

## Bob Dylan's: 'When the deal goes down' – lyric analysis by Kees de Graaf

### 1. What does 'when the deal goes down' mean?

This song was written by Bob Dylan in 2006 for the album 'Modern Times'. The melody is reminiscent of Bing Crosby's staple hit, "Where the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day." The whole interpretation of the lyrics of this song very much depends on how you interpret the refrain of each of the 4 verses of the song: ***"I'll be with you, when the deal goes down"***. Before we can start analyzing the verses of this song in more detail, we first need to have more clarity on this key line in the song. Who is this 'you' that the poet will be with when this deal goes down? Is this some other person, a woman perhaps? Or even God? And what is this 'deal' exactly? Is this some sort of business deal, a deal with a woman, or some kind of obscure agreement? And what does it mean when a deal 'goes down'?

First of all, I think that the 60 minutes CBS television [interview](#) Bob Dylan gave in 2004 might give us an important clue on how we should interpret this song. In this interview Dylan is asked why after so many years he still out there on stage, performing all of his songs on tour. After emphasizing that he doesn't take any of it for granted, Dylan gives the following reply: *"It goes back to that destiny thing. I mean, I made a bargain with it, you know, long time ago. And I'm holding up my end"*. On the question what his bargain was Dylan answers: *"to get where I am now"*. And asked whom he made that bargain with he answers: *"With the Chief Commander, in this earth and in a world we can't see"*. How should we interpret this statement? From this statement, it seems obvious that the 'Chief Commander' must be Jesus or God. However, some people on the internet have argued that Dylan had sold his soul to Satan, and that he had Satan in mind when he talked about the Chief Commander. Some have even scrambled or distorted his 60 minutes interview to make it look that way. In Matthew 28: 18 Jesus says about Himself: *'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'*. So there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Dylan meant Jesus or God with whom he made that deal with a long time ago. Earlier in the interview it is said that he knew even then that he was destined to become a music legend. *"I was heading for the fantastic lights,"* he wrote in the Chronicles. *"Destiny was looking right at me and nobody else."* How does Bob Dylan describe the word "destiny"? Dylan says: *"It's a feeling you have that you know something about yourself - nobody else does - the picture you have in your mind of what you're about will come true,"*. A 'bargain' is defined as 'an agreement, especially one do to something in return for something else'. A 'deal' may be defined as 'an arrangement to the advantage of both sides, often in business'. In this sense these two words – 'bargain' and 'deal' are quite synonymous.

We learn from this interview that Dylan once made a bargain, or a deal, with God. But one may ask the question if a human being – in this case Dylan himself – is in a position to make a 'bargain' or a 'deal' with God? Usually a man makes a bargain or a deal with one's peer, one who is equal to you. But does the Almighty God make a deal with a mortal human being? To answer this question we first need to introduce another word here. This word is closely related to the word 'bargain' or 'deal'. It is the word 'covenant'. A 'covenant' is defined as 'a formal solemn agreement between two or more people or groups'. The word 'covenant' is often used in the Bible. In Genesis, Chapter 17, we read that God has made a 'covenant', a 'deal' with Abraham. Abraham's part (obligation) of the covenant with God was to "walk before me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). God from his end promised Abraham that he will be multiplied exceedingly and that Abraham will be the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:4). A deal that has gone down, and has been put into effect. In the song 'Covenant Woman' – released on the album 'Saved' – Dylan once said: "I've got a covenant too".

'To go down' has various meanings. When used in combination with the word 'deal', 'to go down' means: 'to put into effect'. Let me give an example to clarify this. One may say "When the deal goes down, I'll be waiting for the merchandise in the alley!" In this example drugs are exchanged for

money. The drugs deal has been put into effect. Both parties can now separate from each other because what was agreed and promised has been delivered. The drugs deal has gone down. Having said this, let us now try and apply this more specifically to what Dylan might have had in mind when he says: **"I'll be with you when the deal goes down"**. When his deal with God will have been accomplished he will not be separated from God but he will stay with him: **"I'll be with you"**. What was Dylan's part of this 'deal' exactly? His answer to that question is a little enigmatic and typically Dylanesque: **"to get where I am now"**. I feel it as a missed opportunity that the 60 minutes interviewer Bradley did not dwell on this subject and asked Dylan in reply to this: "What do exactly you mean by that?"

**'To get where I am now'** in my opinion means that Dylan feels he follows the path, he walks the line. Apparently God has a plan for Dylan and Dylan sticks to the roadmap God has made for him. That is supposed to be Dylan's part of the deal, the bargain. **'To get where I am now'** is as if Dylan says: "So far I have followed the roadmap God has made for me a long time ago, and if I had not held up my end of the deal, I would not be here at this point, at this stage of my career. I do what I have to do. Being here proves that I am holding up my end of the deal. At the same time it implies that there is still a road ahead of me. Nobody knows how long this road is going to last, I take nothing for granted, but when I die the deal will have been fully accomplished, and then the deal will go down. And if that happens, at the end of the trail, **I'll be with You in heaven**".

It all seems to demonstrate that Dylan doesn't do anything at random. He feels there is a divine purpose, a plan behind everything he does as an actor. He seems to believe that his songs, his shows, the set lists, the albums, all are all a part of some sort of 'a perfect finished plan', a carefully selected process for which he has guidance from above. He feels that as an artist he officiates as 'watchtower' to warn people, in some sort of a way like the old biblical Prophets once did, that this world is doomed. This idea is supported by the fact that the song *'All along the watchtower'* has run like a continuous thread through almost all of his shows for so many years. As per today's date there have been more than 1900 performances of this song.

Also the fact that the background décor, - the all-seeing 'eye' - looms large on audiences all over the world, in the so-called Never Ending Tour, might give us an important clue. Somebody wrote: 'the eye represents the watchful state of those who serve in constant vigil of a most pivotal event in earth history, and one that which must surely come to pass. The crown represents the regal countenance of the King who has been foretold by prophecy, and who is still yet to come. The lightning that is all about the symbol realizes the circumstance in which the King will be recognized, and as seen coming through the ethereal sky, and through that of time and space'.

To sum this up, I think that if you wish to understand what Dylan means when he says in this song: **'When the deal goes down'**, you simply cannot ignore what Dylan said in the 60 minutes CBS Television interview in 2004 about destiny and about the bargain, the deal, he said he made with the Commander in Chief, God.

## **2. Analysis of the four verses**

### **A. Verse 1**

*In the still of the night, in the world's ancient light  
Where wisdom grows up in strife  
My bewildering brain, toils in vain  
Through the darkness on the pathways of life  
Each invisible prayer is like a cloud in the air  
Tomorrow keeps turning around  
We live and we die, we know not why  
But I'll be with you when the deal goes down*

We do not know if Dylan had the expression "Ancient Lights" somewhere in the back of his mind when he wrote this first line. He could just be using a play upon the words here. Anyway, "Ancient

Lights" is a colloquialism for the "right to light," guaranteed under English law, whereby windows that have seen twenty years' worth of "uninterrupted" daylight cannot be blocked by the construction of new buildings.

**"In the still of the night, in the world's ancient light"** takes our minds back to the early days after the creation of the world, to the time and place where wisdom was first born. **"Wisdom"** is personified here. Wisdom has been defined to be "the quality of being wise; knowledge, and the capacity to make due use of it, is the use of the best means for attaining the best ends". Wisdom therefore implies the selection of right ends as well as of right means." Hence, wisdom implies the union of high mental and moral excellence. "Knowledge", on the other hand, is a more comprehensive term; it signifies the simple apprehension of facts or relations. Wisdom, however, is so much more than knowledge, for wisdom it takes tossing and turning and often strife to come to the right decisions. Wisdom is such a precious gift that it can only grow up and thrive in the stillness of the night, in the world's ancient light, when it all began. In the stillness of the night, when God alone was there in the flickering ancient light, he created the earth by wisdom, like we read in Proverbs 3:24 **"The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens"**.

**"Where wisdom grows up in strife"**. When Dylan wrote this song he must have been inspired by the poetry of Henry Timrod (1826-1867). In this song we find a few lines which are very reminiscent of this poet. In his poem "Retirement" the poet Timrod writes: **"There is a wisdom that grows up in strife and one - I like best - that sits at home and learns its lessons of a thoughtful ease"**.

**"Wisdom grows up in strife"** means that, although there is a wisdom that is acquired easily like in Timrod's poem, most of the time true wisdom is never acquired in an easy way. It takes a lot of pain, struggle and strife to find true wisdom. In the world's ancient light, when God created the earth through wisdom, wisdom was incontestable and irrefutable but when man was corrupted, true wisdom can usually only be acquired through strife.

**"My bewildering brain, toils in vain, through the darkness on the pathways of life"** Although the poet will eventually find consolation when the deal will go down, he is still on his way. Darkness, misery and pain is all around him and no matter how hard he tortures his mind, he is unable to understand or to come to terms with all this misery and hardships he encounters in this world. He has no alternative but to walk that lonesome valley, the dark pathways of life which are so puzzling and uncertain.

**"Each invisible prayer is like a cloud in the air"**. It was Paul Simon who once wrote: "Prayers are the constant memory of God". There is a constant flow of prayers to the throne of God, like a continuous flow of clouds through the air. Prayers are not visible but yet very powerful. They resemble clouds of incense. Clouds of incense are mingled with the prayers of all the saints and the smoke of the incense rises with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. (Revelations 8:3-4). Invisible prayers from the saints spark off a lot of heavenly action: peals of thunder and flashes of lightning coming down from the clouds and even earthquakes (Revelation 8:5).

**"Tomorrow keeps turning around"**. This line is again inspired by Henry Timrod's poem **"A Rhapsody of a Southern Winter Night"**: **"I am so happy! That is all my thought. Tomorrow I will turn it round and round"**. Things will take a turn for the better tomorrow. The effect of prayers is often invisible to the naked eye but yet behind the scenes these prayers are answered and they turn things around.

**"Tomorrow keeps turning around"** may also mean the same things keep on coming back over and over again. For everything there is a turn, for everything there is a time in a seemingly never ending cycles. That is what Dylan had in mind when he read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 from the Bible in his Theme Time Radio Hour [Broadcast](#) .

Everything and everybody seems to be trapped in fires of time when we read: **"We live and we die, we know not why"**. Also here the lyrics seem to lean heavily on the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 8:17: **"Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the son. However a man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out"**. Ecclesiastes 3:19-20: **"For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over beasts; for all is vanity"**. Ecclesiastes 1:13: **"And I applied my**

*mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with".* When a man is left to himself he cannot find any purpose in all that happens under the sun. Left to himself a man is unable to look beyond the horizon to understand why he was born and why he will die. For the bewildered poet there is only one consolation left now: 'all I have and all I know is this dream of You which keeps me living on'. The confidence that at the end of the trail, when the deal goes down, he will be with God, keeps him going on

### **B. Verse 2**

*We eat and we drink, we feel and we think  
Far down the street we stray  
I laugh and I cry and I'm haunted by  
Things I never meant nor wished to say  
The midnight rain follows the train  
We all wear the same thorny crown  
Soul to soul, our shadows roll  
And I'll be with you when the deal goes down*

The words "***We eat and we drink***" are reminiscent of what Dylan once wrote in 'Standing in the Doorway': "*I'll eat when I'm hungry and I drink when I'm dry, and live my life on the square*." ***We eat and we drink, we feel and we think***" seems to demonstrate that every human being, no matter what higher calling he or she may or may not have, is tied up to the earth. Our earthly existence, demands that our material and physical needs are met. Nobody can live without eating or drinking. In this respect we are like any other living organism, including animals. Although animals can feel, they cannot think logically, in the same way as human beings do. Man was created as a rational being. This enables man to feel and to think and to make his own decisions, whether right or wrong. It also makes him responsible for his deeds and for the choices he makes. At the same time there is some tragic and painful in these words. Although man was created with this beautiful and pure gift of reason, he chose to use this gift against his Creator and Maker. Man fell into sin and dragged down all mankind in his fall. This is the biggest catastrophe that ever happened to mankind. Everything is broken. This may be the reason why the poet cries out: "***Far down the street we stray***". Man is lost in dead and empty streets. Man is walking in the middle of nowhere in streets which are filled with people, who have lost all ray of hope. The call of the poet: '*Look up, look up, seek your Maker before Gabriel blows his horn*' (Sugar Baby, see I Thessalonians 4:16) seems to sound hollow and empty in this desolate and forlorn world. The poet goes on to say:

***"I laugh and I cry and I'm haunted by things I never meant nor wished to say"***. Whereas 'feeling' and 'thinking' may be predominantly inward human emotions, 'laughing' and 'crying' are more outward, extravert, emotions. As the poet grows older and wiser and comes closer and closer to the moment when the deal goes down, he is more and more marked by all the things he experiences in life. These may be joyful and humorous things: "***I laugh***", even some sort of resignation or complacency, when you start to realize that there is no sense in trying to change the world all on your own and that it is no use bothering too much about it: "*I used to care, but things have changed*" shows this kind of resignation. But in life there is not only a time to laugh but also a time to cry. Like in the [Broadcast](#) we mentioned above, when Dylan read Ecclesiastes 3:4: "*There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance*". Dylan's songs are full of the pain and distress, the alienation and estrangement of his existence on earth; rolling and tumbling and crying all night long. Often he feels lost in the crowd, feeling wretched to such an extent that all his tears are gone.

As the poet comes closer to the moment when the deal will go down, he also becomes more and more aware of his own fragility, weaknesses, sins, and shortcomings. The urge and necessity to

repent knocks on the door of his soul and shatters the broken mirror of innocence when he says: **"I'm haunted by things I never meant nor wished to say"**. "Things which you neither meant nor wished to say" is taken from and inspired by Sonnet 13 of the poet Henry Timrod (1828-1867). In the context of this song these words sound like a penance. In the Bible this is called the process of inward renewal (Romans 12:2) which produces repentance, like it says in 2 Corinthians 7:10: *'for godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation'*. At the same time there is something tragic in this. You cannot unring the bell. *"You can't turn back, sometimes you push too far"* (Sugar baby). It is like Dylan says in Mississippi: *"So many things that we never will undo, I know you're sorry, I'm sorry too"*. If a man cannot make amends for the things he has done wrong, if he missed the mark and overstepped the line, the only thing he can take refuge to is the saving grace of God.

**"The midnight rain follows the train"**. In Dylan's "Chronicles" we read that from his earliest childhood Bob Dylan had been familiar with trains and the spectacle and the sound of trains had always given him a feeling of comfort and security. Dylan writes that in the place where he was born, you couldn't go anywhere without having, at least for a part of the day, to wait at grades and crossings for long trains to pass by. The sound of trains in the distance made him feel more or less at home, as if wanted for nothing, as if he were on some sort of neutral terrain, freed from any danger and as if everything had settled down in the right place. However, if the midnight rain follows the train, the train too must be a midnight train. A *midnight* train however, has a negative connotation. The word has a connotation of loneliness and desolation. In a midnight train there are usually only few passengers, if any, on the train. The almost empty trains and deserted platforms at midnight may easily give you some kind of a spooky, unsafe feeling, like Dylan once said in "Standing in the Doorway": *"I've been riding the midnight train, got cold ice water in my vein"*. With a few exceptions – e.g. *"I fold my hands and pray for rain"* in Maggies's farm' -rain usually has a negative meaning in Dylan's works and expresses pain and distress, e.g. *"Buckets of rain, buckets of tears", I'm back in the rain and you are on dry land"*.

**"We all wear the same thorny crown"**. "Thorny crown" is a reference to a.o. Matthew 29:19 where it says: *"And when they had platted a crown of thorns they put it on his (Jesus's) head and a reed in his right hand and they bowed the knee before him and mocked Him saying Hail King of the Jews"*. The Crown of Thorns was woven of thorn branches and forcefully placed on the head of Jesus before his crucifixion, to humiliate and to mock Him. According to the Bible Jesus now reigns as King over this world, (see e.g. I Corinthians 15:24,25). Seen from this point of view, Jesus was quite correctly referred to as "The Commander in Chief" by Dylan in his 2004 CBS interview. (Referring to Matthew 28:18). The Bible also says that accession to the throne of Jesus went through suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection (see e.g. Philippians 2:5-10). The thorny crown forms a part of the road of suffering, the Via Dolorosa, which would in the end bring Jesus from suffering to glory. In this sense the expression is related to **"wisdom grows up in strife"**. The road to true wisdom is paved with pain and struggle and strife.

The poet says: **"We all wear the same thorny crown"**. Again, from a Biblical point of view this is a correct statement of the poet. Not only Jesus, but also his followers will, in a figurative sense, wear that same thorny crown. Romans 7:17 confirms this when it says that if we suffer with Him (that is Jesus) we will also be glorified with Him. 2 Corinthians 1:5 says *"For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ"*. The Bible makes it clear that all the followers of Jesus will suffer and wear the same thorny crown as long as they live on this earth. The Bible also says that it will not stay that way. One day the thorns on the crown will not be longer there and from that day on they shall reign with Jesus (Revelation 22:5). 'Some sweet day I'll stand beside my King', then I'll be with you, when the deal goes down'.

**"Soul to soul, our shadows roll"**. I read somewhere that 'the eyes of our souls only then begin to see, when our bodily eyes are closing'. The poet now takes us (like he also said in the 2004 CBS interview) to 'a world we can't see', but which nevertheless does exist. When a man dies his soul is separated from his body. The Bible says that whereas the body of a man returns to dust, his soul is lifted up into heaven. In Revelation 6:9, 10 we read that souls rest under the altar, waiting anxiously for the Day of

Judgment, the restoration of all things. Modern Times, more than any previous album, is heavily immersed in Biblical imagery taken from the Old Testament. Death is in the Old Testament referred to as a shadow. A 'shadow' in this sense means that it is not clear yet what exactly will happen after a man dies. In the Old Testament this is not as clearly expressed as in the New Testament. That is why the word 'shadow' is used in the Old Testament in connection with 'death'. See e.g. Psalm 23:4: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil"*.

Having said this, the best interpretation we can come with for *"soul to soul, our shadows roll"* is that the soul of the poet, together with the souls of fellow believers, drives, impels and rolls forward like a shadow, waiting anxiously, both in this life and in a world we can't see, for the great day when the deal will finally go down.

### **C. Verse 3**

*The moon gives light and shines by night*

*I scarcely feel the glow*

*We learn to live and then we forgive*

*O'er the road we're bound to go*

*More frail than the flowers, these precious hours*

*That keep us so tightly bound*

*You come to my eyes like a vision from the skies*

*And I'll be with you when the deal goes down.*

***"The moon gives light and shines by night, I scarcely feel the glow"***. This line is inspired by Henry Timrod's poem "Two portraits" where it says: "Still stealing on with pace so slow, yourself will scarcely feel the glow". The moon, unlike the sun, is not a source of light so it does not produce any light but it only reflects the sunlight to the earth. Also unlike the sun, the moon does not radiate any warmth to the earth so you cannot feel any glow. The whole expression is therefore poetic. It is used to express a feeling. The sun and the moon represent an important place in Biblical apocalyptic literature. At the day of the Lord, Judgment day, *"the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood"* (Acts 2:20). The Apocalypse, what will happen on the so called Latter Day, is also a main feature in Dylan's works, e.g.: *"Darkness at the break of noon shadows even the silver spoon, the handmade blade, the child's balloon, eclipses both the sun and moon"* and *"the moon is almost hidden, the stars are beginning to hide"*.

Here however, the word 'moon' is *not* used in connection with the Apocalypse, it does not foreshadow any immanent doom. On the contrary, the word 'moon' is used here in a positive way. The moon shines by night and it gives light by night. This moon is not supposed to harm you, but to protect and to guide you, like it says in Psalm 121:5, 6: *"The LORD is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night"*. The warmth of the sun and the glow of the moon are a demonstration of the favour of God towards mankind but the poet hardly feels this favour right now, he feels depressed, lonely, cold, deserted by God and man, and that is why he says: ***"I scarcely feel the glow"*** of the presence of God and man".

***"We learn to live and then we forgive, O'er the road we're bound to go"***. We do not know by nature how we should live. Through a process of trial and error a man grows up from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to maturity. We try to learn from whatever crosses our pathways of life. But that is not enough to learn to live. Life is an art. Life is a continuous growing process which takes a lot of pain and agony. No matter how marked a man's life may be because of all the hardships he has experienced in his life time, when left on his own, man is unable to learn to live. The poet needs help from above to learn to live. (cf. *"Who says I can't get heavenly aid" – Ain't Talking*). We already found out that true wisdom only comes through strife. The same may be said of 'learning to live'. When a man is left on his own, the process of learning to live is bound to fail because a man does not look in the mirror in the proper way. His judgment about himself is biased. He is incapable to see what he looks like and who he really is. He does not see that by nature a man is full of

revenge, unwilling to forgive and full of envy. Like it says in Proverbs 14:30: *"A sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy the rottenness of the bones"*. The first phase of learning how to live consists of an ever growing awareness of how much a man has been forgiven. Like it says in the LORD's prayer: *"forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"*(Matthew 6:12). Once a man has realized how much he has been forgiven, he starts to live, he learns to live. The more he learns to live, the more he is capable to forgive others. *"True love tends to forget"* Dylan once wrote, we may also say: 'true love tends to forgive'. It is the reason why the poet states that first we must learn to live and **then**, only then, we can start to forgive. True life, true love starts where a man begins to forgive. The ability to forgive is something we can only acquire from heaven; it is a gift from heaven.

It all happens ***"O'er the road we're bound to go"***. It all has to do with the 'destiny thing', we talked about earlier. As said Dylan strongly believes in destiny: *"Every step of the way, we walk the line, your days are numbered, so are mine"*. It is true; there is an element of tragic and intransparency in the word destiny and the way in which Dylan uses this word in his works. (*"There ain't no going back when your foot of pride comes down"* - in 'Foot of pride' - or *"some on their way up and some on their way down"* - in 'Can't wait') Elsewhere Dylan calls it the 'foggy web of destiny'. At the same time Dylan has made it clear through all of his works that destiny and ***"the road we're bound to go"*** does not take away a man's responsibility for the deeds he does and the choices he makes. Dylan has always made a clear distinction between good and bad, right and wrong based on Biblical principles of love and social justice. Here he wants to emphasize that it is essential that one first has to learn how to live and only then one may start to forgive and that these are necessary processes on the road we are bound to go. It is a process guided from heaven. It may be a painful road but it is nevertheless a road which will ultimately lead to glory: *"There ain't but one train on this track"* and, *"all rails leading to the west"*; it is a slow train coming but this train is bound for glory.

***"More frailer than the flowers these precious hours, that keep us so tightly bound"***. This line is inspired by Timrod's poem "A Rhapsody of a Southern Winter Night" who has *"A round of precious hours Oh! here, where in that summer noon I basked and strove, with logic frailer than the flowers"* Earlier we came already to the conclusion that the "You" of "I'll be with "You" when the deal goes down", is supposed to be Jesus or God. Accordingly, the "us" in "that keep "us" so tightly bound very likely must be the poet and Jesus or God. Dylan says in "Precious memories": *"In the stillness of the midnight, precious sacred scenes unfold"*. On the one hand Dylan seems to have had - and there is enough reason to believe that he still has - a very close and tight relationship with Jesus; these are those precious hours when he is closely connected with God. On the other hand this relationship is at the same time also fragile and frail, even frailer than the flowers. This may be caused by the fact that once a widely acclaimed public figure like Dylan has made a controversial choice, a lot of counter forces may come into action to pull him into the opposite direction, just like Dylan elsewhere says: *"A lot of things get in the way when you're trying to do what's right"*. As far as his faith is concerned such controversy and public pressure may easily lead him into a crisis with God or Jesus. We have good reasons to believe that he is hanging on to his faith, no matter how frail his relationship with God may be at times. This pressure is put into words when Dylan says: *"I look away but I keep seeing it, I don't want to believe, but I keep believing it"*. God from his side keeps on knocking at his heart's door when he goes on to say: ***"You come to my eyes like a vision from the skies"***. This line is again inspired by Timrod who has in his poem: "A Vision of Poesy - Part 01": *"A strange far look would come into his eyes, as if he saw a vision in the skies"*. A vision may generally be described as a religious or mystical experience of a super natural appearance. The poet needs reassurance that he is still on the right track, he needs strengthening of his wavering faith and somehow he gets a heavenly signal, a vision, that gives him power to go on and not give up on the deal he once made with God.

#### **D. Verse 4**

*I picked up a rose and it poked through my clothes  
I followed the winding stream*

*I heard a deafening noise, I felt transient joys  
I know they're not what they seem  
In this earthly domain, full of disappointment and pain  
You'll never see me frown  
I owe my heart to you, and that's sayin' it true  
And I'll be with you when the deal goes down*

***"I picked up a rose and it poked through my clothes, I followed the winding stream"***. Roses are ancient symbols of love and beauty. As an expression of how much he misses love and being loved Dylan wrote *"Everybody got all the flowers, I don't have one single rose"* in the song "I feel a change coming on", but here he finds at least one rose to pick up and poke through his clothes as he follows the winding stream. The stream is ever winding, so you don't know what is ahead of you and you can't see what is behind the bend. Amidst the uncertainty of a dark and grim future, it is difficult to follow the track; he therefore needs help and reassurance from above. As he follows the winding stream the rose is here a symbol and token of God's continuous love, support and guidance for the poet. This heavenly guidance enables him to endure all the hardships and temptations which he encounters as he follows the winding stream, on his way to the place where he will be with God and the place where at last the deal will go down. In Biblical imagery a stream or a river is an expression of the abundance of life God gives. Dylan once wrote in "Father of Night" that it is the heavenly Father who *"turneth the rivers and streams"* and elsewhere *"God knows there is a river and he knows how to make it flow"*. If you follow the stream or the river you are bound to reach the sources of life. There you will find that stream, that river, *"bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb"*(Revelation 22:1). That is the place where the deal will go down.

***"I heard a deafening noise, I felt transient joys, I know they're not what they seem"*** The album 'Modern Times' is full of Biblical imagery, including some violent imagery taken from the Old Testament. Dylan has been preoccupied with the Apocalypse for almost his entire career. As far as his thinking on the Apocalypse is concerned it would seem that the book of Revelation has had the most impact on Dylan's works. This book has been a major source for his apocalyptic tainted material. This line reminds us of Revelation 19: 6 and 7 where it says: *"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying, "Hallelujah!" For the Lord, our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come"*. All the elements of this line are reflected in those two verses of the book of Revelation. 'Deafening noise' is the sound of many waters and the sound of mighty thunder peals. The *"transient joys"* which the poet feels is the joy of the outcry: *"Hallelujah"* and *"let us rejoice"*. At the same time this joy is **'transient'**. 'Transient' means that the vision from the sky and the subsequent outburst of joy and euphoria only remains for a brief moment, in the same way when Dylan wrote in 'This dream of you': *"In a curtain gloom, I saw a star from heaven fall, I turned and looked again, but it was gone"*. A vision from the sky doesn't go on for a long time. It is transient, it is here, than there and the next moment it is gone again. The vision is enough however, to strengthen the poet so that he can go on.

***"I know they're not what they seem"*** refers again to that same Revelation 19:6: *"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a multitude"*, etc. What John the Revelator saw in his vision was of such incredible awe, magnitude and beauty that it was hard to put this into intelligible words and images. ***"I know they're not what they seem"*** means that the reality of what is being described in this metaphor is always incredibly more beautiful and splendid than one can ever imagine. It is like it says in 1 Corinthians 2: 9: *"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of a man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"*.

***"In this earthly domain, full of disappointment and pain, you'll never see me frown"*** 1 Corinthians 10:26 says that *"the earth is the Lord's and everything in it"*. It is His domain and Jesus is in command of the earth. (See Matthew 28:18) Earlier we already argued that this is may be a good reason why



Dylan calls Jesus “the Commander in Chief”. In spite of the fact that it is Jesus’s domain, the domain is full of disappointment and pain. Paul writes in Romans 7:22: “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now*”. The creation suffers the pangs of childbirth. This causes a lot of pain and anguish. But it will not stay that way. It is just like a woman who no longer remembers the anguish of labor when a child is born (John 16:21), or just like Dylan said in “In the Summertime” almost literally quoting Romans 8: 18: “*But all that suffering was not to be compared with the glory that is to be*”. It is the reason why Dylan now concludes: “*You never see me frown*”. He does not have any second thoughts, no matter how painful his existence here on earth is. He submits to the will of God, he is hanging on, knowing deep down inside, and in spite of all the sufferings, that in the end things will turn out as planned and everything’s gonna be alright, although there were times when he did not know what “all right” even meant.

***“I owe my heart to you, and that's sayin' it true, and I'll be with you when the deal goes down”***. The deal he made with God is not a business deal, a deal in which the personal attitude of the parties towards each other is not relevant. In this deal, in this covenant, it is essential that the parties give each other their heart. In this deal, this covenant, God is the first and the last. He takes the initiative. God graciously calls man from the darkness and invites him to enter his Kingdom of light. The only thing a man must do is to surrender his heart to God. That is why the poet says: “*I owe my heart to you*”. It is the same as if he would say: “I owe God my love and dedication and in ***essence*** that is the ***only*** thing I have to do to make it work and to make it possible that the deal will go down. That is the only truth in the world that counts; the rest is only of secondary interest.

### **3. Conclusion.**

Chris Gregory in his commentary on this song writes: “*What makes the song so moving is the way it depicts a struggle for, and perhaps a final attainment of, a kind of grace, or spiritual enlightenment, achieved not through any conventionally ‘religious’ path but through making a personal ‘deal’ with the spirit of creativity*”. I disagree with Chris Gregory. Where did Dylan say that he made a deal with ‘the spirit of creativity’? And what is ‘the spirit of creativity’ exactly? Can you make a deal with such a vague notion? In the first part of my analysis I referred to the 2004 60 minutes CBS interview, in which Dylan made it convincingly clear that he made a bargain, a deal with the Commander in Chief on this earth and in a world we can’t see. There are very solid reasons to assume that this Commander in Chief is Jesus or God. The whole interpretation of the song stands or falls with the interpretation of the “You” in “I’ll be with you when the deal goes down”. It is true, Dylan makes art which can stand on itself and may be interpreted in various ways. This makes his work accessible to believers and non-believers; it also makes his work subject to a large variety of debate. Personally, I am convinced that there is consistency in his work and that the frame work of his thinking, also in ‘Modern Times’, is drawn from the moral principles of the Bible. Gregory and others feel that a Christian interpretation of the songs in the album ‘Modern Times’ is only ‘wishful’ thinking. With this analysis I hope to have shown that a Christian interpretation is as valid as any other interpretation. Finally I would like to say the following: ‘Let the echo decide who is right or wrong’.



