

SIGNS AND SEASONS

by Ray C. Stedman

On Tuesday night of this past week our area experienced an eclipse of the moon. I would like to ask you, Were you able to interpret the message of that eclipse? Did you understand what God meant to say to humanity when he arranged the orbits of the earth and the moon so that the earth would come between the sun and the moon periodically and eclipse the light of the moon? If you did not, it was because you did not know the significance of the fourth day of creation. In the events of this fourth day, recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, verses 14-19, we have the key to the ultimate meaning of such phenomena as an eclipse of the moon.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day. {Gen 1:14-19 RSV}

In coming to this fourth day of the creative week we must face a problem that is often raised and which bothers many people. Why is it that light is created on the first day, but the sun, moon and stars are not made until the fourth day of creation? There have been several solutions suggested for this difficulty. There are those who feel that the sun and the moon were actually made on the first day but they did not shine directly upon the earth until the fourth day; that something obscured their light -- heavy clouds, perhaps, or some other cosmic phenomenon -- and on this fourth day this obscuration is taken away; they are permitted to shine directly upon the earth, and certain functions are assigned to them by the Creator.

This does, perhaps, solve the difficulty, but it always strikes me as forcing the language of this section. There is nothing said about the obscuring of light, or the clearing away of clouds. The language does not even suggest it. The same terms are used as those describing the other things God did. He "made" the sun and the moon, the greater light and the lesser light, and he placed them in the firmament (in the sky), that they might perform certain functions.

There are others who suggest that perhaps the earth was really made first before the sun and the moon. They take the passage as it literally reads, that God made the earth before he made the sun or the moon, that the sun and the moon were not actually made until much later. There is some evidence that the moon was made later than the earth. In fact, there are some scientists (and I think there is some Biblical evidence for this as well) who theorize that the moon was made from the earth; that it was torn from the earth and the area that is now the Pacific Ocean was once filled with the material that now makes up the moon.

It is interesting that the Surveyor V lunar probe has sent back from the moon the information that the surface on which it rests has the chemical composition of a type of rock which is widespread on earth. (That disposes of the green cheese theory.) This rock type, basalt, forms the crust of the earth under the ocean basins and underlies the continents at depth as well. Thus it is possible that the moon did originate from the earth in some fashion. It is also interesting that this could tie in with the continental drift theory. Perhaps the removal of the moon from the earth led to a breakup of the originally unified land mass and the continents began to drift away from one another toward the vacated region of the Pacific basin. There are many difficulties in these speculations, but, at any rate, there is some evidence that the moon was created after the earth.

But it is very difficult to imagine how the sun could be made after the earth was formed. It is particularly difficult to imagine how plant life could develop upon the earth before the sun was shining in the sky. This seems almost incredibly difficult from a scientific point of view and therefore this idea seems not to fit the facts

very well.

The best explanation, and one which I personally adopt, is what we have been saying all along: that this passage is not trying to teach a consecutive series of developments. Chronological time is not primarily in view of Genesis 1. The great question of Genesis 1 is not, "How long ago did these things happen?" or even, "How long did it take in the process of making them?" despite the fact that we continually bring these questions into this passage. It is not so much the question of how, but really the question is, "Why did these happen?"

There is a remarkable sequence that has been noted by many in Genesis 1. If you take the fourth, fifth, and sixth days of creation and lay them alongside the first, second, and third, you will notice a very remarkable parallelism. The first and fourth day both deal with the bringing of light to the earth. The second and fifth day are both concerned with the ocean and sky. And the third and sixth day deal with the land and its life, animal and plant life. So here is really a series of three, repeated twice, during these six days of creation: light, ocean, sky, and the earth. In the second repetition there is a further development and enlargement of that which has been given before, a recapitulation in more detail. Therefore, these are not six consecutive days, but they come in a sequence of three. The events of day four occur at the same time as the events of day one, but further detail is given.

It is interesting to note a similar structure in the book of Revelation. Many people cannot understand Revelation because they try to read it chronologically. They get confused by the sequence of sevens there -- seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven vials of the wrath of God -- which do seem to follow one another. The events are confusing if you read it that way. But take these as recapitulations, with one series overlapping the other, corresponding in time, and you will find a wonderful harmony develops and it all fits into place beautifully. I am suggesting that this is the way we ought to read the first chapter of Genesis.

It is interesting that the number three is stamped upon this chapter of Genesis, as the number seven is upon the book of Revelation. Anyone who is acquainted with Eastern languages knows that numbers are very significant in the East. Here, in chapter one, the number three is repeated many times. Three times it says, "God created," three times it says, "God made," three times it declares, "God named," three times it reads, "God divided," and three times it says, "God blessed." So throughout the chapter the emphasis is on this number three. But the book of Revelation focuses upon the number seven. This is highly significant, for three is the number standing for the essence of Deity --the Trinity, the Three-in-one, the very essence of God -- and that number is stamped upon the created world. Seven, too, is the number of deity, but deity in its full manifestation -- deity unveiled, deity fully revealed. It is quite understandable, therefore, that you would find Genesis at the beginning of the Bible and Revelation at the end. I mention that in passing only to stir your minds to understand and explore some of these things in Scripture.

If it be true that day four occurs at the same time as day one, then we have a remarkable accord with some of the proposals of science. For instance, this explains without any difficulty or forcing, the source of light on day one. It comes from the sun and the moon, as we might expect and as everything in science indicates. Further, this would show that life began first in the sea and not upon the land, for day five and day two are simultaneous. Life begins in the oceans, as recorded on day five, rather than upon the land as recorded on day three. This again is what science has discovered. Furthermore this idea would reveal that animal life and plant life began together. Since, in many cases, one is dependent upon the other, this is in exact accord with what the fossil record reveals and what science has discovered. That may help us in trying to reconcile this with some of the facts which science has uncovered in its search for truth.

But, as I have suggested, the great question is never "How?" but "Why?" The answer to the question, "Why did God make the sun and moon and stars?" is given in a three-fold way here in this passage. Notice the three divisions. They exist, first, to give light upon the earth. both during the day and at night. They separate the day from the night. Second, they exist to measure the process of time, "for days and for years." says the Scriptures. They are the means by which we measure time. Third, they are designed to mark significant events; they are "for signs and for seasons." The entire record of human history confirms the truth of this. This is exactly what the sun and moon and stars do.

We all know that the sun makes the day. One of the hardest questions I ever heard was the question of a little boy who asked his father. "Daddy, why does the sun shine in the daytime when we don't need it, and not at night when we do?" That was a keenly observant question, but its answer is very difficult. Yet it is obviously true that the sun makes the day, and separates the day from the darkness. But the darkness is not entirely dark, for God has provided light in the darkness: the light of the moon and the stars. (By the way, the "stars" referred to here are thought by most Hebrew scholars to be more likely a reference to the other planets of our solar system. They are not the distant stars of sidereal space, but the other planets which shine brightly within our solar system and which we see as stars.)

We know also that the rotation of the earth is what determines the length of the day. The speed of the earth as it rotates on its axis determines the 24-hour day we have. Yet that speed is regulated by the moon which acts as a brake upon the earth, raising and lowering the tides. It restricts the speed of the rotation of earth to the exact time that makes possible the 24-hour day, which is the length of time best adapted to the needs of man. Is that not remarkable? Other planets have entirely different lengths of days. On some of the planets a day would occupy months and even years of our time. On others they go much more rapidly. On Jupiter, for instance, the day is only about nine of our hours long, though it is the largest of the planets. But God has designed a 24-hour day for our planet because it precisely fits the need of humanity.

The orbit of earth around the sun determines the length of the year, which, again, is just right for human needs, providing a harvest once every 365 days, the right length of time needed to preserve human life upon the earth. The orbit of the earth around the sun is determined by two factors: the gravitational pull of the sun, and the velocity of the earth. No one knows what determines the velocity of the earth, what strange force hurls us through space at about 1100 miles per minute. We do not know what causes it. But here we are told that God has ordained the sun and moon to provide measures of the time which mark off the segments of life we call days and years.

Then, as suggested here, the heavenly bodies are also for special signs. We are all aware that eclipses, for instance, are like mileposts in human history, marking off certain dates. We can study events in ancient history because the eclipses have been recorded. Anyone familiar with the Bible at all knows how the sun and the moon have served as great signs. There is that strange occurrence called Joshua's long day, recorded in the book of Joshua, when the sun stood still and the moon stayed its course for about the length of a full day. There is that other strange story in Isaiah, during the days of King Hezekiah when God turned back the shadow on the sun-dial so that Hezekiah would have a sign that God was at work in his life and his kingdom.

We are all familiar with the story of the star of Bethlehem, which caught the attention of the Magi in the East and brought them to Bethlehem. It announced the birth of the greatest person ever born in the history of our globe. There is also the strange darkening of the sun at the time of the crucifixion; an unexplained darkness that lasted for three hours. It was not an eclipse of the sun, as some versions say, because no eclipse lasts that long, but it was an especially remarkable darkness. There have been other times like this. Many of you have read of the "Great Dark Day" in New England in the 1780's, when the whole New England region passed through a period of darkness that no one to this day has been able to explain. And through the Bible there runs a repeated refrain, beginning in the early books and running through into the New Testament, which says there is coming a day when the greatest even the world will ever know, the return of Jesus Christ to earth, will be heralded by the darkening of the sun and the moon turning to blood. These bodies are provided for signs and for seasons.

But it is when you turn from the physical level to the spiritual level of these functions that you come to a full understanding of why they act as they do. What is the spiritual significance of the sun and the moon? In the Scriptures we find the sun repeatedly used as a symbol of Jesus Christ. Malachi closes the Old Testament with the promise, "... the Sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in his wings," {cf, Mal 4:2 KJV}. In the symbolic visions of Christ that appear in Daniel and Revelation his face shines with the brightness of the sun. Again and again the figure of the sun in its glory is used to describe the greatness of the Son of God.

Then, what is the symbolic significance of the moon? It does not take much thought to see the relationship between these two. If the sun is Christ figured for us, then the moon is the people of God. Again, you have interesting references to this. In the Song of Solomon, which describes the relationship of the Lord and his

people, you find the bride described as "... fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners," {Song 6:10b RSV}. Recall also in the New Testament that the Apostle Paul tells us that Christ and his church are seated together in the heavenly places. As here we are told that the sun and moon were placed in the firmament to perform functions upon the earth, so in the Epistle to the Ephesians we learn that Christ and his church are seated together in heavenly places to be a testimony to the universe of the great truths God desires his creatures to learn.

As you think this through you can see what a beautiful picture this is. The moon has no light of its own; it shines only by the reflected light of the sun. So the church has no light of its own to give; it has absolutely nothing to say to this world, except to reflect the message which God has given it. The knowledge of that is helpful in answering the question that is plaguing many today, "What is the purpose of the church?" "Why are we here?" "What are we supposed to be doing in this world?" The answer is: reflecting the truth, the light that comes from God. That is the major purpose of the church in the world.

You recall that Jesus himself said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world," {John 9:5}. But, speaking to his disciples, he said, "You are the light of the world: a city which sits upon a hill cannot be hid," {Matt 5:14 RSV}. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so the church (or the people of God in any age), are to reflect the light of the Son of God.

Further, we are told here that the sun was designed to shine in the day, but the moon to shine at night. That is very significant. We learn in the New Testament that the Lord Jesus Christ shines in his fullness only for those whom Paul calls, "the children of the day" {1 Th 5:5b KJV}, i.e., only believers in Christ. The world cannot see him but he shines for us. He illuminates our hearts and lives. He shines into the darkness of our souls. He captures our imagination and wins the love and affection of our hearts. But this is only for those who have come to know him, who have become children of the day and not of the night. It is for them Jesus Christ shines.

But the light of the church is for the darkness of lost humanity. It is in the moral darkness of this age that the church is to shine, reflecting the light of God. God, in a sense, hides himself in his people. That is why we say, and say quite rightly, "The only Christ this world can see is the Christ they see in you and me," the Christ who is reflected in the attitudes and reactions of his people. That is why it is so extremely important how we live. The apostle writes to the Ephesians and says, "You must no longer live like the Gentiles live, in the darkness of their minds," {cf, Eph 4:17}. You must begin to live in the light. In that same chapter he says, "Walk as children of the light, and not as children of the darkness," {cf, Eph 5:8-11}.

Over and over in the New Testament you have such exhortations. We must not be like the world around in its blindness, its darkness, its hostility, its obscurity, its failure to understand, its ignorance. We must walk as those who understand what life is about, reflecting truth for the world to see, that there may be some light in the darkness in which they live. Only as the church does this is there any light in the world. That is why the Lord says of us, "You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine among men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven," {cf, Matt 5:16}.

That brings us to the meaning of eclipses. Why do we have eclipses? They are not inevitable in the pattern of nature. It would have been possible for the Creator to design the orbits of the sun and the moon in relationship to one another and to the earth so as to have eliminated eclipses. But he did not. Why do we have them? In each of these natural events there is a great and important lesson taught. There are two kinds of eclipses, that of the sun and that of the moon. When the moon is in eclipse it ceases its shining as the earth comes between it and the sun. So the church loses its light when earthly values and earthly aims obscure the face of Jesus Christ. This is what has been wrong with the church many times, and what is wrong today. The people of God forget the fact that they are not a worldly people but begin to live for the same aims, the same purposes, and the same standards and values as the world around. When that happens, the light of the church goes into eclipse. It loses its light and the world around plunges into darkness.

On the other hand, the sun stops its shining when the moon comes between the earth and the sun. If you follow the figure through you will see what it means. When the church becomes more important than its Lord, then the light of the sun is blocked out and all is in darkness. This too has happened again and again. People

have forgotten that the great aim and object of the church's concern is its Lord. They talk only about the church and what it can be and try to draw the attention of the world to the church. They are concerned about denominational values and denominational prestige in the eyes of others. When the eyes of Christians and the world are focused upon the church and not its Lord, then the church obscures or eclipses its Lord, and the light ceases to shine.

We are told that the sun and the moon, depicting the Lord and his church, are put in the sky to serve as measures of time. Is it not interesting, when you turn to the Bible, that the people of God determine the onrush of human events and how long those events last? There is that remarkable passage in Daniel 9, familiar to many, called the vision of the 70 weeks, wherein Daniel is told that 70 weeks of years are marked off in relation to Israel, 490 years. He was told that 483 of them would lead to Jesus Christ. As time ran on its course the nations of earth were unaware of this and carried on their affairs in complete ignorance. But in the reckoning of God, those years were being clicked off on God's chronometer until the moment came when the Son of God was to be presented as King to the nation of Israel. At that precise moment, 483 years after the beginning of the predicted period, the Lord Jesus mounted a donkey on the Mount of Olives and rode into the city in the so-called "Triumphant Entry," offering himself as king in fulfillment of the promises. The people of God are the measure of time.

We read in the Olivet Discourse and in other places in Scripture that the gospel is first to be preached unto all the earth "and then," the Lord says, "the end shall come," {cf, Matt24:14}.. Peter, writing to the church, exhorts them to be diligent and exemplary in the way they live, in order, he says, that they might "hasten the coming of the day of God," {cf, 2 Pet 3:12}. Again, see how time is related to the people of God.

Furthermore, the sun and moon shall be for signs and seasons. I think it is most significant that no one has yet been able properly to write a history of the world without relating it to the church, to the people of God. For as the church goes, so goes society. Next Sunday we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the day when Martin Luther strode up to the castle church of Wittenberg and nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door and thus began the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe. He was not the first of the Reformers for there were others before him, such as John Huss of Bohemia, and others. But you cannot read the record of those days without seeing that, as great theological truths began to break out upon men again, they also had an immediate effect upon society around. As the Reformation came into being, the Renaissance was born.

There is no other way to explain what happened in 18th century England in the days of John and Charles Wesley, when England was saved from the terrible riots, violence, and destruction that the French experienced in the French Revolution, except to note that the Evangelical Awakening broke out in England at that same time. As the Evangelical Awakening swept through the British Isles, economic conditions were changed and society was adjusted.

Ask yourself, why we are going through this present decline in morals, this breakdown of law and order. The answer is, the church has been languishing, sunken in spiritual poverty and darkness. We must remember that we are the church, and that, as the individual Christian shines, so the church shines. But when individual Christians turn their backs upon their Lord and walk in the ways of the world, the light fades from earth, the nations are plunged into darkness, evil conditions break out in society, and tumult, violence, riot and immorality come rushing in. This is the invariable record of history. This is why God has provided a people who might shine and give light; who might be salt, arresting the corruption of society around. If ever there was a day which calls the people of God back to an earnest facing of these things, and a turning away from the values, standards, attitudes, and outlooks of the world, to give themselves once again to fulfilling their calling and reflecting the glory and light of God, it is the day in which we live. May God grant that we will, each of us, earnestly, individually, face this question and ask ourselves, "What am I doing about this? How am I failing to reflect the light of God in my life, in my home, in my family, in my situation? When am I doing what the sun and the moon never do, defying my Creator, refusing to fulfill the function for which he has placed me here?"

Prayer:

I thank you, our Father, for the lesson of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Write it upon our

hearts that we will not forget. As each day in its unchanging course reminds us of these events; as the sun rises and the moon sets, and the stars come out, as the light of the night is brightened by the shining of the moon, so help us to remember that this is the picture of your intention for your church: to shine in the moral darkness of this world and lighten it until the Day Star shall arise once again, "the Sun of righteousness, with healing in his wings," to bring light, in all its fullness of glory, to a troubled and darkened world. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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