

other than sin that would be decisive in judgment, so that the question can be raised again, whether one is to be rejected or absolved.

This "something other" is the belief in Jesus and his sacrificial death. If this belief is sincere, it involves the strongest self-rejection, namely, that the sinner thinks: *"Nothing can help me except the blood of Christ; and my cause is lost unless the blood of Christ intercedes for me."* That is why the Lord also says, *"The Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin.....because it does not believe in me"* (John 16:8-9); which is to say: He will convince them that, from now on, nothing else will condemn them but their stubbornness, which will not allow them to believe in Jesus and through that turn away from themselves. It is also written: *"He who believes in the Son will not be condemned"* (John 18:3)--that is, even if he has committed many serious sins he does not fall under judgment, because he rejects himself and relies on Jesus' reconciling blood alone. It is said further, *"He who does not believe is condemned already"* (John 3:18)--meaning, there is no deliverance from condemnation for the one who still does not recognize himself sufficiently as a sinner; and the closing words are--*"because he has not believed in the Name of the only Son of God"* which alone could save him from repudiation.

Now, because Jesus gave himself up as an offering for the sins of the whole world, in complete self-sacrifice, and in taking on the condemnation which was due to man allowed himself to be put to death: Therefore through him the whole of mankind is reaccepted insofar as it grasps his sacrificial death for its own, or, believes in Him. Now the Father has to do only with his own Son, who at the same time is the Son of Man. Through Jesus all are already accepted, just as previously they were all rejected. All are freed from judgment; only, that Jesus, the Son of Man, has by the same token taken on the responsibility for them that they abide by faith in his sacrificial death. The judgment which will come at the end of time is therefore nothing less than a declaration of who is to be absolved of judgment; and in this respect, the judgment *".....will depend on the measure of*

*repentance, and will be fulfilled accordingly"*, as the third evangelist has already stated [cf. John 3:18].

Only faith in Jesus is demanded in order to be free; and he who does not have this faith will receive no further consideration; without anything further said he will be condemned. We can see clearly that such a judgment can be entrusted only to the Son of Man [311]. He, because He is the One in whom we have to believe, has to test each one, whether he has faith, and whether his faith is complete; whether every sin is confessed, without exception--and whether there is sufficient repentance and sufficient faith in forgiveness through the blood of Jesus alone. He who passes this test will be reckoned with the multitude of the redeemed.

Hereby the majesty and holiness of God is given due recognition, for in this way mankind is revealed through Jesus, in deepest submission, placing itself under the protection of Jesus' blood, as turning back to the God whom it has wounded. Jesus is the precursor and representative of all (Heb.2:10). The entire believing human race, with Jesus at the head, is like the prodigal son, who comes back from afar to the heart of God the Father. The Father stretches out his arms to all those who have become one with Jesus and with one another, just as the father does with his lost son, celebrating a joyous festival over *"this my son who was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found"* (Luke 15:24).

This accords with the words spoken by the Son of Man in passing judgment on the world: *"As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"* (Matt.25:40)--or, *"As you did it not to one of the least of these you did it not to me"* (Matt.25:45). Out of his great grace he lets all the services which he can accept as done unto himself, be done in faith in him, who saves even when this faith is not distinctly present. We can then understand Paul's words, *"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone"* (I Cor.15:28).

If we reflect on these things, we may very well understand why it is written, *"The Father judges no one, but has given all*

*judgment to the Son"* (John 5:22), and further--"*and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man"* (John 5:27). It also becomes clear what is meant when it is said that the Son of Man will come in his glory and sit upon his glorious throne and gather all the nations before him for a judgment which will be decisive between eternal life or condemnation (Matt.25:31ff., free from the German).

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[312] THE SAYINGS OF JESUS CONCERNING HIS APPROACHING  
SECOND COMING.

(Matt.26:64; 10:23; 16:28; 24:14)

I have often wondered whether we have been given enough light on the actual incarnation of Christ, or whether we should not imagine it more radically than we generally do. We like to think of the Savior as in some way omniscient, even when he walked on earth--which, indeed, he could have been, for it is said of him: "*He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*" (Phil.2:7). He was a servant to such a degree that at any given moment he knew no more than any other man about the future; and if he did know something it was because he had just heard it and received it as the prophets received their insights. Certainly we must bear in mind that he received the most perfect intimations that a human being can receive, but still only as a human being, which for the present he was. First he must be willing to receive everything, not presuming that he already had everything on account of his divine origin. He received only according to his needs, and as he requested of his Father, especially from the time he was recognized as the Son of God.

Christ points this out when he is speaking with Nicodemus. He says: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen*" (John 3:11)--both, we must assume, through revelations and visions. In vv.12-13 he lets us understand--at least we can take it that way--that he, Jesus, was also often transported into heaven during the time of his work on earth, as "*the Son of man who is in heaven*"--he who, although he is the Son of man, had yet his roots in heaven. If Paul was transported into the third heaven [II Cor.12:2] how much more may we believe this of Jesus; but this, too, only as a consequence of the love he had gained for himself as the Son of man, because of which he had been declared to be God's Son also.

If we ponder this, it would seem that perhaps the Father, keeping his own counsel, did not make known absolutely everything

to Jesus; probably for the very reason that Jesus, who as a human being was faced with many temptations, should not be raised up in a way inappropriate to the lowliness of the flesh. If such an [313] observation is right--on no account do I wish to be dogmatic about it--many a passage that has caught my attention becomes plain to me: As, for instance, when Jesus was looking for the fruits on a fig tree, which of course could not be there yet, "*for it was not the season for figs*" (Mark 11:13); or, since he did not know who had touched him when the woman touched the fringe of his garment (Luke 8:43-44). In both cases we have to assume that if Jesus let go of himself, as it were, he could be taken unawares like anyone else. If he had been carried along by the idea that everything would be previously revealed to him--which, however, was not necessary because he also had to appear as an average human being--he would not have been taken unawares in either case.

If we apply what has been said in the passage above, the Lord's remark is quite instructive: "*But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*" (Mark 13:32). This leads us to think that the Savior might well have brought specific questions to his Father, but had received the answer that the Father reserved that for himself. Even after the resurrection, just before the ascension, he said once more to his disciples who were questioning him about the hour, "*It is not for you to know times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority*" (Acts 1:7). This shows us that it still was so--that even the Son did not know, but only the Father. Still more striking is what is said at the beginning of the Revelation to John: "*The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him*" (Rev.1:1)--that is, therefore, Christ did not know it immediately after his ascension, but rather, he had to receive it in a special way in heaven itself. Yes, in the sequel we are even told the heavenly act itself, how he received the revelation: The Father, so is it written (Rev.5), seated on the throne, held a well-sealed scroll in his hand; and the question was asked, "*Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?*" At first no one was found in heaven or on earth or under the earth who was worthy even to look

into it, and this made John weep bitterly. Finally the Lamb became visible in their midst; now there arose great jubilation because the One was found who could be proclaimed worthy to take the Book and break its seals, because he had been slain and by his blood had ransomed all created beings. Before all created beings the Lamb opened one seal after the other, and in this way [314] he himself received full enlightenment, also as to that which until then had been held in deepest secrecy by the Father himself in his might. At that time the hour also must have been revealed to the Lamb; but the Lord did not give John full information about the hour, only a certain indication that in high places that was known and determined. There was no fuller explanation, so also today we do not know the day and hour of Jesus's coming and assuredly will always seek in vain to know.

As we reflect on this, we find in it a meaningful indication of how we are to understand the incarnation of Christ: that it is a sign of how much the Lord, the Word that was with God in the beginning and was God, who was the light and life of all people, without whom nothing could have been created which was created--how much he gave up when he became man. This he did so that he might be the Redeemer and Comforter, showing all creatures how they might come to know God's plan. For the Lord Jesus had to go through all the steps which men do; and therefore he first appears in heaven only as the Risen One, the Son of man raised to the Father to whom all power is truly given. Therefore, he can receive from the Father all that he needs to bring about his redemption, yet still he does not appear to have returned to his original status; perhaps this complete reversion will first come about in the last times, when all will be put in subjection to him [God] and *"then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God, with the Son, may be everything to everyone"* (I Cor.15:27-28). Only after these considerations can we sense the whole depth of the Word: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

Now, the question might be, how is it possible that Jesus can declare so definitely the nearness of his coming? If we turn

to the passages themselves, we shall discover how much this is ultimately so.

Let us begin with the passage (Matt.26:64) in which the Lord seems to express before his judges the nearness of his second coming if they should kill him. These judges were doing their utmost to find out something that would seem to render Jesus worthy of death. The last device which the high priest lays hold of is that he wants Jesus, from his own mouth, to declare in the presence of the councillors that he is the Messiah. The high priest summons him to say seriously whether he is the Christ, the Son of God. [315] Then it says: "*Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.'*"

Here we are led to believe that Jesus is speaking of the nearness of his second coming. But we see that Jesus states two things: Firstly, he is seated at the right hand of Power; secondly, he will come on the clouds. Does this not lead us to think that "*hereafter*" refers to the fact that he is seated at the right hand of Power, and that the other will follow at the right hour?

Concerning Jesus' first words we understand him to mean "*seated at the right hand of God*"; but our Lord intentionally Xsays "*seated at the right hand of Power*" so as to convince his judges that even after his death he will be invested with power. But has not this happened already? Certainly the judges were not able to see high into the heavens up to God's throne. However, in all that followed, they must accept that Jesus would be seated at the right hand of Power--that is, God's power, as the prophetic Word foretold of the coming Christ. The judges want to know whether he is the Christ. He admits it, saying that he is truly the Christ, as it has been written. For David says "*The Lord says to my Lord*" (which is to say, *to my future Son, who is Lord over me*): "*Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool*" (Ps.110:1). The judges want to get rid of him, thinking to thwart him because he wants to be the Christ. But Christ says that by doing this they will enable him to become fully and completely the promised Christ; because that is the

very path he has to take in order to be raised to the right hand of God. This has to happen to enable him, from the throne of God, to overpower all his enemies. The Lord's words could not have had a more disturbing effect on his enemies. The judges had thought themselves to be his masters, and now they are about to do exactly that which will put him in the very position whence he will bring all his enemies, including them, under his feet. For the present, let the judges condemn him; his role was to be the loser. And so it would come about that everything Christ said would immediately be fulfilled. Therefore, also, he was able to say, *"Hereafter you shall become aware and see that I stand above you and shall receive such power that no one can resist me"*

[Matt.28:18]. How this was to be fulfilled I do not need to explain in many words. How the news of the resurrection must have struck the judges! [316] What could they do when, more than once, the apostles stood before them declaring that he whom they had crucified had risen from the dead and had given them power to perform miracles? Also, they had seen something of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as with Stephen. How they had been disgraced when they imprisoned the apostles! Meanwhile the Word and the church had grown. Suddenly it dawned on them that something must have happened with the Crucified One, and through that they would have to reckon with him as the One at God's right hand. And so the *"hereafter"* of which the Lord had spoken was to be fulfilled [Luke 22:69].

Now secondly, the Lord said that they would see him coming on the clouds. However, if he is seated on the right hand of Power in order to overpower his enemies according to the prophecy, then his coming must take place only after they are overpowered. It is clear that there must be a lapse of time between the first and the last event; the question is, how long or how short will it be? *"But nevertheless they were to see it"*, someone will say, *"and it did not happen"*. Not even this is clear from the words of Jesus; or should he have said that they would see him coming if they were still alive? Think how awkward this would have sounded if he had even presumed that they all would not all live to see it. Evidently the impression which remained with the judges was that they might experience it, and

we shall see that this was not a mistake. It follows that even if they did not live to see it, they would all the same see his coming; for in the world beyond people will also have eyes (cf. Rev.1:7). Above all, the judges were to know that even if they caused him to leave the earth, he would simply come back to it--and moreover, not upwards from the underworld, but down from heaven. This they must know; and when, as we have indicated, they see him seated at the right hand of God, the thought must tremble through and through them that he might come suddenly on the clouds; and then they might see how they would fare (Note in Acts 5:28 their secret fear: *"You intend to bring this man's blood upon us"*).

We can find no further trace of anything questionable or especially striking in the passage mentioned, except that the actual time appears indefinite. Let us mark however how important the *"hereafter"* is. *"After what?"* you ask. We answer: *"After the day of his death, which they demand from him by force."* Through this death everything will be fulfilled that he was charged to do. Everything can run its course without delay until the time is ripe for his coming. There remains nothing that might take up more time. [317] *"It is finished,"* the Lord says on the Cross; and there can be no question of postponement. From his standpoint all is ready; and through his departure the time of his return is brought nearer. His victory through his death is so complete that all that remains is to clean up the field of battle, so to say. Possibly this could have taken place in a very short time. But a necessary part of this cleaning up was that the advantage of this victory should be reaped by the Christians. Did not the Holy Spirit condemn the world *"concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world will be judged"* (John 16:11)? Therefore the saints might bring this about forthwith in course of time. The dominion of darkness could be completely cast down by the powers that Jesus offered. Also, through the spreading of the Gospel throughout all nations this could be achieved rapidly; and that they made amazing progress in the beginning is witnessed to in the New Testament. But if they wanted to behold the strongholds of darkness falling quickly before them, it would demand the unabated use of Christ's

victory in order to draw to themselves the powers promised by the Lord. Paul could even write to the Romans: *"Then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet"* (Rom.16:20).

Hereupon we must believe that the saints themselves very soon failed, so that through them all that had been prepared for a time close at hand became remote. The victorious powers, so mighty at first, decreased with every decade, weakened and in the end almost disappeared. Once again Satan had the upper hand, and *"its mortal wound [of the beast] was healed..."* (Rev.13:3). In this way, what had been imminent became distant. TThatthis could happen to what had been spoken about from the very beginning! It would have been even worse if the Lord had not upheld the certainty of the nearness of his coming, for it could only have discouraged the apostles if they had been told when their task was entrusted to them that, in spite of the given plan, progress would come to a standstill.

This standstill came gradually; the writers of the New Testament hardly became aware of it during their lifetime, and after them no holy books were to be written to point it out. Thus the New Testament tells more about Christ's nearness than about his remoteness. Holy men of later times could well have recorded what the angel of the Lord said once to the people of Israel in Bochim, that after the death of Joshua and of the elders the completion of the conquest of their country would come about slowly. In the Name of the Lord he said:

*I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land which I swore to give to your fathers. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars." But you have not obeyed my command. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you [Judges 2:1-3].*

It is a fact that such an angel has dealt in this way with Christianity. Now we must await a new time when what has been given up and postponed will be taken up again. When this time comes, we shall also have the proof that everything could have

been fulfilled in the first decades already if all had been rightly led. Oh, how short-sighted we are to speak of the misconceptions that the apostles, even Jesus himself, appear to us to have been under!

Let us turn to other passages where Jesus appears to express the certainty of the nearness of his coming; for instance, Matt.10:23. Here the Lord sends his disciples out to go in his stead through the cities and proclaim the Gospel, because he knows that he will not have enough time to go everywhere in person before the end of his days on earth. So now he says that the disciples would not even be able to complete this mission, in these words: *"Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes."*

Here it is noticeable that Jesus says *"before the Son of man comes"* instead of *"before the Son of man is killed and taken from the earth"*. In effect, those words are the nearest Jesus will use to express what will happen next. He does not want to broach the thought of his death because the disciples would be shocked and their courage for their mission to the cities would be weakened. *"Why"*, they might have asked anxiously, *"should we go through the cities if, before we have finished, you are to die and then all will be over?"* The Lord could have said much here that the disciples could neither bear nor understand; and that is why he speaks of the last things--the aim and goal of it all--his coming, his return. Certainly, there is a quiet hint here that he will soon depart; but it was not disturbing as long as nothing was said about his death and he could speak of his coming. So the meaning is: *"You will not have finished your work in the cities, before that happens which is the prelude to my coming"*. [319] If one looks at it carefully, one can see how subtle these words are. It as if he said, *"You will not have finished until I--but no!--until I come"*, by which he suppresses *"dying"* and emphasizes *"coming"*. His death is disheartening, his return inspiring; and he can encourage them with the latter because he is in fact on the road to it. Accordingly, although it seems strange that in this context he should put such emphasis on this word, as if to make out that his coming would happen earlier than his dying, yet his coming began in reality with his resurrection

and transfiguration; for there and then was the beginning of an actual continuous coming toward the final goal: his true and visible coming.

If this is kept in view, the meaning of this passage could be, "*until I myself am in the position to come and work with you*". Meanwhile he allows them to act without his presence. But soon he is to appear on the scene in person, and we are reminded of his Word, "*I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you*" (John 14:18). He will in fact be with his disciples every day after his ascension, also through the Holy Spirit, who brought him back in person even if they could not see him. He wants to let his disciples know that the time of his coming to help them in this way is so close at hand that they will not yet have finished working in the cities. At all events, we see that nothing is mentioned in this passage about the nearness of that future time that we are still awaiting now.

Another passage which is not easily understood is the word of the Risen One to Peter about the disciple that Jesus loved: "*If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?*" (John 21:22). Here again the Lord seems to assume that he will return very soon. But the other disciples do not take it in this way and tend to think that the Lord means John will never die. This makes it very clear that they think of Jesus' future return as more remote rather than close at hand, or else that John's life would have to be very long to enable him to experience that future. So, on the whole, Jesus' words speak more against than for the immediate future. John himself does not want people to assume that Jesus said he would not die; he would rather leave it as Jesus has said it, whatever the meaning. But what if the disciples were right after all--if in reality John was not to leave his body but would be transported as was Elijah? I can believe that, just as I also believe the same may have happened with certain other apostles who did not die as martyrs; as with some remarkable saints of the early times, who, I feel, could not [320] have died like other people. I am always of the opinion that there must have been believers, at the time of Jesus, in whom were fulfilled these words: "*And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die*" (John 11:26); just as I also

elsewhere understand that at the time of Jesus' return those who are still alive will not die but shall be transfigured and taken up to meet the Lord. I would like to say this in the case of another passage which causes many misgivings to the interpreters, namely:

*Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom (Matt.16:28).*

Before this, the Lord had spoken of those people who, even if they lost their life, would nevertheless find it again. Now, there are many who are ready to sacrifice themselves just as the martyrs have done, but they do not have the opportunity, as it were, to be martyrs. Beside the martyrs these people seem diminished, yet they too have to endure the miseries of death. Since the Lord once taught this about losing one's life, it is our bounden duty to say that for the truly faithful there is no more death in the sense that one can fear that one's life is lost. Even if there has been no martyr-death through which life is gained, yet life, everlasting life, can be given even without death. Herein lies a glorious comfort for the faithful and at the same time an encouragement, because the martyrs and those others are in the same position: these are willing to lose their life to find it again, whereas the others have kept their life and therefore do not need to find it again. If this passage (Matt.16:27) says that when the Son of man comes in the glory of the Father he will reward every man for what he has done, does not this mean that those people who have denied themselves entirely, according to God's will and desire, will not taste death? Nothing hinders us from taking these words literally, namely, that some will not taste death--even if it is the case only with the apostles and those who are similarly working for the Kingdom of God--until they see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom. Perhaps they will be the leaders of the living, who, transfigured like themselves, will be taken up to meet Jesus in the heavens. In this way the focal point of this passage [321] would not be the nearness or remoteness of Jesus' future time, nor the coming, nor the beholding of the coming, of the Son of

man, but rather that some would not taste death before the time is fulfilled when all death will cease with his coming.

Now we have talked about the main passages in which Jesus seems to indicate the nearness of his return, and we have found that while nothing definite has been said, we can take it that the actual time has not been announced. All the passages that tell that the Lord will come quite unexpectedly after a long period of waiting point in the same direction, and this causes people to come into a false security. Moreover, there are other sayings of Jesus which point more to the distant future than to the immediate time. In the parable of the talents (Matt.25:14) where, before the master leaves on his travels, he distributes the talents with which the servants should bring in an increase, it is said, *"Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them"* (v.19). Similarly, according to the parable of the widow and the unrighteous judge, the church is likened to a widow completely abandoned to the mercy of her adversary; thus is foretold a real deterioration in the church, such as could only come about through a long time of waiting. Here the church stands no more under the promise that the Lord gave: *"I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you"* (John 14:18). The church is widow and orphan, and her Lord is as good as absent. Moreover she is in the hands of an unrighteous judge who should rescue her from her adversary who has gained power over her. But, it is said, for a long time the judge would not do this. In short, the whole parable goes to show that the Son of man will let us wait and wait a very long time, and in the end (that is, at his return) the Lord still asks, *"Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"* (Luke 18:1-8).

Finally, this passage in Jesus' longer teaching concerning his future is of especial importance: *"And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come"* (Matt.24:14).

According to this passage, how can the Lord speak of the nearness of his coming when he lets his coming depend on the outcome of the teaching [322] entrusted to the apostles and their

followers? However, we know that just in the most recent times the Gospel has been preached again throughout all lands. Yes! Now pay attention! Now you can say "*The time is near!*" For we can almost assert that there is no place on earth where Jesus' Name is altogether unknown. There is a growing excitement everywhere. Therefore be on the watch! The Lord's preparations can be made very quickly; and the call of the Lord may be heard overnight: "*Behold, I am coming!*"

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[322]

THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN

*Question:* What is meant by "*the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens*"? According to my understanding, the suffering and dying of the Lord is re-enacted by the church (as the Body of Christ). When, in antichristian times, the church as the Body of Christ is publicly declared dead, and is seen by humankind as an ethical phenomenon [*sittliche Erscheinung*] in their heaven, apparently inanimate; and after this it arises again in the first resurrection--then would be fulfilled "*the sign of the Son of man in the heavens*". Is this correct?

*Answer:* This question can be answered by a consideration of Matt.24:29-30:

*Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and when they see it all the tribes of the earth will mourn.*

I cannot find anything figurative about this passage. I just have to take it as it runs. By "*sun and moon*" I understand naught else but the actual sun and actual moon that we know, just as by "*stars*", the actual stars. If I take it differently and let myself be drawn into metaphysical interpretations I will get as good as nothing from this wonderful, promising prophecy. Further, this prophecy indicates that when the powers of the heavens will be shaken there will be changes in the laws and powers which, up till now, have determined the motions in the heavens, as the observations of astronomers have confirmed with incredible accuracy. The convulsing of the entire heavens, whereby the order and the laws are changed, may well indicate that, in the end, an altogether new heaven shall come into being, at which time God will renew the whole of creation. [323]

Now, if in the midst of this powerful shaking and convulsion of the heavens or heaven, the sign of the Son of man is to appear

throughout the whole infinite space of the heavens, then I still cannot understand anything different, finally, than that it is the outward visible sign which will be seen in the heavens by all nations, who will become aware of it--as is possible within twenty-four hours--and all people will be so greatly appalled that loud lamentations will be heard. The sign will appear not to move for a long time, until it gradually sinks down to earth. It is possible that such a sign of the Son of man is the Son of man himself in radiant splendor and accompanied by angels and saints. But perhaps he himself is not to be seen in the forefront; so that everything else that comes with him and surrounds him is the sign of his appearing in the heavens. Something so great, so unspeakably great, will occur in the whole of creation at this time. But our thoughts and imaginations are of no avail, we still can have no conception thereof. Therefore it is better to take these words as they stand, without too many explanations and discussions. But we can be given much faith and hope through them, although they are a theme not yet realized. There are many prophecies in the Scriptures which must suffice us even if we have their word alone and may not probe into it any further.

This enquirer takes the word "*heaven*" figuratively, not understanding by it the actual heavens, in that he calls the church, as the Body of Christ, an ethical phenomenon in the heavens of mankind, that is, an appearance among men, which, as it were, hovers over them, animating, refreshing and enlightening them as the blue of the sky hovers over the earth. Certainly, we ourselves often use the word "*heaven*" in the same way; but Scripture never does this. When it speaks of heaven, it means the actual heaven. Suppose the questioner thinks further: The church appears in the people's heaven as dead--that is, it seems that she has received the finishing stroke on earth--yet she will arise again at the first resurrection and be an enlivening and enlightening power in the people's heaven (that is, among the nations); and there will be the appearance of *the sign of the Son of man in heaven*, when the Son of man with his church becomes all-important again." Should this then also take place at the first resurrection? We see that we cannot come to any clarity

about the sign of the Son of man if [324] we don't accept the word "heaven" as it is meant in the text.

However, concerning the thought we often meet: that the church as Christ's Body will also suffer, die, and rise again--I cannot agree with it. The Savior is so intimately bound with his church that, if she were to be killed, it would be as if Jesus should die for the second time. But he fulfilled everything with the one sacrifice; and the death of the church cannot add anything to his sacrifice to make it any more perfect. According to the Bible it is true that the church, or the Body of Christ on earth, will still have many afflictions. But the reason for that is, that Satan must be totally overcome, and this is the affair of the church through her faith in Christ, since Christ himself is no more on the earth and therefore cannot perform this task in person. No doubt Satan, the prince of this world, was judged for all time through the death of Christ (John 16:11). But the judgment has not yet become effective insofar as Satan still has his claws into everything; and first he has to be driven out through the faith of the church, by means of Christ's heavenly power. Judgment cannot be carried out except through the faith of those who are Christ's followers and who entrust themselves completely to his might. Satan attacks wherever he can; and if he is attacked he defends himself furiously and fiercely; he is not to be so easily captured. That is why extreme endurance is needed on the part of the fighters--who are always very few, and mostly in silent opposition--especially since what power Satan still has is constantly being reinforced through the falling away of so many Christians and through their endless wantoning with him. But faith in Christ and in the power of his blood has warded off Satan's attacks and has overcome him through perseverance, in spite of much struggle, temptation, suffering and at times apparent defeat. Finally, however, faith will prevail over all the powers of darkness, and the words that Paul spoke in his time will be fulfilled: *"Then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet"* (Rom.16:20); and that will be recognized by a general awakening throughout the whole world.

In the end all that is left to Satan--who has become powerless against the church itself--is to strengthen enmity and hostility against the children of God by those Christians who [325] have fallen away, the only ones over whom he has a hold. But those people who have not yet met judgment to the degree that Satan has, and who therefore still have a great deal of liberty left them which they can use to be tyrannical and powerful by their unbelievable practices (even though these bring judgment upon them, to be sure)--those people will inflict great torments on the believers, who will be defenceless against them. Yet these [Christians] will overcome them with their patience and steadfastness, through their faith in Jesus, even at the cost of their lives. The opponents of Christ, with the so-called Antichrist at their head, may well go so far that it seems as if they were able--and even were allowed--to completely exterminate the church of Christ. But the elect will call on God day and night, and they have the promise that in the end the Lord will rescue them speedily (Luke 18:8). At a time where all seems lost, the *sign of the Son of man* will be seen in the heavens ("*after the tribulation*" means when that tribulation will have come to an end) before the extinction of the church can take place. Then all at once everything will take a different course. Satan will be bound for a thousand years, Christ's opponents will be banished, the elect will be transported to the Lord, and those who are left will come under the care of Jesus and those of his own to whom judgment will be committed, however that will be (Rev.20:4).

This is more or less what we find in the Scriptures. But that the Body of Christ--his church--must be killed, and once killed, like Christ will rise again, of this we find nothing in the Scriptures. The sign of the Son of man in heaven, or he himself, will be the banner of redemption and victory.

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THE TRIBULATIONS OF THE LAST TIMES

*Question:* How can it be affirmed and put forward by many as a general recognition, that the future days and last times are going to be better times, richer in spirit and grace, when, according to all the witnesses in Old and New Testaments, just these last days are described as a time of falling away? (Dan.11:36; 12:1; Matt.24:37-39; 25:1-13; Luke 17:26-30; I Thess.5:1-4; II Thess.2; I Tim.4:1-4; II Tim.3:1-6; 4:1-5; II Pet.3; I John 2:18-19; Jude, vv. 17-20; Rev.13). All these passages give us ample proof that the last times are to be times of apostasy. From the time when Paul and John write in their letters that the evil is already stirring, it has gained increasing ground up to our time alongside the working of the Gospel like leaven among all the nations; thus the acceptance of the Word and the falling away from it continue side by side. But in my opinion, the words of the prophet Joel [Joel 3:1 in the German Luther Bible, Joel 2:18 in the English R.S.V.] apply to the people of Israel only after the multitude of the gentiles has been accepted. For at the first Pentecost, this applied in the first place to the Jews; and in the end time also it will apply to the remnant of Israel.

An industrial worker.

*Answer:* I am very willing to answer the above question, even though this time I will make it shorter, considering how much I have already written on this subject. Above all I want to say that I do not wish to be dogmatic. I want to seek out and interpret these passages according to Scripture only, and I ask to be corrected by others. My only wish is that we do not read the Bible with prejudice, but are willing to value everything therein. We generally tend to ignore those promises of the prophets which are not yet fulfilled; and we often picture the hard times that have been announced, in such a way as can be found nowhere in the Bible. So all the world pulls a long face

when the end times are spoken about; and I would so wish for my Savior that he might meet happy faces among us. For the rest, I have not yet noticed that my written thoughts have found general recognition; perhaps, however, our friend who writes has seen more than I; I should be very glad of this.

Above all, I would like to discuss what actually is meant in the Scriptures by "the end times". According to the Scriptures, they already began with our Savior (Heb.1:1-2); and the whole time after him until his second coming is called "the end time" because it is the last time of which God has spoken (Acts 2:17; I John 2:18). This is all the more understandable because this time is incalculable--rather, it is a time which soon, indeed any day, may come to an end. Consequently, all that Scripture says about the afflictions to come is already taking place "in the end time". The first persecution of the Christians took place "in the end time". The false teachers, the false [327] prophets and false saviors of recent times, and after apostolic times, already came "in the end time". The Mohammedans, with their horrifying wars of extermination, came "in the end time". The dreadful mass migrations that turned the whole world upside down happened "in the end time". The numerous murderous wars, already soon after the first centuries and gruesomely repeated right into our epoch, already happened--and are happening--"in the end time". The many distortions of Christianity and the most evil corruption in the churches, about which there is no protest, have all occurred "in the end time". The Reformation and the storms brought about by it came "in the end time". The wicked persecutions by the Catholic Church, continuing right up to the present, the burning at the stake of Christians, took place "in the end time". How are we to understand the French Revolution, which replaced even God and Christ? All this took place "in the end time". How much pestilence, how many earthquakes, famines, danger from fire and flood have there been, and all "in the end time". What unspeakable atrocities come to mind that have happened in these 1800 years, and all in the period which the Scriptures call "the end time" (passages such as II Tim.3:1; II Pet.3:3; Jude, v.18, support these facts).

We see then that in thinking of the scriptural prophecies we simply have no grounds to ignore all the atrocities of the last century as if they must needs be repeated, only more intensively, just in those years immediately before the return of the Lord. Rather, we may confidently assume that a great deal has already been fulfilled which the Devil, without waiting for the end time, contrived in order to corrupt humanity so far that even the sacrifice of Christ would be wasted. Above all else, we can be certain of one thing: that those earlier struggles can surely not have been in vain, and in truth, have brought us much benefit. No greater tribulation can ever take place than there was at the destruction of Jerusalem, which was *"such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be"* (Matt.24:21). As we reflect on these things we must straightway pray: *"Father in heaven, let it suffice with what has been, and spare us from the same!"* Our dear friend says himself that the falling away had already begun even at the time of the apostles, and again in this end time--in fact it is the spirit of Antichrist; evil was already raging secretly, and it has prevailed more and more right into our time. Perhaps it is in our own time [328] that--through help from above--it will come to its end. Scripture described even then many events which will occur in this end time (cf. Acts 20:29-30) from which one need not understand that things will again reach such tremendous heights. If the coming of Jesus is to be the redemption not only of ourselves but of the whole groaning creation, over which we must rejoice, then I do not see it that it must needs be so horrible right up to the time of Jesus' coming, as is usually imagined by Christians. How refreshing is the picture of the blossoming fig tree, before the Lord comes (Matt.24:32); and what a peace is expressed there with the ten virgins! We can already derive from this that after all the bright day may break in even if there are still very terrible events taking place until the first signs are visible. Moreover, all the passages raised by our friend are either not completely grasped, or else we do not know if they truly belong to the end time, for so very much has happened already in these eighteen centuries of "end time". Apostasy has never been so extensive as it is now, and yet in

such a way that there is the appearance of peace. The Gospel is being more and more neglected, and everywhere there is peace. The apostasy that impertinent art has brought into our time, an actual falling away from Christ to Belial, can hardly become more widespread. This may well be that which is spoken of in Rev.13:7, when the beast will overcome even the saints in the fight and will have authority over all, great and small, rich and poor, free men and slaves (Rev.13:16). But all this, no doubt, is part of the end time, and has gnawed away from the beginning as the most scandalous apostasy. But many believe that it is not a time of apostasy if there is not one great commotion after another. Yet in this very last time of all everything can be changed immediately through the Spirit of God!

That is to say, I believe that we may discover other scriptural passages in the prophets and in the New Testament which show that after the Fall there still will be a period before Christ's return in which the Lord will blaze a trail of light through all the races of men, as is written: *"And his Bride has made herself ready"* (Rev.19:7). We have so much apostasy and misery already that I can believe that now, finally, finally God will also allow something better to happen, as he has promised. Paul says already: *"Then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet"* (Rom.16:20) (so true!), so that something better will come for a while; and we do know that *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the Devil"* (I John 3:8). [329] When is this to happen? Or, after all, are we not to see a time when Satan's works are destroyed? There are many passages to show that our Savior is still to have a time of victory on earth. The Holy Spirit will help toward this end, the Holy Spirit which has been given back to us, since according to Joel it will be poured out over all flesh, not only over Israel. We know that our hearts are still hearts of stone; when will come the hearts of flesh, so that we may become capable of obeying God's commands? When the Lord says to his Son, *"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession"* (Ps.2:8), this surely means that all peoples shall be overcome and fall at Jesus' feet. In short, if our dear friend has taken the trouble to find instances that

proclaim only terrible events, and of these he has found only a few, he should for once read the many other passages, namely from the prophets, that speak of the overwhelming splendor God will send through Christ over all flesh, even in these days.

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CONCERNING THE FINAL TRIBULATION

*Question:* Is it true that the church will not come into the great tribulation but will be caught up in the rapture, as the Darbyites say? Is it not rather that just this tribulation is necessary for us, and that the church, as the Body of Christ, must come into Hades in order to prevail over it and triumphantly show in the first resurrection that the gates of Hell could not prevail against her? Is it not so that the victory over Hades is our authorization to reign over the earth with an iron rod?

*Answer:* This question leads us on to many subjects about which something must be said. I will try to express my thoughts on all this, without wishing to appear as an authority who may not be questioned.

First, I must say that I dislike answering such questions if I am to stay specifically within their bounds. For it seems to me that such questions disregard the present too much, looking toward a future time about which one can say all kinds of things, clever or inept, which to me throw no light on the present. If I neglect the present, I may well have to depart [330] without experiencing the dreamed-of future; and then nothing is gained if what is required in the present has been neglected. Some, in directing their gaze to the distant future, may even fall into swamps and over precipices; or may remain lying there without working their way out. How mistaken they are!

I perceive that the present has been passed over when I need to ask, *"Who and where is the church that is to be the Body and the Bride of Christ?"* Does there exist such a church, somewhere and somehow? In what country can we imagine it to be? If we say *"This church consists of the believers of the so-called invisible church dispersed all over the earth"*, that is indeed true; but that is not a gathered circle, no union of many or of all who might be the corporeal expression of that church, for it would

remain just about invisible and inconceivable. Again, who are these believers? How is it that all of us who believe in Christ are so cut off from one another, even in the Spirit, that we really have no idea in which denomination, in which group or community we are to seek out and find those believers who are members of the invisible church? Neither do we find much trace of the pure Bride that Paul would like to lead to Christ when he appears (II Cor.11:2); but we do find much which is repellent, loveless, worldly, secretly hypocritical. Even among the best, how much harshness, exclusiveness, self-righteousness is shown to others who also wish to belong to the church! Thus it is not possible to bring into plain view the church as it should be, and which can be prepared as the Bride of Christ. Occasionally one finds communities of Christians who mistakenly believe that they, with all their members, are the church. One could name a dozen such communities who believe they alone have it, and they alone are it; and that whatever does not belong in their group stands outside the church which the Savior will acknowledge as his Bride. The Darbyites too, as far as I know, take the position, sometimes decidedly, that they alone are the church. Just to say one thing: If this were the case, how it would reduce to insignificance the fruits of the death of Jesus on the Cross! However this may be, it seems strange to me to speak of a church which is privileged not to suffer under the coming great tribulation, where actually I simply cannot see any kind of church; and each of us, and I am no exception, must take pains to find out whether he may be [331] counted as belonging to it when he honestly sees himself for what he is.

The next thing, first and foremost, that we should get in focus, would be: "What should a church be like which the Lord can one day recognize as his church and his Bride?" Hardly anyone will be able to accept that such a church could be brought into being by men today; and those, too, who go all out to convert people, zealously using this or that method--against which there is nothing to be said--they, too, can see well enough how little they can achieve. Occasionally there are so-called revivals, also very diverse in character; but how quickly they disappear, and how little trace remains, as we experienced years

ago with the revivals in England and America! The papers were full of it for one whole year; but we have to recognize that about them there was little that was God-centered--on the contrary, much human persuasion and pressure, so that it has all disappeared again with almost no trace; indeed if anything, there has been a hardening of many hearts. It yielded no increase for the church of the Lord. If this church is really to come about of which it is said, "*Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready*" (Rev:19:7), then something new must come from above. A renewed, actual, not just imaginary pouring out of the Holy Spirit has to come, bringing new life to Christendom, to Israel, to the heathen world, in one word to all flesh; a stirring which will rapidly spread throughout the world and call into being a true church of Christ. Believers must rather direct their thoughts to this end. For this they must have more faith and hope than is generally the case, and to this end they must act in word and prayer. They must learn to call upon God like that widow, "*Vindicate us from our adversary and give us back what has been stolen!*" That must be the first thing that we should watch for in looking toward the end time, in order to act now in good faith and loyalty. All else one hears said about the end time is to me less important; and before I see this happen, I have as good as no interest in anything else, because only if a new spirit is to blow through Christendom can one understand the Revelation rightly, or see and say anything true about the future.

From this, it will be clear that I can in no way entertain the thought that the church of Christ will not come into the great tribulation but before this dread time will be caught up in the air. Actually this is to happen first with the coming of the Lord, as is unequivocally said in the Scriptures (I Thess.4:17): first the dead will arise, and the living, insofar as they are found worthy, will be caught up together with them. This apostolic word is completely overlooked by any other concept. I, however, stay by the Word.

The thought that the Church must come into Hell and overcome Hell in order to legitimize her reign on earth is also not

founded in the Bible, and is altogether unthinkable. Indeed, before all believers come to die, the Lord will speedily rescue the chosen ones who call on him day and night (Luke 18:7-8), in order that they remain alive and can straightway be welcomed by the Lord. A chosen one, even if he dies, does not go to Hell (a place of torment in the underworld). Or else, what would the Word of Jesus mean that he spoke at Lazarus' grave--"He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25)--if it does not mean that he will not go to Hell, but in some way be led alive into life in the light? Perchance the martyrs, "*the souls of those who had been beheaded*" (Rev.20:4), have the authority to rule. But it is not their death but the Savior's that gives them that authority. Whoever remains true unto death is entitled to all things, whether he dies a violent death or not. But he has not earned it; the death of Christ alone has earned it, whose blood suffices for the perfecting of all according to His will, without any additional merit on the part of man.

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ON ISAIAH 65

When we interpret the writings of the prophets as they foretell good times, times of redemption, the end time after the great tribulation, and the blessed Year of the Lord, we should not lose sight of the fact that the prophets deal only with earthly things; they never go beyond the earthly, perhaps to describe the blessedness of a life outside of time, a heavenly life. All revelations that they receive are to take place primarily in this life. Nothing beyond this is disclosed to the prophets of the Old Testament, so much so that it is difficult to interpret in the Spirit the details that they proclaim. They do not [333] console themselves with thoughts of life in heaven, as we do, to compensate for the wretchedness of the present, or in order to escape the misery of this time which, as things are, will never change. They remain throughout on the earthly plane and, in general, absolutely nothing speaks to them concerning the world beyond. Thus their hope for a glorious future is directed only to the lifting of the curse that burdens the earth, making it impossible for life on earth to change.

Thus Lamech, Noah's father, said about his son at birth: *"Out of the ground which the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands"* (Gen.5:29). So to Lamech, the thought of redemption meant only the lifting of the curse that had come to the earth and human life through sin; and that all the good life that he believes he is promised will come about in his days on earth, so that life on earth will be as pleasant as the Lord had wanted it to be when he said, *"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good"* (Gen.1:31).

We can see this clearly also in the passage where the prophet Isaiah speaks about children, young men and old men, about vineyards and houses, about birth, about lambs and lions, oxen and serpents, and so on; all this presupposes only that there will be no more corruption, no more abusing, to embitter

life on earth (Isa.65:17-25). Thus, when in the seventeenth verse a new heaven and a new earth are spoken of, it is not meant by "new" that the entire nature of heaven and earth will be transformed and therefore life on earth as it has been until then must needs change; what is meant here by "new" is: when all that is harmful and corrupt--not only that which lies in the earth as a seed but also that which is caused to continue through celestial influences--will be removed, and every curse brought about by sin will be taken away. Quite different is it in Revelation (21:1ff.), where a new heaven and a new earth is spoken about; for there, much is said that points to quite other circumstances and different conditions coming into being. This is a broader view than that given by the prophecies, an insight that the prophets of the Old Testament were not given.

The question arises then, how is the promised restoration of the earthly [334] to be fulfilled? This wonderful time on earth is represented as an abiding and long-lasting period. Yes, it is not even indicated that anything other is to follow this time. One can even say that the Lord did not wish the prophets to proclaim anything of what lay beyond the frontiers of life on earth; and so nothing remained but to translate all blessedness as earthly blessedness, or to speak only of a blessed earthly life for the living, and to take this time as being boundless. This does not preclude the fact that the Lord might thereafter allow changes in the life of blessedness, also on earth, according to his hitherto unrevealed counsel, and that gradually he might transform the earthly into the heavenly. However this is to come about, human blessedness is not to decrease but rather increase in the future time, whether life is to be on earth or in heaven. Certainly, however, there is the prospect of a better life on earth, according to the narrations of the prophets.

In speaking thus I am not inferring, like many recent commentators, that the prophets were not able to distinguish between the times. In many aspects this is true; but in what we are concerned with here it is hardly acceptable. For it is not the prophet who is speaking but the Lord himself, as we understand clearly from the passage under discussion. But the Lord must know what he is saying, and in any case he must have in

mind a betterment of life on earth which we cannot take to be merely on the spiritual plane. God's honor demands, as it were, that the depravity that entered through the serpent, corrupting man and all around him, would not be healed through the destruction of the corrupted world and the establishing of a new one; no, in order to prove that the Lord is indeed more powerful than Satan, the corrupted world itself must be led back to its primeval, unspoiled state. Thus also it will be proved that there is nothing which has been ruined which the Lord cannot restore again without himself having to demolish everything. Therefore we can in truth expect a time on earth which will be the same as that which the Lord portrays through the prophets, a time of nothing but delight and joy, whence all that is evil and corrupt will have vanished; but all else will continue as pre-ordained.

Certainly one can have varying thoughts concerning this. First I shall refer to the so-called millenium, as many commentators do when they place the glorious [335] days of life on earth which the prophets portray into the thousand-year kingdom about which the Revelation speaks (Rev.20:5ff.). However, I will still later comment that these thousand years are not described as so glorious in the Revelation as they are in the descriptions of the prophets. It is hard for me even to look at these thousand years which have such a painful end, and I can only think that, immediately on the Lord's coming, he will much rather want to bring an end to all the deep suffering on the earth if we prayerfully approach him; all the more so because the delay has been so great, and in the beginning was not accepted. But apart from that, the glorious state portrayed by the prophets does not fit the thousand years, for this thousand years is to have an end; whereas those other prophecies picture a perpetual splendor which will not fall back into decay. The prophets describe the ultimate, the goal of God's thoughts of grace; these at least will never again suffer a reverse, even if there is to be a transformation of the blissful state in the more distant future. What God will restore is to remain and endure for as long as God's kindness does not have even greater blessings to bestow--of which nothing could have been foretold by the

prophets, because nothing had been revealed to them of the New Testament times to come. All that is shown by the prophets is that the earthly life will one day become as God had originally planned it; and we may assume that once this state is restored the new conditions will prevail eternally. In this way we also are able to recognize how wonderfully the Lord will bring everything into his true order again. We can accept this assumption, since in all that God still intends to do there will never again be a falling away from what has already been won.

God may very well have in mind a complete transformation of the entire creation, one which will no longer have its roots in the corruption brought about by the opposing power. This last must be made better or restored without such a transformation. Even if Peter (II Pet.3:10-12) speaks of the heavens passing away with a loud noise and the elements being dissolved with fire on the Day of the Lord, we must not forget that according to other passages in Scripture all this clearly will not take place immediately, but only after a longer period of time; it will follow in the future, or after the Day of the Lord. Much has to happen before this coming of the Lord, as Jesus himself also foretold. How remarkable are David's words in Psalm 102:25-27, in which there is a premonition that the first foundations of heaven and earth and all that was created can wear out as something transitory, and therefore need renewal from the hands of the Creator, perhaps firstly to become imperishable, and only then to become eternal.

*Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They will perish, but thou dost endure, they will all wear out like a garment. Thou wilt change them like raiment, when thou wilt...*

[Free translation from the German].

We have too little information in the Scriptures to determine the time of such a catastrophe; and therefore we should not take Peter's words to be decisive also as to time. Nevertheless, a rejuvenation of the earthly conditions is certain, according to the prophets, whether it is of long or short duration; although the prophecy does indicate a longer period, as we hear that the

people's days will be like the trees', and that men of a hundred years will be called boys or young men.

During the great time of the redemption of the earth--no other "end time" was conceivable at the time of the prophets, since life in eternity was entirely unrevealed--man also must undergo a great change. He will have the Holy Spirit, a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone, he will be inwardly brought in frame to serve the Lord with all his heart, and caused "*to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances*" (Ezek.36:26-27). Also, the powers of darkness which were within him will have left him. The redemption on earth is so great on this account, that men will no longer walk in *sin*, tormenting and corrupting one another. Meanwhile--and now we come to the main point of the question before us--we may understand that sin will not be entirely eliminated, since the freewillingness of man has not been withdrawn. Until man has entirely lost the habit of sinning, he will always be in a struggle; and here our text says "*The sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed*" (Isa.65:20). So there can still be signs of wantonness, as there is among the youth in our epoch, they who in this new time will reach the age of a hundred years. But sin will then immediately be punished with death, so that a general corruption may not again take hold. Consequently it is said in Isa.65:20, "*The boys shall die a hundred years old (namely, if they sin); and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed*". Their punishment will go still further, and probably in the place of torment where the accursed of earlier times are kept. Furthermore, when men fulfill their days without having to end them before their time, and when "*the days of my people shall be as the days of a tree*", a certain limit is assumed although death is not mentioned--then, in place of death, we may think of those people as being transformed at the coming of Christ, and caught up together to meet the Lord in the heavens (I Thess.4:17); this transformation and ecstasy will cause men to leave the earth, just as eternal life with the Lord, the redemption of all, is the actual goal according to New Testament revelation. Therefore, whilst some will be uplifted into blessedness, there will be some who, although they do not die as we die now, will be transported into the place of torment,

that is: into the other death, and in this way they will die.  
The prophecies of the prophets tell us this much. But still, we  
have to think of an actual transformation coming over the heavens  
and earth, as is described in Rev.21. What will then be is not  
revealed to us.

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Trsl. Ivy Staengl, Jan. 1992  
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[337]

GOD'S THOUGHTS OF PEACE

*These are the words of the Lord: When a full seventy years has passed over Babylon, I will take up your cause and fulfill the promise of good things I made you, by bringing you back to this place. I alone know my purpose for you, says the Lord: Prosperity and not misfortune, and a long line of children after you. If you invoke me and pray to me, I will listen to you: When you seek me, you shall find me; if you search with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord (Jeremiah 29:10-14 [-13 in Eng.]).*

It is always most interesting to learn to understand the whole mind of the prophets, because when they refer to the present in which they live they say infinitely more about it than of the things which did not immediately take place. Keeping this in mind, that is the reason the prophets are so important for all times, and especially for our own.

These prophetic words are part of a letter which Jeremiah wrote from Jerusalem to Babylon, to the Jews in captivity there. It was Nebuchadnezzar who had already come on two occasions, and each time had led away many Jews into captivity, in order [338] to weaken their power so that they would not be able to start a further insurrection. Until then, the Jews had paid little attention to the prophets. Now, however, in captivity they were more inclined to listen, because their needy situation and their homesickness weighed on them. But now it was the false prophets, rather, who made themselves important by representing to the Jews in captivity, as from the Lord, that they, the Jews, would soon be freed and allowed to return, because the Lord would deliver them by a miracle from the Chaldeans who were again besieging Jerusalem. But these prophets had not been sent by the Lord; and whoever listened to them was deceived.

Instead of this, Jeremiah advises the captives to consider Babylon as their home for the present, and to make the best of it; for the captivity would come to an end only after seventy

years. Until then, they were free to build houses, plant gardens, marry and increase, so that they might remain in the city in peace, and later leave in peace also.

Jeremiah announces that the captivity will end after these seventy years, and whoever desires it may return then to the promised land (Jer.29:14). The seventy years, however, were to be reckoned from the first captivity, which occurred eighteen years before the actual destruction of Jerusalem. At the time of the return from exile God will once more show them his favor. As the foregoing words indicate, he will seek them out and recall his gracious promise to bring them back to their homeland. Indeed, there were prophets such as Daniel who were instrumental in this, and those who returned would be given prophets again, among them Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who announced the grace that would come with the advent of the Messiah. For, in all this, God's thoughts--and here is what is most important in the passage--were of peace and not of suffering. Even in his judgments lay his thoughts of peace.

First of all, things were not going as they should with Israel. It appeared that the Lord would have to demolish Israel, but with this intention, that with the remnant who were to return he would bring his great thoughts of peace to fruition. For Israel was the people through whom all races and nations of the earth were to be blessed.

This, then, is the goal of God's thoughts of peace, which he intimates through his blessings that the remainder were to come to know. God wanted to bring to fulfilment his original thought in calling [339] Abraham. This is what the thoughts of peace embrace: "*For*" he says, "*I will bring you to the goal that you have been waiting for*" (Jer.29:11).

Now, this future was generally thought of as the hoped-for end of their captivity. But the prophetic word goes further, as has been indicated. When the word *end* is used, it means the same as the word used by the prophets when they say *in the last times*. With Jeremiah, the word means *end* and *hope* or *expectation*. God sees further than the Jews; and those believing Jews who understood that Israel's calling was for the entire world could have a presentiment of what God meant. The prophesied end of

captivity foreshadows the great goal and expectation for the distant future. Just as God shows his benevolence even now, and leads [them] out of captivity, so in time to come this will be transfigured and glorified, although it is not yet so clearly to be seen as proclaimed in the text. Now this will point to Christ, the expected Savior of the world. That was the goal and the expectation of the believing Jew. God's intention is to send this Promised One, and since he is a Prince of Peace, God's thoughts in reference to Him are, above all, thoughts of peace. However, because the intention of peace has not attained complete fulfillment even with the appearance of Christ, we still have to await an end, a final time, when all this will be completely fulfilled for the salvation of the whole world. So we, in our time also, must find comfort in thinking of the peace that God will give in the end time that we await, and which we speak of now as the Second Coming of Jesus.

Jeremiah makes special promises about the coming time of peace: *"If you invoke me and pray to me, I will listen to you"* (Jer.29:12). When the 70 years are over, they will have in their God a God who hears them, helps them and leads them. To those who return, he sends a new Spirit, so that they may seek their God and find him. It is said further: *"When you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me"* (Jer.29:13-14). Such promises were partly fulfilled but, as history shows us, not to the extent that God's intention of peace could be fully realized; for in the first place the Jews never did learn to seek the Lord with all their heart. But still it must one day come to pass that Israel seeks God wholeheartedly; and if that Israel is [340] not the Israel we have known until now, then it must be meant in the larger sense, that it is Christianity that should be endowed with a new living spirit to seek wholeheartedly her God, now become her Savior. Thus God can let himself be found for the fulfillment of all the thoughts of peace which he wants to bestow upon us in the end time that we await, namely, at the longed-for Second Coming of Jesus.

Still today, God has never yet forgotten these thoughts of peace; for, according to this, there is to be peace not only in [the land of] Canaan, but among all the people of God. Let us

learn first how to call on the Lord and plead that when our hearts are fully turned toward him he will hear us if we pray earnestly. If this is so, we shall still experience the great miracles of compassion which all God's thoughts of peace for the whole world embrace. May God give it that, above all, we believe in these thoughts of peace, not in thoughts of suffering; so that at last we can pray for their fulfillment. For God's plan must come to fulfillment, for God is faithful and true.

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[340]

ABOUT THE MILLENNIUM

[Translated in Woodcrest, March 1973.]

The millennium, about which so much is being said nowadays, is something about which I, speaking frankly, am not quite clear. I find it difficult to accept all that people write about it, or even to sketch out an acceptable picture from what they write. For it seems to me that people don't simply stay with the Bible but read an extraordinary amount into it. They do this haphazardly; one can't find in the Bible sufficient justification for all they read into it. Some present such a finished history of the future that it gives me an uncanny feeling to imagine that everything is supposed to come about one day in just the way they depict so fancifully. I feel better if I leave out all the explaining, and consider only what and how the Bible gives it, without Xagreat deal of imaginary detail. Also, I would like to ask simple readers of the Bible not to worry too much about this teaching on the millennium. For in the end it may all turn out to be wrong, and one could think of things to contemplate that are far more profitable for the heart. Nor does it harm anyone to remain completely unclear about this teaching.

[341] The only place in the Bible where one can find anything about a reign of a thousand years (the word *millennium* itself is not there) is in Rev.20:4-7:

*Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgement was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the Word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life again, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life again until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years. And when*

*the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison....*

To depict the glorious conditions there, people often take passages out of the prophets, especially Isaiah (for example, Isa.11:6-9; 65:17-24). There is a serious question, however, whether the time of the thousand years in Revelation will really be so splendid as these passages would indicate. The places mentioned contain a picture of something perfected and completed, only that it is depicted on the basis of the present time and earthly conditions. Yet this perfect state cannot exist just in those thousand years, because it is a limited span of time, whereas the prophets say that the good--that which is to come last of all-- is to last forever. Thus, according to Isa.65:17, the new heaven and the new earth are already there; whereas according to the Revelation of John these two things are not to come until all judgment has been finished. There is nothing at all we can find with certainty about the millennium in the prophets; and merely to pick illustrations of it at random from them is something that I, for one, do not care to do.

According to Revelation, certain of the risen are to live (that is, they are actually to live, not merely to appear as spirits) and rule with Christ for a thousand years. Now, I cannot accept the idea that the resurrected are to continue living on earth in just the same way as before; that they are to be there and remain there among the other people. Those who can accept this say--without foundation, I think, for this is not stated--that Christ is to come only from time to time. What about the risen, then? Will they too be there only now and then? In general, I can't imagine a kingly, princely reign by the resurrected over the people on earth, for if people had to go along under the yoke of such lofty leaders, it would deprive them too much of their independence as well as of their future development.

As to the rule, however, all I can imagine is that it is the opposite of Satan's rule of violence. Up to that point the devil has reigned; that is, the prince of this world, the wicked one, who has secretly subjected everything to himself. Now Satan is bound; now people can begin to communicate with the good

invisible world. Influences of the risen, which come from the Lord, are to be felt everywhere, just as previously the influences of the unholy world were to be felt. The risen make themselves felt everywhere for protection, instruction, warning and even punishment; but they do not conduct themselves as rulers, kings or superiors. The people feel free, and they do keep their freedom.

[342] I cannot imagine the life and rulership of those martyred or beheaded for Christ in any other way. Visible phenomena, however, are not excluded. It is probably significant that it is the martyrs who begin an angelic communication with men in the course of the thousand years. Thus Christ is depicted a thousandfold, through the martyrs, to the eyes of the human generation still living. This is apparently necessary, in order to draw them all the more surely out of a self-seeking life and nature and into full repentance. It appears that the people of that time do not rank particularly high in spiritual insight, since it takes so much to soften their hearts.

The resurrected are also those who have not received the mark of the beast and thus have not entered into an alliance with the darkness and sold themselves to it. They are to show the living that they must keep themselves pure of all idolatry, superstition and darkness, because only by doing so can they receive the good.

There are still a number of observations that could be made which indicate that in those thousand years things will not be so glorious as people usually picture them. It is said, "*The rest of the dead did not come to life again.*" In the same way, the other people, those who did not share in the transformation, also stayed behind on earth (for it is strangely arbitrary to assume that the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the transformation of the living according to I Thess. 4:13-18 will not take place until after the millennium). Those who stay behind on earth, however, must be in need; and because they have to wait so long, they need the special care of the resurrected, even though Satan is bound. After all, they cannot be good people so quickly, at a single stroke.

Furthermore, the risen priests of God in Christ (v.6) are to be manifested in men through the fact that men, unable to help themselves sufficiently, need much special priestly intercession, help, meditation and absolution in order not to be deprived of God's great mercy to them. Thus the millennium is also regarded as a time of patience which God will not draw out any longer than this, because he wants to press on to the great judgment.

The necessity for Satan to be loosed after a thousand years exists only because things go downhill again with men; because, in order to allow them to change their hearts again, they need to be tested by renewed temptations brought on by Satan. It is striking, too, that the thousand years under the care of the risen [344] do not cause a conversion of the gentiles, or that the antichristian minds of the nations of Gog and Magog cannot be turned to the good by the Word of the Gospel. True, the fact that in v.9 a camp of the saints and a beloved city are mentioned shows that there arises and remains a good core which is allowed to experience God's help through fire from heaven. But according to the above, the spiritual state of affairs is not so marvelous as people often picture it without having any proof in the Bible itself.

I find it particularly hard to understand the many interpreters who assume that the rise of the so-called thousand-year reign or millennium is the goal of all revelation of the Old and New Testaments. Yet the millennium is certainly wrongly called by this name, since it is supposed to include all peoples, and this is not the case.

Finally, I am also struck by the fact that nothing is said about powers of the Holy Spirit being perceived during the thousand years. Those who consider it desirable, even necessary, for the Holy Spirit to return very soon, are often told that they are wishing for something that is not supposed to come until the millennium. Yet in the single passage that speaks about this thousand-year reign, if one can call it that, I can find nothing about the return of the Holy Spirit.

On the contrary, what we read about here is not something inward such as the early Christians had through the Holy Spirit; it is more outward, through influences and appearances by the risen;

thus their rule has almost a legal character. Speaking quite freely, I must assume that the Revelation goes on the supposition that no one will ask for the renewal of the Holy Spirit before the coming of Christ; and in that case the Spirit cannot just simply fall upon the people who are left, after the coming of the Lord. But without the Holy Spirit, everything remains in a poor state, even during the thousand years.

How would it be, though, if Christians were soon to concern themselves with coming again into the possession of the Holy Spirit? (The Bible cannot speak about the renewal of the Holy Spirit, because it does not speak about his disappearance.) There are many passages in the New Testament that speak of the coming of Jesus not as a halfway affair but as something complete--the words of Christ in Matt.24 and elsewhere; of Paul in the Letter to the Thessalonians, and in other places. Could not these words become reality immediately and fully, without the thousand years coming between, if Christians were to take up this concern to possess the Holy Spirit? Would not the redemption be much more complete, more radiant and more quickening for all creation, without the thousand years, which give such a melancholy impression?

[344] The Lord tells us to pray without ceasing and never to give up. Unless we do this, the things we are told about in Revelation will happen, including those that we could have prevented. But if we follow Jesus, how many of the heavy things that are written about might then come about in a different way from the way people think they have to come!

I do not want to make any assertions, but I am glad to use this opportunity to offer my thoughts for the examination of those for whom the Bible alone is valid.

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[344]

THE REVELATION TO JOHN

Question: *In reflecting on the prophetic words of Jesus Christ, our Lord, should you not also consider what is written in the Revelation to John? Is it not to be regarded as a complement to them? Surely this would answer the wish of many people.*

Answer: For us to consider the Revelation to John as complementing the prophecies of Jesus, it would have to be clearer and more intelligible to us. It would have to bring more enlightenment; and for myself, if I am to come to some conclusion from it, I must be sure that I understand it. In general, I do not actually understand it, although for the last forty years I have had cause each year to give talks on it. However, in recent years I mostly say nothing more on reading it, whereas earlier I often believed I had found a right explanation; but even this last explanation would leave me dissatisfied. We have to wait for the spirit of prophecy, which we do not have, and which alone can give us true enlightenment.

Jesus' prophecies are clear, distinct, understandable to everyone. In the Book of Revelation we seldom know exactly what is meant, whether the events take place in this world or in the invisible world, whether it is humankind that plays a role or rather the hidden powers of darkness. When I consider it, I would not feel inclined to take anything out of the Revelation and place it so lightly beside the words of Jesus, in the sense of adding something. I would have done so already if I had found it at all possible. Concerning the plagues that are so manifold in the Revelation, we hardly have [345] the right to assume that the Lord has waited 1800 years so that these plagues might occur only in the last days. It is evident that during this long time much will have already taken place which was foretold, especially as these events were to take place, or begin, immediately after the Revelation was given. Can one suppose that in the last 1800 years the Lord has done nothing with humankind of what is

intimated in the Revelation? Certainly, earlier on I was more of the opinion that these prophecies must apply to the last days; but gradually, the silence of Jesus concerning those events which can surely describe only the last times has become so important to me that the thought came to me that many things will have been fulfilled already long ago, so that they are in "the last times" that we are living in now. If we only think what horrors have taken place in the last 1800 years, we can hardly imagine that anything worse than what has repeatedly happened already could still take place. Just think about the Black Death in the fifteenth century. What more, exactly, should remain to happen in the last days, I cannot fathom with certainty. Meanwhile, I do not wish to dispute this point with others who think differently and have different explanations; but I would need much more clarity about the entire Book of the Revelation, in order to come to a complete understanding. For the present, the prophecies of Jesus are more than enough for me so that I have no desire to seek any further.

The friend who asked that question will perhaps be surprised that this narration of the last times according to Jesus does not appear so negative to me as some usually imagine it to be. But it is not my own idea--I have drawn it completely from Jesus' words, which do not even touch on certain things which would cause great fear to all the world if that time should come. To begin with, we read nothing about any ultimate resumption of persecution, specifically not of an antichrist ruling the entire world, holding the nations in dreadful hostage against Christianity. When, however, the Revelation speaks of a false prophet, and one doesn't know whether a man is meant or rather a hidden power of darkness casting a spell over the people, then it is possible to think that for the most part these things have already taken place. Without reminding ourselves of events from earlier epochs, I believe it possible that the dark power portrayed in Rev.13 is actually revealing itself now in very much the same way all over the world, but quite otherwise than we usually imagine. All the world is being urged toward a uniform rationalism which is completely contrary [346] to Christianity, that in our country we could call the religion of the

intelligentsia. It is making rapid progress among Protestants and Catholics, among Jews and Turks (although perhaps less with the latter), among Hindus, Chinese and Japanese. Everywhere it is the religion of the cultured toward which everything is drifting, and from this the deeper conceptions of sin and redemption are completely stripped away. In many newspapers and books this universal religion of the cultured is accepted as the dominant religion, by which the Christian standpoint is seen to be superseded.

How deep the impact is of the power of darkness presumed by the Revelation, no one can really see; but while everyone waits only for the terrifying things to happen which will threaten the world into being converted, everything is slipping unnoticed into the hands of darkness, toward a complete collapse. Surrounding this religion, all remains more or less peaceful, and exactly this is the hidden way in which evil works--to let everything come inwardly to corruption and ruin under the cloak of peace.

Now the only question would be whether, abruptly and finally, things will change, bringing a violent breach of peace and a time of frightful persecution. But in face of this, I wish to point out only that our Lord Jesus said nothing of it; and I would not want to dispute this further, but I set my hope on the coming of springtime, the blossoming of the fig trees and every other tree, the assurance to us of a higher peace. As long as these trees are in flower, let it happen to me as it may, even the opposition of an inventive antichrist, or of some malicious person as described by Paul in the Letter to the Thessalonians (II Thess.2:3-12); although here it is only temptations that are spoken of, not persecutions, and these occur rather through spiritual forces than through the political conniving for power that will be there.

Meanwhile, as long as there is apostasy, we shall still experience much wrath coming upon us from above. Also, we live in a time where the pressures of life reach new heights. The misery which is already so great may become even greater. Sickness and death will also play an important role. Accidents of all kinds, now becoming so widespread, are still then to be feared. But if our Savior is soon to succeed in approaching the

hidden invisible powers of darkness as Victor, everything must quickly appear in a more favorable light in view of his final coming in person.

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[347]

THE WOMAN ROBED WITH THE SUN

Question: Recently I was reading Rev.12:1-6, and I would be very grateful for an explanation, because as I see it at present I am led to assume that a Christian Church is meant. Who is the woman robed with the sun? Who is the moon under her feet? What is the crown of twelve stars on her head? Moreover, who is the child she bears? What are the pangs of birth? What is meant by her "being sustained"? May I ask you to give me some kind of explanation?

Answer: In general I dislike giving interpretations of the Revelation if I have to go further than the discussion and exposition of the text; because to give an interpretation I would have to feel absolutely sure that, not only for myself, but also for others, this interpretation would be admissable. I would not like to be so presumptuous as to believe I can give a more rightful interpretation than others would, especially as there are so many interpreters who again and again render it differently, and at the same time, believe that only their interpretation is the right one.

No doubt I can say something about the passage above, because it becomes much clearer simply by expounding the text itself; and I will gladly do that, especially since the so-called "*woman robed with the sun*" has given cause to many aberrations, especially among those people who time and again believe that one of them is designated to be the "*woman robed with the sun*". It would seem to me as though the questioner, as one of these people, may have in sight something definite of which he is inclined to think, since he speaks specifically of the present--that with this designation he is aiming, perhaps, at a Christian church he may have in mind. Perhaps he is thinking--and if I am making a mistake here, others also have thought this--of one specific Christian church which he believes may aspire to the dignity of the "*woman robed with the sun*" of the Revelation. On account of this, I would ask each reader in advance not to look

toward any particular church he might know about, as if something said in the Revelation might refer to this specific church. We shall come back to this later.

With the last verses of the eleventh chapter a certain cycle of prophecies was closed, and this brings us to the very issue of the whole Revelation story: *"Then God's temple in heaven was opened and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple"* (Rev.11:15-19). This was the consequence of the preceding great strife that ended with a victory over which all heaven was triumphant (v.15-18). For *"The kingdoms of the world have become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ"* so [348] that in reality only this very last would seem not to have happened yet. However, what follows from chapter twelve on is not a direct continuation, but rather goes back and describes additional details that seem in part to fall into the previous period of time, before God's temple was opened in heaven. That is to say, a certain connection is made between the Church of God on earth from its very beginning, even touching on the essential core of how things were with the Church of the Old Covenant, and how they would be under the New Covenant. For the Church of God in the Old and New Testaments is one and the same, one house alone, one family of God on earth (Hebr.3:2-6); thus the woman of whom we speak is to be taken as the selfsame woman in both periods of time.

Now we read: *And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman robed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars* (Rev.12:1).

Here we are presented with two different signs appearing in heaven, the one represented by the woman, the other by the great red dragon (v.3). In general, the expression *"in heaven"* designates the invisible celestial world, in which there appears to John, first a reflection of what God has done and is doing, and then a reflection of the Adversary. The struggle between light and darkness is present in the invisible world as in the visible, and this fight takes place mainly there where its base is, in this world. The symbol of God's Church on earth, now represented by the woman, had its previous history in heaven. And this appears to John as a great sign in the heavens. The

roots of that Church, through which every victory is to be given throughout the whole creation, are on earth. Here Israel, God's people, is called "*the woman*"; that is, not all Israel but that better part which held firmly to the promises of grace, looking to them expectantly, and also was truly active in faith. Israel is seen by the prophets as an entity, as God's bride with whom God has entered, as it were, into a close marriage bond.

Now, when this woman is presented as being robed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, this refers to Abraham and Sarah, or in a broader sense to the patriarchs and their believing wives, and to the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph's dream may also point to this, when he told his father that it seemed to him that the sun and [349] moon and eleven stars bowed down before him, and this was straightaway thought to mean his father and his mother and his eleven brothers. Now Abraham is called the sun because his faith shines forth throughout his lineage; like the sun shining over his descendants, he clothed them with light. With Abraham's faith, a sun rose upon humanity, just in the midst of the deepest darkness of all mankind. This sun shone only over Abraham's descendants, who therefore are called "*the woman robed with the sun*". But now she stands as a great portent in the heavens, no longer thrust aside, but rather, as she who will, finally, cast her full light over the whole of humankind, so that, in the end, they will all say with Abraham, "*In the Lord alone, men shall say, are victory and might*" (Isa.45:24).

The importance of Abraham and Sarah as the cornerstone of God's people is also expressed by Isaiah:

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to your father Abraham, and to Sarah who gave you birth* (Isa.51:1-2).

The sun and moon with the twelve stars shone brightly and continuously over God's people, so that even if it were not so with all, at least a kernel, a remnant remained throughout all generations of those who kept the light of faith and beheld the future redemption in their heart, to a greater or lesser degree.

We read further: *She was with child, and in the anguish of her labor she cried out to be delivered* (Rev.12:2).

The woman who was with child portrays the expectation of a Messiah, the great Helper and Redeemer that Israel awaited. The woman's conception began with the promise given to Abraham when it was said to him: *All the families on earth will pray to be blessed as you are blessed* (Gen.12:3). With this promise, the seed of the Savior's birth was laid in Abraham's lineage. This seed lay implanted for the entire duration of Israel's history right up to Christ, and this came to even greater clarity and certainty through the prophets especially. The lifetime of the child, I say, this child who was to be born when the time was fulfilled, came about 1000 years after Abraham, and was fulfilled through David. The child grew as though in the womb of the people; and his heartbeats were particularly [350] to be felt in the time of the prophets. The longer the delay, the more painful were the birth pains, that seemed never to come to an end; and those believers in Israel, although there were only few of them at the time of Christ, cried out like a woman in the pangs of birth. We think of one Simeon, who did not want to die until he had seen the Promised One. The great anguish over the delivery stands for the great hardships which Christ's parents had to battle against, since it was hardly conceivable that in those times such a wonderful child could be found within such a terribly degenerate people, so alienated from God. We see how the Revelation describes in simple language the distress amid which Christ was born.

So it goes on: *"And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads"* (Rev.12:3).

The heaven in which that other sign appeared is the invisible world above us, brought out of God's actual heaven whence the first portent had appeared with Abraham and ever since--Abraham, whom the Lord summoned out of his heaven, ordering him to leave his fatherland and go to Canaan. In the whole creation, visible and invisible, there has been great apostasy; and the great red dragon may well be seen to represent all the apostasy in what is left of creation; it brought backsliding among men also, as the serpent in paradise reminds us. The closer drew the birth of the child, the more restive and

alert became this dragon. The red dragon also had his representatives on earth; they are what is meant by the seven heads, the ten horns, and the seven diadems, as well as the main forces that influence the temporal holders of power and authority. A more literal explanation of these heads and horns and diadems would lead to a mere childish pastime, which I would not like to risk. Their number, also, does not need to be taken literally, but it is there only to give us the impression of a great number of powerful forces. Since all this is taking place in the invisible realm, we can trace nothing definite of it on earth; even if we were to take it to mean the Roman Empire, the different heads, horns, and diadems would still remain inexplicable. Even diverse spiritual powers among the world of human beings, set in motion by the invisible dominions, could well be meant here. The main thought that we are to keep in mind is that everything in heaven (except God's Heaven) and on earth, took [351] an attitude hostile to the woman who was to bring forth the Savior of the world, the Victor over all God's enemies:

*With his tail he swept down a third of the stars of heaven and flung them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth (Rev.12:4).*

We cannot understand the opening words at this time, because we know nothing of the extraterrestrial creation and its history, namely of what has gone on among the stars. For it is not the stars themselves that the dragon threw to the earth, but rather powers that were in conjunction with the stars, and who, having been condemned, stood far from God. The only conclusion that we can draw from this passage is that an innumerable host of satanic beings or entities filled the world--beings who had been pressed into the service of the dragon, possibly angels who had fallen, who now were doing their utmost to corrupt and destroy the earth. We cannot but be mindful, among many other things, of the great corruption which, just at the time of Christ's birth, reached its most appalling heights in Rome and other places. In what way these rejected beings corrupted the world remains a mystery which has not yet been made clear; and perhaps new light will be given us through a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit,

about the meaning, the existence, the power and influence of this darkness. For now, it is enough for us to be shown how the dragon tried in every possible way either to hinder the birth of the child, or to get rid of the child once born, or even to draw him into its snare or oppose him in such a way that his influence on the redemption of all creation should be rendered ineffective. However, from history we know something already about the dangers the little boy was exposed to, and how he was to be killed in infancy. What tremendous efforts and struggles were needed in the invisible realm before he could make his triumphant entry into the world through the help of the angel hosts, have remained hidden from us. The actual birth was easy, in contrast; and the child's further life went forward in an orderly way, as we read: *And she brought forth a male child, who is to rule all*

*the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was snatched up to God and to his throne (Rev.12:5).*

This verse shows us that at the time of Jesus' birth the circumstances, great and small, had stabilized to the point that the birth of the boy could take place without [352] danger, although not without apprehension. All the mobilizations of darkness were thwarted; and all its dark speculations and ambushes were in vain, because the faith of those involved overcame all. The boy was born, as if nothing had stood in the way. The protection of the angels which faith called down was too great for hell with all its endeavors to do anything. The first great sign that had appeared in heaven gained the upper hand over the second sign, the dragon. But nothing further is said of the child at this point, except that he was destined to control the gentiles with a rod of iron. It is called an iron rod, not meaning that it should inflict pain, but as a rod that would not break under the greatest stress, and would prevail over all. He goes into action and brings all to pass so wonderfully that in the end all the gentiles are subject to him.

But the rod which strikes the gentiles is the Word from the Cross, [which says] that his impregnable power is not lost, but will be seen clearly and completely only in the last days. Of the life and deeds, of the death and resurrection of the boy as he grew to manhood, nothing is said in our picture, for this

would not be the place. All that is said is that he was snatched up to God and to God's throne, whereby is expressed Christ's ascension to God's throne, to the right hand of his Father; from this throne it will be given him to lead all the gentiles and gather them to himself. Yet first of all, his mother, the woman, the foundation of the Church on earth, comes into great distress through those who are still far off--the people in the wilderness, as it were. It is now said of this woman, the mother of the boy:

*And the woman herself fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared for her by God, there to be sustained for 1260 days (Rev.12:6).*

We have to look beyond the actual mother, Mary, in considering the woman, the mother of the child. She is only the representative, the instrument of the great Mother. In a certain sense, Christ is the creation of God's people, who through their faith and their longing expectation have carried the Savior of the world under their heart, as it were, like a mother carries her child in her womb. Now this woman, the Church, has remained on earth, while her Child was lifted up to God; but through this she has gained a great honor, for her Son (the Son of Man), who sits at the right hand of God, is now her shield and her leader who will never abandon her. But, just as [353] previously she represented the people of the Old Covenant, now, in the same way, she represents the New; or, rather, the Old has taken on a new form, now belonging not only to the Lord exclusively, to the God of Israel, but also to the One whom God has sent, and who now sits with him on the same throne, and endeavors now to extend his realm over all the nations of the earth.

Now it is now said of this woman that she fled into the wilderness. Here the wilderness stands in contrast to the Promised Land. In the latter the woman has her homeland, her center. But now this was no longer so; and those of her seed, now the Christians, might no longer abide in the Promised Land, since those who had been their main leaders until now, opposed her. She flees and increases and is sustained in the wilderness, until then pagan ground, and there she is protected from on high,

as she had been until then in Jerusalem. In this wilderness, among the pagans, she must gather herself as well as she may.

If it is said: "*where she has a place prepared by God*", this indicates it is a place which was to serve her as another Zion and Jerusalem. It is not clear whether there was such a place in these times. There was no city or region that would seem to be, or could be regarded as, the center point of the Church, or as a haven for the fugitive woman. Maybe Corinth might have given the first signs of being so qualified (Acts 18:9-10); but there, very soon, this was not so obvious, although they had no lack of gifts. They did not disassociate themselves enough from the character of the wilderness. Were perhaps the seven churches of the Revelation the designated place? We cannot rule this out completely, since their angels are named as seven stars in the hand of the Lord, who walked amidst the seven golden lampstands or churches, as was told to John as a mystery to be taken down in writing (Rev.1:19,20; Rev.2:1). It is also said after every Letter to the Churches: "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*" (Rev.2:29). But the Lord was to have come already during the lifetime of these churches; for the future coming of the Lord was presented as happening shortly. In the meantime the churches deteriorated; and gradually the delay took place of which we have often spoken. So, in fact, the woman had no special place to escape to, that her God had prepared for her. Later, certain cities did become administrative centers, that is, the four patriarchal Sees: Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople (Byzantium), and Rome. But these cities cannot be called places of refuge "*for the rest of her offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*" (Rev.12:17) because they themselves became a spiritual wilderness.

[354] Therefore we are obliged still to say that nowhere in the wilderness is there to be found a specific place on the soil where the gentile world had hitherto been, which was reserved for the woman, for the genuinely faithful members of the Body of Christ; no Zion from which God's revelations and the manifestations of Christ's power radiated as the light of the sun into the great universe. We do know that everywhere, over all

the earth, there are Christian churches, and a strong faith and recognition of Christ is to be found in many of these places; but not in such a striking way as to lead one to say: "*All the nations shall flow to it . . . that he may teach us in his ways*" (Isa.2:2-3). Nowhere in the whole world is there such a place, especially since even those who confess Christ diverge greatly in their beliefs. If there is no such place, we must not hasten to build it; and this is what those people do who are too quick in concluding and testifying that this church, or that church, has it. Before new insights into the Kingdom of God are given by the Spirit from above, no such place at all can be prepared by God. For such a place must show traces of the undeniable strength of God if it is to stand as having been prepared by him.

If we look more closely at our text, we see that the length of time for which the woman needs the place prepared by God as a refuge is given as 1260 days. This number occurs again and again in the Revelation, also expressed as forty-two months [*in the German:--42 weeks*] or three and a half years. If we ponder over this, we find ourselves suddenly in the end time, to that which will happen ultimately before the [Second] Coming of the Lord [*in the German:--the future of the Lord*]. The preparation of the place where the remnant of the believers (12:6) are to be sustained through new strengthening by the Spirit from above, falls only in the appointed last time, when victory will have been gained over the dragon, and he will have been banished from heaven; so that now he can vent his great wrath only on the earth (Rev.12:7-13). That is why there is a further mention of the place prepared where the woman has to defend herself before the dragon and prove victorious.

The time between the snatching up of the boy child and the 1260 days is of no further concern; and it seems as if the snatching up of the boy child is the beginning of the time of nourishment in the wilderness. In the broader sense, it seems as if a specific place had not yet been prepared, for something crucial was still missing. However, the text gives [355] no further detail about that time, and continues as if there were no delay of any importance. Therein lies a certain hint that in fact there would have been no delay except for the indifference

of those on earth. It is indicated, at least, through the reference to the number of days, that what happens is to take place in the last times; and therefore, we have to wait first for the preparation of a specific place to serve as a Zion for the woman, and when that is done, the end is in view.

Thus, the entire era of the Christian Church up until then is completely passed over in the Revelation, as if it did not exist; and we have to accept it that the whole period of time since the Revelation was written has been passed over completely, at least in this passage. All 1800 years until today are taken as non-existent. For the 1260 days are the last before Christ's Second Coming. The woman in the wilderness--who for us represents above all the decadent, spiritually devastated condition of Christianity, or of the world--will be given a place in these last days, recognizable to all the world, in which she will be sustained and strengthened in a wonderful way. To this place will hasten all who are now distressed by the terrors of darkness. Hence, such a place will be a refuge only to that remnant of Christendom which are her children, who will have their home there. These people will persevere in a firm, unshakable faith, at the same time bringing strength to the whole church, also through difficult times of persecution and anxiety, until all is fulfilled with the Coming of Christ. For the ragings of the dragon, however furious he is, will all be in vain (Rev.12:17). This is how I understand the twelfth chapter of the Revelation. But I am also ready to be taught. I will not have it said that I wish to be dogmatic.

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[355]

CONCERNING THE FLIGHT

Question: *Does the flight that is described in Matthew, as well as in John's Revelation, apply to the future Christians, or is it only traditional?*

Answer: I will gladly answer this question according to my understanding, but I want to stay with the words of the Scriptures, without trying to weave more into them than is there. There are only two passages, as far as I know, where an impending flight, [356] that believing Christians have to face in the last times is mentioned. The first is contained in Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and of his Second Coming, that we find in Matthew's Gospel (Matt.24). In different places in this chapter Matthew touches exclusively on the one or the other; and to some extent we can take the destruction of Jerusalem to be symbolic of the last days; although we must not be too quick in spelling out and elaborating things which are not directly said in the text. I, at least, will not let myself get involved with anything I don't find explicitly in the text. Indeed, in this chapter it is only in v.29 that Matthew brings in something new, over against the old, when he writes about the end time:

*So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath (Matt.24:15-20).*

In Luke 21:24, where we are given the same words of the Lord as in Mark 13, the following is added:

*They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the gentiles until the times of the gentiles are fulfilled*

(Luke 21:24).

The passage in Matthew describes plainly the distress of a city against which hostile armies press in to besiege it. There the Lord gives the people the advice to flee out of the city as quickly as possible, taking nothing into account, for once the city is surrounded it would be impossible to get out. According to history, this actually happened.

I cannot see any deeper significance in this flight, because it is not a case of fleeing far and wide or into the desert, but the advice is to flee to the mountains, accessible also from the Jewish country. For in the mountains of Judea was a certain security from the enemy, because the latter limited themselves to taking the city and did not easily have access to the bare mountains, and they did not consider it their task to massacre the people outside the city. Nor, according to my present understanding, can I see in this passage a summons to the believing Christians, to take flight in the last times from the antichristian atrocities, and therefore flee to the remotest countries where the arm [357] of the Antichrist could not reach them. In Matthew's Gospel, in connection with the above, we can read further:

*For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened (Matt.24:21-22).*

I cannot believe that this applies to the tribulation of the last days. The words "*and never will be*" convey that even the last tribulation will not be as terrible as the Jews experienced at the time of the destruction of their city, because no such tribulation could ever come again. However, this distress could have become even greater if it had lasted longer, so that possibly no one in the whole country would have survived. But for the sake of the Christians, whom the Lord calls "*the elect*", he did not want it to go so far, and he shortened the siege. Even in those days there were many false christs and false prophets, of whom the Lord warns us. These may well be a premonition of what it will be in the last days. But the Lord dwells on the subject of the destruction, and finishes only with

these words: "*Wherever the body is, there the eagles will gather*" (Matt.24:28)--which is generally thought to refer to the Roman emblem of the eagle.

Something important is indicated here: Even during the most intense period of the antichristian era, it will not be so grim as at the time of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. In essence, the Lord himself says that nothing like this will ever happen again. Certainly we shall have to go through great tribulation for the sake of our faith, and many a one will be called on to sacrifice his life for that. But we must take care, especially considering Rev.13:15-17, which refer to the image of the beast, not to imagine that the distress of the last days will be so dreadful, since these verses cannot possibly be of general application. We can hardly imagine that the tribulation of the last days could be so frightful, since at the same time the victory of the Gospel will be revealed throughout the world (although, in spite of what I say, this is questioned).

Certainly the resistance against this victory will be very great; but I cannot think it will be so disastrous as is usually imagined; I mean here, we have to keep things in proportion; I become almost angry at the thought that the Lord cannot prevail against human and satanic powers, and [358] that he will allow the most extreme distress to come upon his elect, until in the end he strikes down all opposition with his almighty powers. I cannot imagine it will be so. The Savior will truly remain the Savior and not sacrifice his character as the One who saves from the Antichrist. I wish we could leave behind to some extent this panic-stricken dread of the last tribulation. First shall come a time of grace; and that too will bear fruit. But who actually believes this? We prefer to look to terrors and damnation, rather than to redemption. Of one thing you may be sure, not even as the last one left shall I join with those who flee.

The second reference which is said to advocate this flight is in Rev.12. There, we hear of the woman robed with the sun, who, in the snares of the dragon, gave birth to a Son; who, after he had accomplished his task (as we may infer from vv.4-5) was caught up to God and to his throne. This woman clearly represents God's people, Israel, most of all those believers from

whose womb Christ came. After the Son is caught up, it continues:

*And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days (Rev.12:6).*

At that time, war arose in heaven against the Accuser, and the believers overcame him through the Blood of the Lamb, whereupon the dragon began to persecute God's Church on earth all the more violently, because he had been thrown down to earth. Then it is said:

*But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time and times and half a time (Rev.12:14).*

Here, it is no more a question of an escape but of the woman flying to the place prepared for her, according to v.6, in the wilderness. Here also, the woman does not remain untouched by the serpent, for he spewed water after her in an attempt to drown her. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the dragon went on to "make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev.12:17).

Now, if we were to ask where the woman had first flown from, we can only surmise it was the Promised Land, where until now the people of God were settled. Now she must flee to the wilderness, that is, to the world of the gentiles, which, in contrast to the Holy Land, is regarded as a wilderness. Since the people of God could no longer prosper at home, their special place from now on is to be the land that had [359] hitherto belonged to the gentiles. The woman was given a special place in this wilderness, where she was to be sheltered, cared for and nourished from above. Whether v. 14 says the same thing as v.6 is open to question; for it is noteworthy that the same duration of time is given in both verses.

I suppose many will expect of me a more exact interpretation. But I will give no interpretations that are not directly in the text; in spite of the innumerable other interpretations I fight shy of adding further particulars as if I

myself had revelations about this, as others repeatedly take credit for. However, what I have said should at least make it clear that the idea of flight during the last days is not indicated in this second passage (Rev.12:6-14). I cannot find even a hint of this. It is most probably a tradition that has established itself firmly in the mind without anyone being able to account for it. As far as I can see. this is a traditional idea that has come about through legend outside of the Bible, or through incorrect explanations of Scripture carried from mouth to mouth. I cannot consider it biblical, unless the contrary can be proved to me.

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[359]

THE ANTICHRIST

Question: *Is the passage in Rev.13 about the Antichrist to be understood literally? Is the Antichrist understood to be an actual person, or does the term signify only unbelief and false doctrine?*

Answer: This question is too much for me. However much I have reflected on this chapter, I have never come up with anything which has satisfied me and encouraged me to believe that it would meet the approval of others. I would not like to be one of those who give daring interpretations that no one else could embrace. So I would like to ask the questioner to let this chapter rest a while, perhaps until clarity can be given in the coming time of the last days.

Actually this chapter can be divided in two parts; but in either I would find it difficult to conceive of the Antichrist as a person. I cannot in any way interpret the first beast rising out of the sea, that is, coming to the surface with its heads, horns, and crowns; and next, a leopard alike to both bear and lion. Certainly the dragon gives the beast power; but it can hardly be a human being [360] because it is healed from its mortal wound--which, in other words, it could have received through Christ's appearance on earth--thus gaining the admiration of the entire--yes, the entire--earth. Even if one cannot draw a conclusion, nevertheless the impression is not given that it is actual military power which renders the beast invincible, because military power could not gain influence over all who dwell on earth; and with wild blasphemies against God no military power could win over every race, tongue and unbeliever. One can think of the beast only as an invisible power opposed to God that gains a tremendous influence over all people, casting a spell over them, as it were; against this power the elect can defend themselves for a time, until even they are conquered, caught in the powers of darkness which create inconceivable godlessness everywhere. I am puzzled by the appearing of this mysterious

power that was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months, indicating the time of the last days. Could this hidden power not have been present and active earlier on? This power cannot only be disbelief or false teaching; for it has form, if not a human form; nevertheless, it contains an element of both, although it is spoken of in such general terms that are difficult to understand. Here, I touch on details only to show that I am quite unable to gather a clear, comprehensible picture of the Antichrist.

Now, after the fall of the first beast (v.10), the second beast appears with its great signs. What this means, I again do not understand, for it should appear sometime after the forty-two months. According to the words, this could mean a human being, but again it might not. The image of the beast that talks and bewitches all the people is unexplainable to me, as well as what is said about not buying and not selling, if it is to be throughout the world; neither do I understand what is meant by the "*mark of the beast*". I find it hard to accept that one and all surrender to the beast, with few exceptions, because it looks as if there was no counterweight factor on the part of Christ, to restrain the beast. So that it seems, as it stands there, that absolutely everything were lost to Christ on earth, but where, then, would be the victorious coming of Jesus? I find it too frightful and too all-powerful to relate to a human being; so that again, I can only think of a hidden, mysterious dark power, that makes itself felt only through its powerful influence over men, introducing all kinds of demonic powers to them. But I firmly believe that this would arouse opposing forces on Christ's part. [361] I say this only to indicate that I can make out nothing from the phantasmagoria given here, unless its chief significance lies in the invisible world. The number 666, as a number applied to man, is quite inexplicable to me, insofar as the letters in our alphabet do not at the same time signify numbers, as the Hebrew and Greek letters of the alphabet do, and in part the Latin also. It seems to me impossible that in our time the name of a man can be identified by everyone from the number 666.

I have said enough, and now I ask that we should not concern ourselves with this section of the Revelation until it comes to fulfillment--when the returning spirit of prophecy can teach us how it all applies to a time which lies in the past. For it is actually indicated that these things will not be understood and interpreted before a new spirit of discernment is given again from above. This is my firm conviction--that if we want to make something out of these images before the right time, or before we have the means to interpret them, it is quite useless.

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[361]

FEAR OF APOSTASY

Question: *I have a great fear of falling away from the faith. In times of great persecution the devil came in wooden shoes. In the last days, will he not be wearing velvet slippers when he comes to lead the souls that he has captured unawares into his net? In the last days, will the evil spirits receive great power to lead men astray? In I Tim.4:1 it is written: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons". How are we to take this?*

Answer: I believe we do not need to have so great a fear of falling away. What is important is that we do not let ourselves be taken in by anything strange, new or singular which anyone may bring to us. Whether the deceiver comes in clogs or velvet slippers makes no difference. I must only make it a rule not to accept anything from anyone which is in opposition to the sober faith in which I was brought up, indeed anything which puts in question this faith or the church to which I belong. Those are the ones in velvet slippers that one might be led to believe less dangerous than those in wooden clogs. For the more they flatter, the smoother they appear in their bringing in of something new, the more we know for sure that we have to do with false prophets in sheep's clothing. People of an amiable, obliging nature, when they bring in something new, we must always avoid; and [362] we must not let ourselves become involved in their affairs. Whoever does this relies on people and not on the Lord. Jeremiah says: "*Cursed is the man who trusts in man, and leans for support on humankind, while his heart is far from the Lord*" (Jer.17:5). What is most insidious is when people say: "*This or that person is saying nothing different from that which we have already, nothing new at all. It is in complete agreement with what we have been taught; it is exactly the same*".

The worst deceivers in the world are these people who say: "*Indeed, there is nothing he cannot explain, he can account for*

*every single thing!"* For they act as if they set out to deceive no one, yet in fact they do deceive. If a man surrenders to this new thing, he soon find himself in the midst of something strange and new, feeling cut off from his erstwhile fellow-believers; but he cannot come back, because he is already under a spell, as it were. The apostasy of the last times need frighten no one who begins in good time to avoid every possible thing that might lead him into an elite group, be the difference never so minimal. Every step into a closed society that estranges us from what is commonly accepted is apostasy, since it draws us away from faith in Christ as the Savior of the whole world. You can be totally reassured, then, if you keep absolutely free from anything of a novel nature into which someone wants to entice you; for in this way you will remain free of the antichristian characteristic. But how many people find that they have to repent of following their fancy, like mice who fall for a piece of bacon!

The question is asked, whether the evil spirits will receive an especially great power in the last days to prevail over mankind, leading it astray. I do not believe so; for their power also will be weakened. So their power will not exceed what it has been. But so much is sure, that this power is only great over and against those impertinent, omnivorous people who want to examine and taste everything, who do not shy away from any pitfall, and even perhaps say: *"What difference will it make if I do go there?"* Stay away from where you do not belong, and where you notice that you are being offered something strange. What is the matter with you, wanting to savor every new thing which catches your fancy? Recklessly, we regard anyone who brings us something new as a savior; and the catchword is: *"Do not miss anything; hurry, so that you're not too late!"*

Remember, when they want to egg you on in a hurry, who is behind it all? What is more, no one thinks of the text: *"And they will say to you, 'Lo, there!' or 'Lo, here!' Do not go, do not follow them"* (Luke 17:23). The bold ones who want to find out about everything [363] under the pretext that one must know everything find themselves hoodwinked. All at once they are caught unprepared; yet they were not taken unawares, because they could have steered clear. It might well be true that in the last

days darkness will fall suddenly upon the masses and imprison them because, throughout the whole of Europe, they will all be cut from the same bolt.

We do experience that in these last days many fall away from the faith. Indeed, this is quite commonplace, as if in a certain way all of us are unsure. Each wants to believe something different; and if someone comes along with yet another belief, people follow him at once and a club is established, a committee, a party, a sect, a cooperative, a community, a brotherhood, all aiming for the new thing. I do not so much fear the downright unbelievers as I do the warped believers and those who lead people astray; for it is those who bear the greatest resemblance to the antichristian, getting by only on the strength of piety--extreme piety at that.

Do not believe that false teaching and warped doctrine cannot assail the Christian, given that there is first a fascination with the world of darkness. Spiritual pride, the urge to be someone, to shine before men, enables the evil one to put many ideas into people's heads. So, as Paul tells us, the Devil has his own deceiving spirits and teachers.

I think we can understand this very well. There are plenty of those. He who remains in simplicity and childlike faith, as according to the Scriptures it has been passed down from our forefathers, will not be overcome by any demon; but he who wants to be special, gives himself airs and exalts himself--not only in theory but also in practice, he should ask himself whether it is God's Spirit that urges him on or whether it is not much more likely a demon who has him on a leash.

In conclusion I can say: No one needs to wait for the last days to be afraid of falling away. Rather, we must all feel that fear right now. I am often downright scared for people because of all that is happening nowadays; and if I see how easily people fall into every trap, so self-confident and complacent, as if there were no enemy there setting his snares. Brothers from both religious and lay circles do not even call a meeting in an appointed brotherhood in order to test any new doctrine or teaching before the Lord, and to place themselves under the united decision. Surely it would be best to examine and come to

a common clarity about this or that [teaching] in order to establish whether anything is involved which smacks of antichristian seduction. Instead of this, each one goes his own sweet way; [364] and everyone else is supposed to trot along behind him. If they do not, one can almost see ahead to where the pyre is waiting. Now, yes now, is the evil time! If it comes in earnest, then we shall fare better; for then God's Spirit will be poured out and Christ's power will prove itself gloriously. But now, now is the time to be watchful! Oh, if only people would let themselves be told!

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"WAITING FOR, AND HASTENING ON..."

Question: ". . . Waiting for and hastening on [the coming of the day of God]" (II Pet.3:12)--How is this to be understood?

Answer: This question gives me the opportunity of speaking about a matter that should certainly be taken to heart nowadays. First, let me remind you of the [German] proverb, based on the Latin--*Festina lente: More haste, less speed.*

Let us consider this proverb so that we may understand its intrinsic meaning aright. The "*hastening*" comes first; and, since such a proverb refers above all to the practical daily life, it must mean: *Once you see that something must be done, don't delay in tackling it, take it energetically in hand.* Too much reflection before getting down to work is never good in such a case. The danger is that then it will never get off the ground, therefore there will be no progress and nothing will be achieved.

The proverb is also saying that we should not be lazy and half-hearted in what we set out to do, as if we should take it easy for a while before we really get going. Above all, we are warned to go to work briskly and decisively, surrendering ourselves completely to the task in hand so as to make it quite clear that we are eager to accomplish it. If we do not direct our zeal toward this goal, we might as well do nothing about it, and we accomplish almost nothing. The only genuine way to achieve anything is to act quickly and press on without hesitation.

This also applies to a conversion toward which one feels constantly impelled: it applies also to the discarding of a bad habit, the turning away from sin or from wrong relationships. Whoever has the feeling that an admonition received is justified, that he should change in some respect, and leave off doing this or that, should tackle this seriously at once. [365] If he does not tackle it but lets time slip by without hastening to act, his

resolution will slacken all too soon, and nothing will come of it, whatever he proposes to do. Therefore, as a man of God once said, "*[The path to] Hell is paved with good intentions*". This points out that some will lose the way in spite of warnings, and even in spite of their former good intentions, because they did not hurry to act accordingly. The same is true if we feel urged to do good and take part in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners and the sick--this should always be done "*in haste*"; if it is not, it will all be left undone and the people in distress are left stranded; and what lamentations will these people raise then on Judgment Day?

However, when the proverb says, "*More haste, less speed*" it is pointing out something important: That there should not only be action but that a deliberation in acting, a "*waiting*" that dwells [on the matter] also has its place. In particular, this proverb warns us against a rash precipitancy and haste, which is often nothing but another face of laziness. There are people who not only appear to be finished with everything immediately but who actually only want it that way. "*Hardly begun, already done*". Such people cannot be called industrious, for they are just looking forward to being able to relax afterwards. In order to have a good rest, they go hastily to work, probably overworking themselves, too. It's all the same to them how it turns out, so long as it gets done. All too often they soon tire of it; they let it lie again if it takes too long.

Actually, it is only lazy people who do this. Each task or enterprise should be undertaken vigorously, but nevertheless with forethought and deliberation, not impetuously; we should be attentive to the smallest detail; and if this slows us down, then let us make a deliberate pause if it will not go; let us be still for a moment if there are hindrances, until these are resolved. In order to prevent anything interfering with the completion of a project, we should think about it thoroughly, rather lingering over all concerns so that what we do turns out right. In this way, the intelligent man, along with his zeal to set about doing something, gives due attention to the thorough consideration a project demands.

With regard to conversion also, forethought is important. Certainly, we should move actively in this direction when we feel urged to do so; just as we should act upon something when we feel it necessary; but there should be no hastiness. If we do not take time to reflect and become absolutely clear about what we want, there will be haste, without doubt, both at the start and later on. [366] We could all too easily come to a conversion without having real self-recognition and repentance. We become sanctimonious and emotional, through which we are apt to launch forth in passionate zeal for prayer, as if to extort from heaven straightaway what is missing, without truly applying ourselves to the renewal of our sinful being.

Others throw themselves headlong into all kinds of wrong directions, which, if they are followed, promise you you will become a new person endowed with complete peace, resistance against all temptation, the riddance of all the old: a person under the seal of grace--as though you had been chemically bleached! They do not bear in mind that everything, also our conversion, needs time, a space of time; we should not let this lapse of time annoy us, but use it to carry on diligently and never lose heart.

Others soon begin to devote themselves zealously to convert people before they have laid a firm enough foundation for themselves. They are like those who are compared to the seed fallen on rock; they receive the Word with joy, but in time of temptation fall away again, because their endeavor has no roots. They want to become immediately what they will one day be, and behave as though they had already reached perfection. To them it is tedious, this time needed for growth described in the Gospel of Mark: "*First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear*" (Mark 4:28); so they rush headlong on their way. In the end they will be worse off than in the beginning. Those, too, who have the task, or take on the task, to approach others with the Gospel, forget at times to be slow in their haste; they take people by storm, as if all at once they must fit into their plans. Then many others follow suit, all rushing from one rashness to another because, in all this, deliberation and caution are lacking--the patience, humility, forbearance and

love, the waiting for the help of the Lord, who surely must give these through the Spirit. Many have no patience even toward our dear Lord; and if he does not give them immediately what they so eagerly desire, they fling everything, as it were, at his feet, despairing of all hope of his grace, without thinking that God, too, waits before hastening with his help.

How much harm has been caused to the church on earth by hastiness! Moreover, no one should be vexed who cannot come through in his own strength, and must submit to his Savior time and again, finding comfort in his grace alone, as even the weakest Christian, God be thanked, is always able to do. Let us thank [367] him also that he does not act so hastily with us, but rather takes his time, so as to save us all the more surely! Thus, with Christianity also, in every aspect, we must consider before we take action, or else everything will come to a bad end.

So we have demonstrated that "waiting" and "hastening" complement one another; and now we need to see how the hastening complements the waiting. If perhaps we have dwelt too long on the first, it will not have been in vain. At least it can have given us some self-recognition, which after all was the aim of the question. Now, however, we come to the passage in Peter's Epistle itself:

*Since the whole universe is to break up in this way, think what sort of people you ought to be, what devout and dedicated lives you should live! Eagerly expect the coming of the Day of God, and work to hasten it on (II Pet.3:11-12).*

Here the waiting comes first. For it says that we should stand in wait even while we hasten it on, not as in the proverb, which tells us to keep working at hastening it on. The reason for that is: We cannot further the Lord's future coming by bringing it about ourselves; but so that we can move forward, the proverb points out those things which we should hasten to do. The day of Christ's coming lies completely in God's hands; and we cannot in the first place hasten it on. First we must wait for it; but this waiting must nevertheless be understood as a time in which we should be actively preparing for such a future, as though there were to be no interval between the waiting for--and the actual coming of--the Lord. It must not be a waiting time in

which we imagine that the coming of the Lord is, so to say, postponed indefinitely, so that meanwhile we may behave and act however we like, until in the end it comes. Those who are waiting should always have in mind that the Lord might come any day, soon and suddenly--as it is often said, like lightning from heaven, like a thief in the night; and we have to watch zealously so that we are found by him, as Peter says, "*without spot or blemish, and at peace*". So the Lord means the following verse to be valid for all time: "*Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning*" (Luke 12:35)--as people who are, as it were, ready to depart; further: "*and let your lamps be burning*", so that if you fall asleep you may have light immediately if there is a sound; finally: "*And be like men who are waiting for their master*", so that, therefore, the whole appearance of that person is of someone who is waiting. On the other hand, in this state of waiting, we must endure patiently even if there is a long delay; but at the same time we should not neglect our hastening, for we should never allow ourselves to feel secure and think there is no such need.

[368] Nothing is so naive as trying to calculate the approximate time of the Lord's second coming. All such calculation is prejudicial to the hastening of Christian people. The Revelation to John does indeed give us certain dates; but, if you look closely, you will find that all those dates--the 1260 days, or 42 months, or three-and-a-half years--refer only to the very last time before the actual second coming of the Lord. These numbers will be important when those events are close to being fulfilled, and they will sharpen the expectation in the last days; therefore they need to be no further hindrance to our hastening. But perhaps, if you have made years out of the days that are given, and counted everything in, you will arrive at such a great number that you may as well relax on your pillow and go to sleep, with the thought that you, anyway, will not live to see it. So you can see how very prejudicial such calculations can be to a true expectancy, insofar as it downright excludes hastening toward God's future. Thus hastening toward the future, and hastening toward the very last signs are equally important. These last signs, also, should not take us unawares.

It would be good to discuss further the following questions: *"In what way are we to 'wait for' our Lord's future?"--and--"In what way are we to 'hasten' toward it?"* Peter himself gives us the answer, essentially, when he says:

*Since the whole universe is to break up in this way, think what sort of people you ought to be, what devout and dedicated lives you should live! Look eagerly for the coming of the Day of God and work to hasten it on!*

Others translate these words in this way: *"If all should be dissolved, how should you conduct yourselves?"* (Answer:) *"You should wait and hasten in holy and godly lives"*--that is, wait with impatience and ardent longing for the coming of the Day of God. The two words *"waiting"* and *"hastening"* combined in the expression *"wait with impatience and ardent longing"* do not seem awkward, because they clarify the meaning. However, this longing expectancy should be clearly visible in us through our *"lives of holiness and godliness"* (II Pet.3:11). But we would like to discuss this further in more detail.

We wait for the Lord's future, in the sense that we have it before our eyes in all we do or leave undone; or in seeking to act in complete accord with it. Our confession of faith in the Lord's coming should be part of every witness to Jesus, just as we find it so well expressed in the Letters of the Apostles. This recognition should be present in every one of our prayers, in every discussion and devotional meeting, in everything we do to comfort and encourage one another throughout this life's adversities and afflictions. If we do not keep to this, our faith [369] in the coming of the Lord will suffer; if we forget to keep God's future in mind, our expectation will dwindle. On the contrary, we should hold before our eyes the coming Savior, who sets everything right. Also, for the sake of all who are dying, or who have already died, our hearts should be directed to the Lord's future, the Lord who will awaken those who have died in Christ, and who, when his day comes, will *"bring with him those who have fallen asleep"* as Paul says (I Thess.4:14-18), concluding with the following words: *"Therefore comfort one another with these words"*.

Hence we must especially keep in sight all that still has to take place on earth before Christ comes. The most important is that the Gospel must first be preached to all nations (Mark 13:10). That is, whoever is waiting for the Lord must be zealous and energetic to do his part in proclaiming the Gospel to all the world; and moreover, he will seek actively to increase the interest on the pound with which he has been entrusted (Luke 19:16-17). Thus his every word and action will further the coming of God's Kingdom. He knows that his words and deeds must all be in the context of the Lord's coming, and thus all that he does for the sinners, for those who are lost, for those who are not converted, he is doing for the great Advent.

He who waits for the Lord will avoid all quarreling and discord, in order not to desecrate the coming of the Lord, remembering Paul's words, "*Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand*" (Phil.4:5). Whoever waits for the Lord will also be aware of the corruption in the world, of how far it is related, perhaps, to the great apostasy which shall precede the coming of Christ. Accordingly, he will take care not to be involved in anything which could draw him into this apostasy, and he will not garner the seeds of evil which will play their destructive rôles in the last days. But he will warn and plead with others not to let themselves become involved, or play, with anything which by its glitter will lead them into corruption, so that they remain protected until the Lord comes. Therefore, whoever waits for the Lord will guard himself against ungodliness of any sort, for this would bring him into the camp of the Adversary, who will be punished only when the Lord appears. Whoever waits for the Lord will also be careful to confront the powers of darkness which, through superstition, magic, and all kinds of unholy practices cast the people into the chains of gloom and impenitence, so that they can no longer recognize the truth. He [who waits for the Lord] will [370] wrestle, pray and fight; through his faithful, firm holding to the promises of the Lord he will help increasingly to dissipate the works of darkness, so that the Lord's path into the hearts of men is freed from all obstacles. In one word, he will believe and pray that

"the God of peace may soon crush Satan under your feet" as Paul writes in connection with the coming of the Lord (Rom.16:20).

Whoever waits for the Lord will also watch with priestly feelings the sighing of the present age; he will take to heart the depths of darkness in which the people are still buried, and he will pray earnestly for new light, new strength, for a new and all-embracing visitation of grace. He will pray for a renewal of the Holy Spirit--so generously poured out in the beginning--so that, through the Gospel, humanity as a whole might grow more quickly and more decisively toward Christ's future coming.

Finally, whoever waits for the Lord will see in each world event, be it great or small, the signs of the future; he will observe, study, and take deeply to heart the threads of events leading to the last days, and he will be strengthened in watching and praying, and guard himself against temptations, errors, and confusing concepts, in order to be able to stand blameless before the Lord when he comes. In such ways must the one who waits for the Lord carry himself in holiness and godliness, as befits those who wait for their Lord.

So far, we have emphasized mainly how we should set about waiting for the coming of Christ; but now, we should begin to "*hasten*" so that our "*waiting*" is filled with true longing. Just as our waiting for the coming Day of God will already give our conduct as Christians a specific and definite direction, so even more will our hastening. Peter simply says that we should live "*in holiness and godliness*". If we take on such a way of living we can easily fall away through the daily trials, becoming vacillating, earthbound people, if we see the future only as an unending vacuum without a goal, going on and on, even through many changes; or, we may become like the scoffers whom Peter describes, who will come in the last days and say: "*Where is now the promise of his coming? Our fathers have been laid to their rest, but still everything continues as it has always been since the world began*" (II Pet.3:3-4). The man who does not keep the goal of his life before his eyes carries on drearily as if [371] all must remain as it is; he becomes more or less resigned and apathetic, and this is reflected in his whole demeanor. This is all the more so if he also thinks that world history is part of

the eternal endless cycle. Whereas, he who reflects on the end that both he and the world will come to, in such a way that he feels that end to be an imminent one toward which he must hasten, that person will be protected from spiritual laziness, from indifference and resignation. The entire philosophy of life, that always influences the conduct of men so greatly, becomes quite other if we stand in constant expectation of Christ. If we wait passively, our urgency is not so great as if at the same time we press on, or if we think of ourselves as people for whom it is urgent not to waste any time so that we are not caught unprepared by the great future. As people pressing forward, we can imagine that it will most likely begin very soon. Then we see it all with different eyes than he who does not think in this way. We can no longer set such immeasurable value on all the great and powerful world events as one is, understandably, inclined to do. We perceive everything in a more detached and relaxed way. If something joyful happens, we can rejoice in it without becoming excited; if something is sad, we mourn but we are not cast down. In consequence, we do not become too deeply involved; we cannot lose ourselves, as it were, in exaggerated enthusiasm, or in excessive lamentation. We cannot surrender ourselves to anything with too great eagerness or, so to speak, in idolatry; it is easier for us to accept even the most painful things as though it were nothing, knowing that it will be nothing when the Lord comes. Our whole being is held and uplifted, and dependent only on this: That the Lord is coming, is coming soon, and our heart longs for that.

We can see from this that "*lives of holiness and godliness*" can come about very decidedly if we are people who wait for God's time, yet are pressing on in our hearts. We will remain moderate, quiet, patient, inwardly steady, and we will ignore many things which others might spend their time on. As we press forward we also do not know the hour [of Jesus' coming], but we will be faithful in our duties, we will perform all we must with diligence and care, as though it must last a long time, yet again, with such eagerness that our hastening toward Christ's future is not hindered in any way. The person who presses forward will in no sense immerse himself in the things of this

world, he [372] leaves that to others who can deal more vigorously with these things because they do not stand in the same expectancy. Neither will he let himself become involved in doubtful ventures; he will keep his distance from all that tends toward dizzy heights, but much rather be content with what is simple and modest, so that he may not to be hurled into the depths, nor be far away when the last trumpet sounds. Everything he possesses is as nothing to him, and all that he enjoys is of no importance to him. He will be especially caring, loving, self-sacrificing, peaceable and helpful, wholly surrendered to serving others, testifying to his fellows, so as not to be like the servant of whom the Lord says:

*But if that servant says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming", and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful (Luke 12:45-46).*

And that is what will happen to him if in his delusion he imagines he belongs in the ranks of the believers and the blessed. On the contrary, to the one who waits with impatient longing, these other words of the Lord are important:

*Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions"*

(Luke 12:42-44).

In one word, the man who is hastening will try to be one to whom the Savior could well come--always ready, his lamp burning and his loins girded; he stands there in spotless garments, not in garments so soiled that he would not know how to quickly wash them clean when his Lord comes. The man who hastens will never let the sun go down without having closed his account with the Savior through repentance and faith, neither will he leave anything unreconciled in his relationship to others. In all this, he hears the sound of the Lord's voice echoing again and

again in his ear: *"Watch therefore, for you do not know at what hour the Lord will come"* (Matt.24:42).

If we give the word *"hastening"*, that Peter recommends to us, a certain meaning according to the Spirit, we are still faced with a false interpretation which occurs often amongst those who are waiting for Christ's coming. They understand *"hastening"* to imply that there are many things they need no longer concern themselves with. For instance, at one time the year 1836 was reckoned to be [the year of the Lord]; this idea was instigated by the interpretations of [373] otherwise godly men. So in the end they wanted no more to marry, or build houses--at least, no permanent buildings; they took on no more transactions, they gave up their employment, sold their fields and houses--all this in order to be free of all that might hinder them from going to meet their Lord. In this they referred to the Lord's words in regard to the time of Noah: *"As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, mmarryingand giving in marriage"* (without in the least thinking of the coming flood). However, let us realize that the Lord did not reproach them for eating and drinking (how could they abstain from doing this?) Nor for marrying and giving in marriage; but for not paying attention to the foretold judgment of God. All the same, they could have restrained themselves somewhat, for they surely knew the day, the end of the appointed 120 years that were given them. But we know nothing of the day or hour. So, if we wanted to stop all that pertains to life on earth, it would point to an assurance with regards to the time itself, which we just do not have. So it follows that there is no contradiction between the state of hastening and the continuing with the usual ordinary occupations as if the time were not close at hand. Also, we should be prudent in all we have to do, as if the Day of the Lord were still distant. The Lord also says that one will be working in the field, one will be grinding at the mill, as if nothing were to happen. But of the two one will be taken and the other left, and this will be because the one is ready, *"waiting for"* and *"hastening to"* [what is to come] and the other will not be ready. But in the work they counted the same.

Therefore, let us beware of all confusion, and let us take with us what is right for our holy journey and for our godly life, waiting and hastening, according to Paul's well-known words, which are not a direct command and do not ask for restrictions, except for those that our conscience demands:

*I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short: From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it; "For the form of this world is passing away" (I Cor.7:29-31).*

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END OF BOOK

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