The awesomeness of the Word and its capacity to transform our lives

“New Church day” Sermon

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June 2024

At the outset, and before reading the Sermon, please read the whole of Ezekiel, Chapter 1.

1Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. 2In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity, 3the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

4And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. 5Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their

of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: and they
sparkled like the colour of burnished brass. 8And
they had the hands of a man under their wings on
their four sides; and they four had their faces and
their wings. 9Their wings were joined one to another;
they turned not when they went; they went every one
straight forward. 10As for the likeness of their faces,
they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion,
on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox
on the left side; they four also had the face of an
eagle. 11Thus were their faces: and their wings were
stretched upward; two wings of every one were
joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.
12And they went every one straight forward: whither
the spirit was to go, they went; and they turned not
when they went. 13As for the likeness of the living
creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of

14And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.

15Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. 16The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. 17When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. 18As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four. 19And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. 20Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were

when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.

22And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above. 23And under the firmament were their wings straight, the one toward the other: every one had two, which covered on this side, and every one had two, which covered on that side, their bodies. 24And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, as the voice of the Almighty, the voice of speech, as the noise of an host: when they stood, they let down their wings. 25And there was a voice from the firmament that was over their heads, when they stood, and had let down their wings.

likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. 27And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. 28As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.

Then,re-read Chapter 1, verse 28: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of One speaking.”

Ezekiel 1:22-28 Vision of the Throne at the River Chebar

A time of uncertainty and transition

Please note, friends, that for all its complexity, and overawed and humbled by it, as the prophet Ezekiel was, he was in no doubt that this was a vision given to him of the Lord. *He knew it to be from the Lord and of the Lord.*

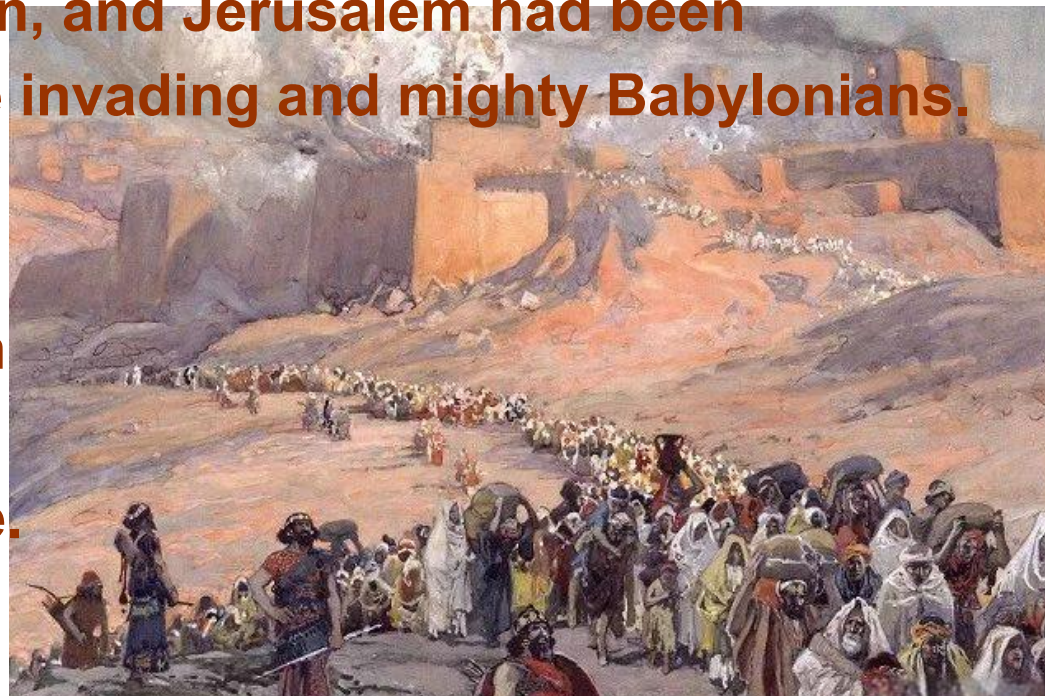
What happened was that Ezekiel's spiritual eyes were opened and he saw into the spiritual world a vision he was told to write down and which holds within it a profoundly reassuring message which the Lord intended people ever after to know about.

Swedenborg wrote of the Word that it is like a mine deep down within which are incredible treasures(See "True Christian Religion 245). I hope that after you have listened to, and thought about, this sermon you will feel you have seen some of the treasure which is hidden here; and that the sermon

What is fascinating; and something it is important to hold on to; is that this vision was given to Ezekiel at a time in his country's history of uncertainty and transition.

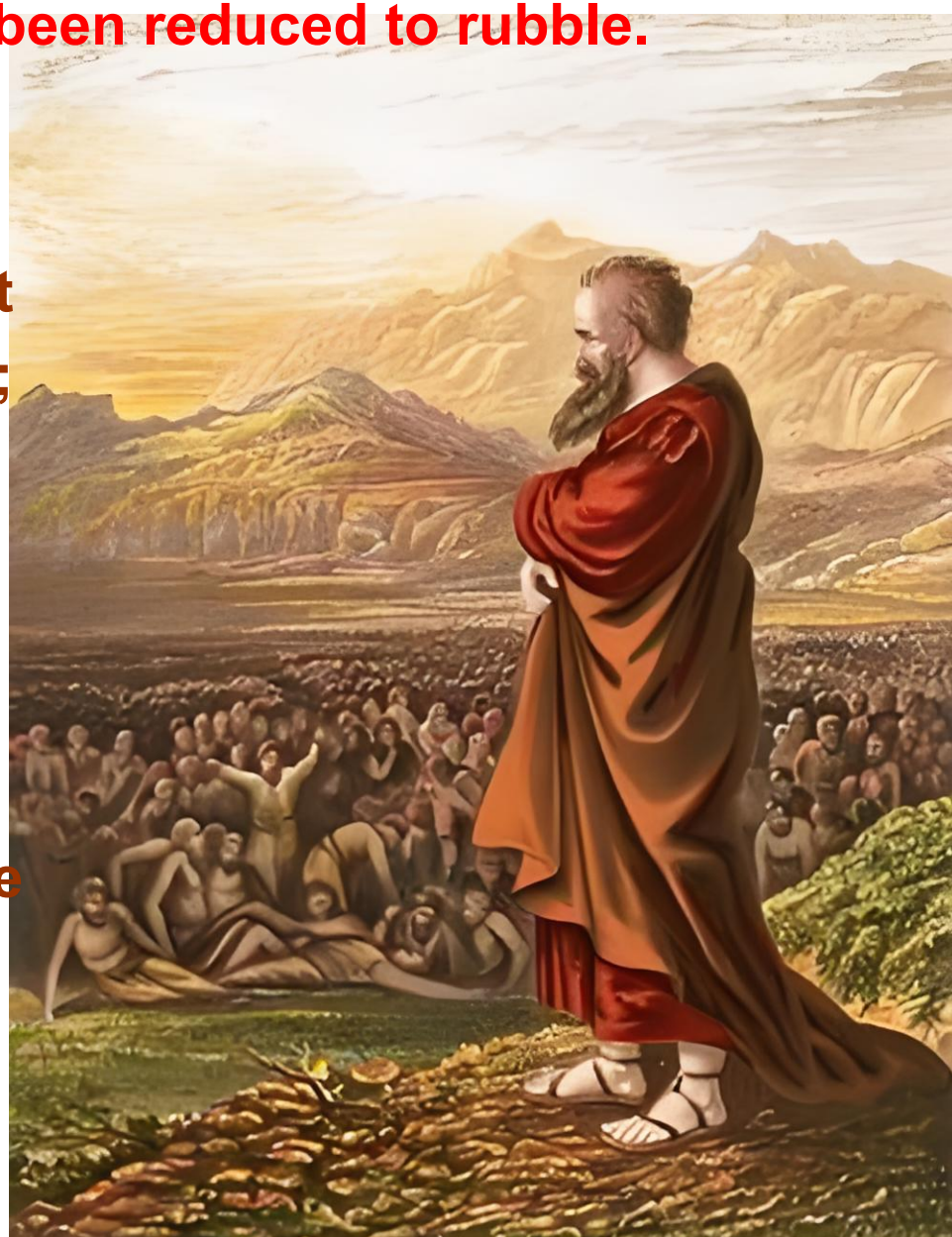
By way of historical background we need to understand that this was a most uncertain time for the people of ancient Israel.

Unbelievably, and in the year 587 B.C., their land had been over-run, and Jerusalem had been destroyed, by the invading and mighty Babylonians. And its leading people, including Ezekiel, had been taken away captive, into exile.



The old order; the old certainties and securities; the old mind-sets; and the way people had been seeing God; had all been reduced to rubble.

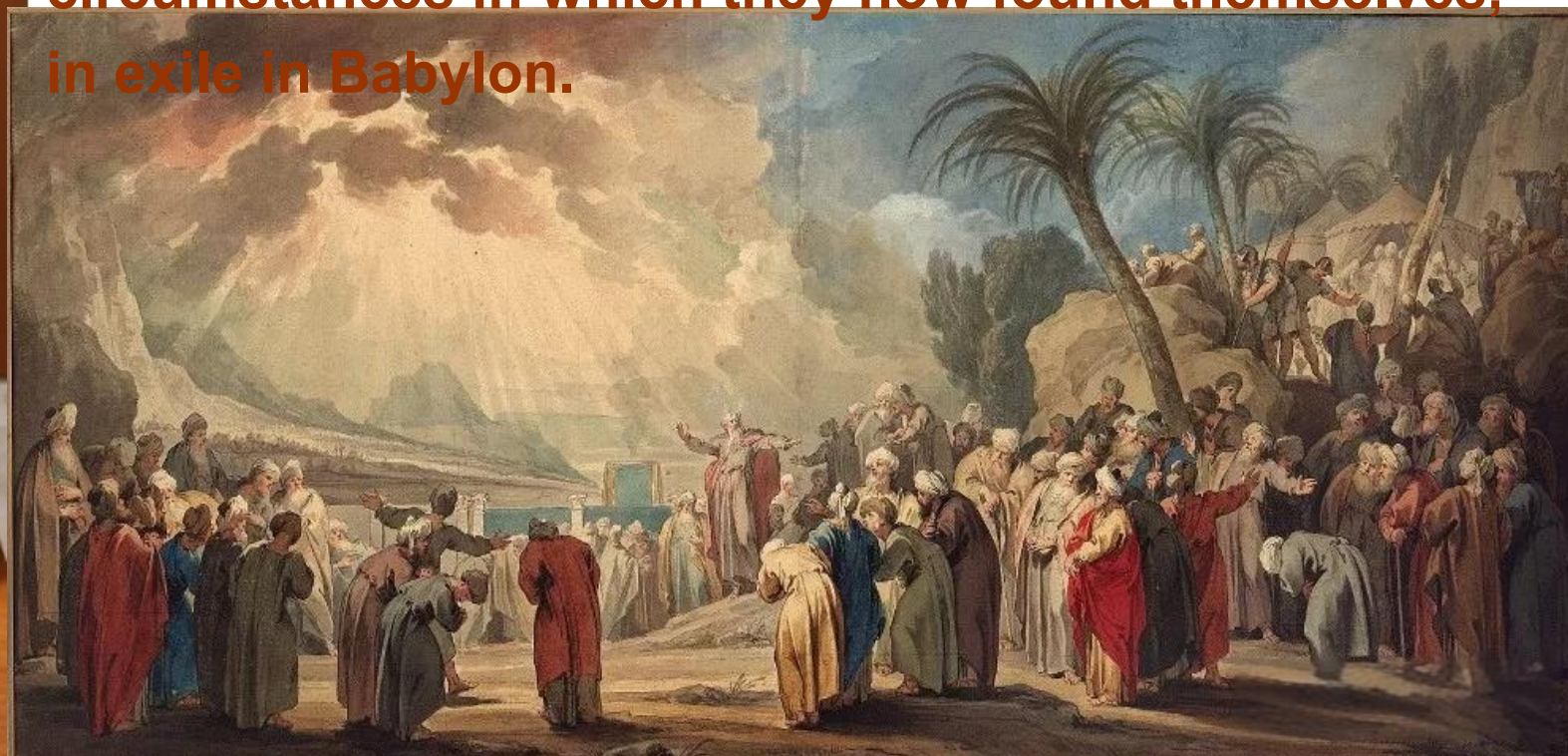
Many people, if not most, will have been asking if in fact God existed after all; and if he existed, Whether He really cared. Hadn't they been His special people? And wasn't He supposed to have looked after them?



Touching base again

So – and by means of this vision – God touched base with them again.

He re-affirmed His existence; He re-assured them of His continuing involvement and of His ongoing connectedness with them; He re-asserted His care over them, even in the bewildering, new, set of circumstances in which they now found themselves, in exile in Babylon.



Parallel

There is a parallel here with, how it is with us; with the Age in which *we* are living: a parallel which, when we think about it, we can hardly miss.

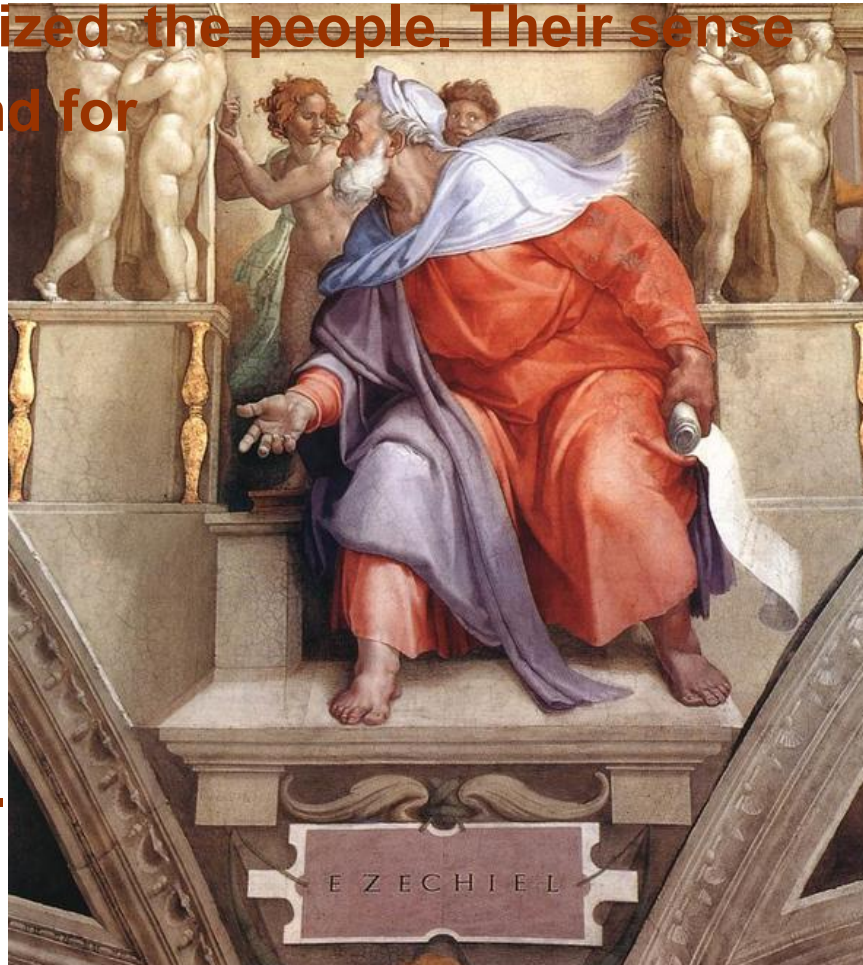
The old order; the old certainties; the old securities and the old mindsets of a former Age; and the way people have been seeing God and picturing Him in their minds; either have passed or are in the process of passing away.

We, too, live in what can seem to be uncertain and unpredictable times. Organized religion, such as it has been, is in retreat. Secularism and excessive individualism are – as we all know – very much now to the fore.

Where is God in all this?

Reconnecting and touching base

God re-connected – as it will have seemed – with the people of ancient Israel by means of this vision experienced by His prophet, Ezekiel. The vision re-energized Ezekiel, in the first instance, and through him, it re-energized the people. Their sense of God was renewed, and for all that it involved uncomfortable challenges, it was balanced by uplifting promises and new insights about God and about His involvement in their lives and affairs.



The Lord re-connecting and touching base with us

Both with regard to the human race as a whole *and* with respect to our very own, personally, unfolding, spiritual states and ages, the Lord from time to time re-connects with us:

- re-awakening our awareness of Him;
- of His involvement with us;
- re-affirming and opening up to us, even more, His purposes for us and His care over us.

But with us, He does this not by means of visions, as such, *but through, and by means of, His Word.*

And, in the internal sense, this is what this vision holds up to us.

This vision is all about the Word; the Word of God as we have it in our Bible.

This vision is about the Word renewed – in the sense of it being made to come alive again. In the sense, too, of it being restored and set free from the layers of misinterpretation which, over many centuries, it had become weighted down by.

It is about the Word, as we have it in our Bibles; the fact that confidence in it came to be so badly shaken and even remains so with many people and in many places. The fact, too, that it has been so misunderstood and argued over, wrongly interpreted and called

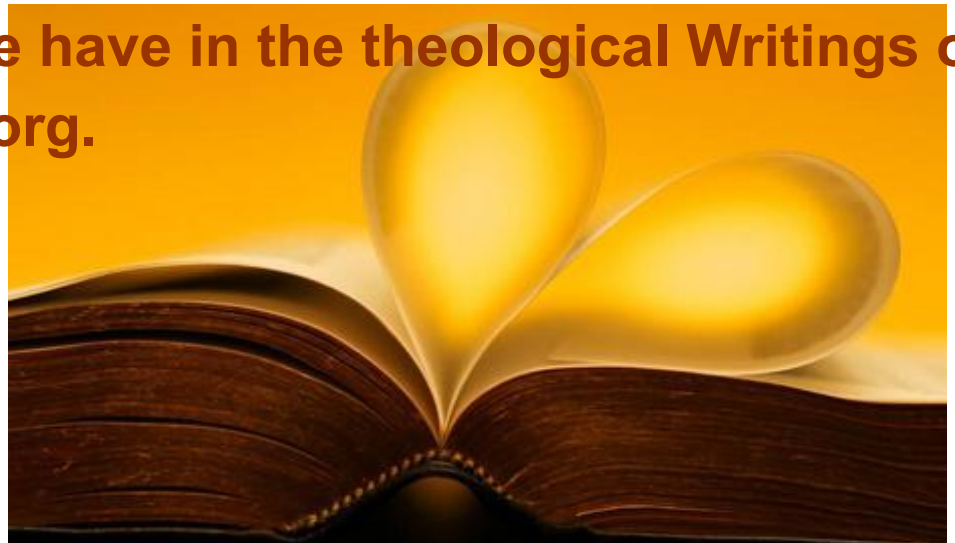
Dr. Alan Crown, one time Professor of Hebrew and of Old Testament Studies at Sydney University, in his book, "Biblical Studies Today" wrote of modern day attitudes in these terms:

"There have always been groups of persons to whom the Bible has been a classic in the sense that it was of central relevance of their thinking, beliefs and ways of life. For these people theology remains the queen of sciences, never to be dethroned and to which all mist pay homage. In no way has the Bible ever come to be superseded. No form of critical study, 'scientific analysis, or historical insights could affect their understanding that here is the plain Word of God miraculously revealed and preserved through the ages…

…On the other hand there have been those people, perhaps the majority in the Western World, who are dogmatically certain that the Bible is a collection of old wives' tales, unworthy of serious study and certainly irrelevant to our contemporary situation. Many of the

Just on two thousand, six hundred years ago, the people of ancient Israel having been taken into exile in Babylon, the Lord touched base and reconnected with them, to restore their faith in Him and in the reality and meaningfulness of the Word.

In our day the Lord has "touched base" – for want of a better way of putting it – with the human race, re-invigorating the Word and for the purpose of restoring our faith and confidence in it, and to awaken anew our enthusiasm and love for it. It was - and is - the central purpose for the giving of the revelation we believe we have in the theological Writings of Swedenborg.



The vision of the Word as it is given to us here in Ezekiel Chapter 1

As challenging as Ezekiel found it to get his mind around what he saw; to adequately describe it; so it is challenging, if not impossible, for us to take in and to truly get a handle on the vastness and depth of the Word: its multiple levels of meaning; its unending richness; and the insights and understanding it brings us about ourselves and, most importantly, about the Lord, Who He is, how He operates, His ceaseless monitoring of the minutest details of our lives and of His plan and purpose which is at the very heart of creation and of our very own creation

Having said that, these – though – are some of the memorable features of the vision so usefully seen in relation to the Word which –as we now know – is

<u>Firstly</u>, and in verse 4 there is mention of a mighty whirlwind.

<u>Secondly</u>, fire is mentioned more than once. The whirlwind has fire in and around it, as we read in verse 13, "fire was going back and forth among the living creatures."

<u>Thirdly</u>, and with regard to the four living creatures, we read they had wings, hands under the wings, and overall the likeness of a man, each facing different directions.

and <u>Fourthly</u> there were the wheels, powerfully and purposefully driven: wheels within wheels.

A whirlwind – fire – four living creatures – and wheels within wheels.

Remember: this is all about the Word. It is highlighting features of the Word.

The whirlwind holds up to us how powerful and dynamic the Word is. It has the power to stir up things, to break down old defenses and self-justifications. It brings home to us the power that the Word has to dismiss unreasonableness, negativity and thinking and influences impacting on us from hell.

The fire speaks of the Lord's love burning at the heart of the Word. Remember? "Fire was going back and forth among the four creatures." The Word is the Lord's love clothed in admonitions, challenges, promises and encouragement; speaking to us

The four living creatures are all about the Word being alive. And the fact that they had the appearance of being human brings home to us what the Word is all about – true humanness and each of us becoming a truly human being.

Notice, too, that they had wings – remember – highlighting how the Word can both lift us up and also protect us.

And the wheels speak of the capacity the Word has; at all its different levels; meanings within meanings; wheels within wheels; to shift us and to move us to better places, spiritually.

The Second Coming

We honour each year, at this time, and as close to June 19th as possible:

- the renewing of the power of the Word in our midst;
- its dynamism;
- the expression of the Lord's love, which it is; its ability to lift our minds and thinking on to a higher level;
- the protection it brings us when doubts, fears and self-centredness start to make inroads with us;
- its capacity to move us to new places;
- and, just so very significantly this new

The Lord comes again to us in His restored, renewed, now opened Word, brought back to life and relevance, as it has been.

Through the Writings the Lord has opened up for us “the genuine sense and understanding of the Word”. (see “Spiritual Experiences” 1464). We see the Lord, now,in a wholly new light. He has broken through the mysteries and uncertainties. He has come again to us. He has renewed His presence with us.

With us

There is nothing so powerful or so potentially life changing as the Word is. No saying of the wisest person or book written by the most renowned author. Nothing!

But we must be careful of mere hearsay in this regard, or the acknowledgement of our lips only, that this is so. I can say it; you can read about it; and we can both convince ourselves that we believe it. But…!

The thing is, and with regard to the Word, we can only truly know its power; its capacity to lead us into true humanness; its protection against falsities and fears; its ability to move and shift us into heavenly states, and to keep us there, as we engage with it; wrestle with its challenges; and

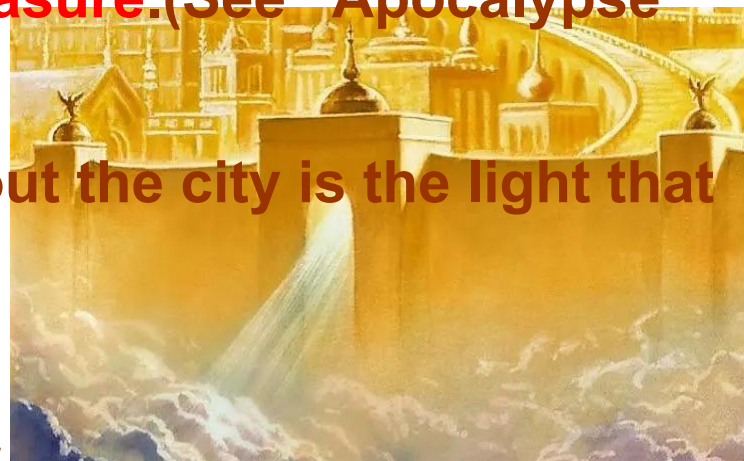
Our transformation

Our transformation, or regeneration, is the Lord's total focus and goal, working with us – as He does – through His Word. Remember: Ezekiel saw Him on high, dazzling with the colours of the rainbow, directing operations.

And the Lord gives us His promise and a foretaste of the regenerate or transformed person we can become in the description of the holy city, New Jerusalem.

This is what the holy city, New Jerusalem, is. It is the now opened, restored and re-invigorated Word being worked into our lives; into thoughts, feelings, attitudes and reactions; into troubles that beset us and in response to doubts all too eager to ambush us.

There are, with respect to the new Jerusalem, its sure foundations, being the basic truths the Lord urges and presses on us, nothing complicated, all straightforward. For instance, *"Do unto others as you would have them do to you*." Such are the truths that make up the strong base on which all else is built. We know, too, of its golden streets, its transparent walls, and that "the length and the breadth and the height of the city were equal". And what this means is that with a person in whom the holy city is descending love, wisdom and the application of love and wisdom to life, are present in equal measure.(See "Apocalypse Revealed" 907)



Beautifully so, throughout the city is the light that shines from the Lord.. *"The city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it,*

Offered observation

The New Church is all about the Word – the Word restored, renewed, brought back into focus, opened up and shown to be full of the Lord's Love and Wisdom and powerful beyond our being able to adequately take in. We are not in the business, as any kind of priority, of becoming a mega Church, a spiritual Disco setting out to attract thousands or a pressure group for social, economic and political reform.

This is so inspiring what we are shown in the Writings, or the Heavenly Doctrines, about it, that if we are sincere and earnest looking to the Lord, seeking help and guidance, we can hear the Lord speaking with us in His Word and He will shine light on it and bring it to life for us in powerful,

Let's not scorn the fact that there are those in the scientific community who ridicule it because they can't make sense of it and won't buy into simplistic insistence on its literal accuracy or the fundamentalists who make nonsense of it insisting on that literal accuracy.

Instead, this is the challenge for the New Church, and of the Swedenborgian community worldwide, to highlight and point the way to this new understanding and appreciation of the Second Advent Word.

And this is promised, that as you and I embrace its power and energy, and take to heart its directives and its reassurances; as we rise to its challenges and as it becomes truly alive in us; so the holy city, new Jerusalem further descends

“This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.”

Readings:

Arcana Caelestia 6221

"With regard to the Word, every single detail has come down from the Lord, passing through heaven and into the world. On the way down it assumed forms suited to the understanding of those in the three heavens, and at length assumed a form suited to man's understanding, which form is the literal sense."

Arcana Caelestia 1771:3

"When the Lord imparts life to the Word it possess such an effecting power that it penetrates to peoples inmost being."

Arcana Caelestia 1776

"The Word of the Lord is a dead letter, but in everyone, when he is reading it, it is given life by the Lord, each according to his capacity to receive it."

The Last Judgement 73

"It is because people have had their spiritual freedom restored that the spiritual sense of the Word has now been disclosed, and by this means Divine truths of a more interior kind have been revealed."

THE END