

The Coming of the Lord

Introduction

Some churches and Christian fellowships give great prominence to teaching on the ‘Second Coming’ of Jesus Christ. You can hardly get through a meeting without at least a reference to this great event, and frequently whole messages or sermons are preached on the subject. Other fellowships hardly mention the ‘second coming’ and many of their members are almost entirely ignorant of what the Bible has to say about it.

For some people then this writing will be an introduction to the subject, while for others it may be a re-examination of what they believe. We will examine various Bible passages on which the teaching of the ‘second coming’ is based, and see if they mean what at first sight they may appear to. I have put the phrase ‘second coming’ in quotation marks as, surprisingly for many people, it occurs nowhere in the New Testament.

It helps to compare today’s situation with the way it was in New Testament times. The Pharisees of those days were expecting the Messiah to come. Not only were they expecting him, but they also had clear ideas about his coming. In spite of this they failed to recognise Jesus as the Messiah when he came. They could state confidently through their knowledge of the scriptures that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus appeared to come from somewhere else - Nazareth - was one of the reasons why they rejected him.

The disciples of Jesus heard the scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) read every week at the synagogue, and they probably knew them better than most people do today. However they had nowhere near the level of scriptural knowledge that the Pharisees had. In spite of this Peter recognised Jesus as the Messiah and the Pharisees failed to do so. This was not because Peter had studied all the scriptures more diligently and more carefully than the Pharisees. It was because he was drawn to Jesus himself, and he received a revelation from God. He said, ‘**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**’. Jesus replied, ‘**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven**’ (Matthew 16: 16, 17).

So today, as then, we know nothing properly unless we know it from God. The scriptures confirm what we have learnt from him inwardly in our hearts.

How Prophecies are Fulfilled

God reveals to his servants the prophets what is to come. That much is plain from the pages of the old testament. But prophecies were not always fulfilled in the way their recipients expected. God's ways are higher than our ways, and this is particularly true in the fulfilment of prophecy. Let us look then at how some ancient prophecies were fulfilled.

From the book of Genesis on there are prophecies of the coming Messiah. God told Eve that her offspring would bruise the serpent's head. Eve was greatly consoled and encouraged with this word from God, but she had no idea how it would happen. Probably she imagined some physical conflict. Perhaps she envisaged dead snakes lying around on the ground. With hindsight we can look back on events enormously greater and more significant than anything she could have imagined. Her far off descendant defeated all the powers of darkness, not by force of physical arms, but by offering himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

God told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore, and that through his offspring all nations on earth would be blessed. Millions of people today claim Abraham as their physical ancestor, and probably this is what Abraham understood the promise to mean. Four thousand years on we know that God's eye rested primarily on the multitudes of spiritual descendants that would be followers of Abraham's faith. The true fulfilment of the prophecy was better and higher than Abraham could have seen at the time.

God told Moses to tell the people that he would raise up a prophet like him from among their brothers. Jesus was like Moses in ways that a spiritual mind would understand. In other ways he was very different and many people would have totally failed to recognise the similarity. Moses delivered his people from the yoke of slavery in Egypt. Jesus did not deliver his people from their hated Roman overlords. Instead he delivered them from a far worse tyranny. He broke the yoke of sin and Satan from their backs.

God told David that he would establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I imagine David was wonderfully happy to think of his descendants for hundreds and thousands of years sitting on his throne in Jerusalem. The fulfilment was very different, but much better than he had imagined. His throne was occupied for several hundred years by his descendants, but not for ever. A tragic day came when after a long siege the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem. They put out king Zedekiah's eyes and led him captive to Babylon. They set fire to the royal palace and every important building in the city. What had happened to the prophecy God gave to David? The physical throne of David became

desolate, but the spiritual throne of David will be occupied for all eternity. Jesus will reign, and his saints will reign with him, till he has put all enemies beneath his feet. The earthly Jerusalem has been trodden down by the gentiles for centuries and its throne left vacant, but the heavenly Jerusalem has Jesus on its throne. The fulfilment of the prophecy was better than David could have ever dreamt.

We can learn from these past fulfilments of prophecy. Before events take place we may know that wonderful things are coming, and we must prepare ourselves as best we can to play our part in God's purposes. Only with hindsight if ever will we fully understand God's plans, and, like the faithful of old, we will find they are far greater and more wonderful than we have ever imagined.

I will come again and receive you to myself

The best starting point in the study of any teaching is Jesus himself. What did he have to say on the subject, and how does it relate to his life, death and resurrection? So we will begin with what people have taken to be a plain statement from his mouth with regard to his coming.

'In my Father's house are many dwellings; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am' (John 14: 2,3).

When I was young I learnt many Bible verses by heart, and I have never regretted the time I spent so doing. Sadly the practice is much less common now than it was then. However the disadvantage of learning verses by heart is that they can easily be taken right out of their context. This is particularly true of the verses just quoted. It occurs near the beginning of a long discourse recorded by John on the night of the last supper. It occupies part of chapter 13 and all of chapters 14, 15 and 16. We will look now at what Jesus said before and after these familiar verses.

Troubled Hearts

John 14:1 reads: **'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.'** Jesus was about to depart from this world and was preparing his disciples for the trauma that lay ahead and his physical absence from them. Telling them that he was going to come back physically very soon and take them away to their heavenly home, when he was not going to do that for 2000 years, would not be very good or honest comfort! It would simply be a false promise. If a friend promised to come and see me, and then waited till a long time after I was dead before he rang my door bell, I would hardly think (if I

were still thinking about it) that he had kept his promise. **Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life** (Proverbs 13:12).

Did the disciples have troubled hearts for the rest of their lives, because Jesus had left them and hadn't come back? Should we have troubled hearts until he returns in person and takes us away to our future home with him? That is certainly not the impression you get from reading the book of Acts, or from hearing the testimonies of many saints from that day to this.

Their hearts were very troubled when Jesus was arrested and tried and put to death. When he came back from the grave and walked and talked with them, and when 50 days later the Holy Spirit came on them with wonderful power, their hearts were troubled no more. Jesus was no longer with them but in them, and unbelievably they had gained more than they had lost.

Where was Jesus going?

Verses 4 and 5 read: **'You know the way to the place where I am going'. Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'**

Thomas, like many people today, did not understand what Jesus was saying. He was not particularly thick or stupid. Simply like us and every other member of Adam's race, he suffered from the darkness of the natural mind. Probably the other disciples did not understand what Jesus had said any better than Thomas did, but he at least was not afraid to show his ignorance and to ask Jesus what he meant. If Thomas did not understand what Jesus said without further explanation, it's unlikely that we will either!

Jesus explained that he was going to the Father, and that he was one with the Father. **'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ... Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?'**

Having said that he was one with the Father, Jesus went on to speak about the Holy Spirit: **'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever -- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.'** He immediately followed these words with the promise: **'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.'** Soon after this he said: **'My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'**

3 times in this chapter (14) Jesus said that he would come again:

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- verse 3 (the best known) ‘I will come again, and take you to be with me.’
- verse 18: ‘I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.’
- verse 23: ‘My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.’

These 3 statements cannot have different meanings from each other. In the third statement Jesus uses the word we, including the Father with himself. Several times also in this long discourse he speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit. How many different comings are there? I believe these comings are all one and the same. **The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was also the coming of the Father and the Son.**

Let us reconsider verses 2 and 3: ‘In my Father’s house are many dwellings; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.’

In bodily form Jesus was going to leave his disciples, but he and his Father were going to come again and make their dwellings in them. The dwellings are not mansions up in the sky. They are his people. **We are those dwellings!**

Jesus said, ‘Where I am there you will be also’. He did not say where I will be. For 3 years Jesus and his disciples were physically in the same place. Spiritually however they were not in the same place. He was above and they were below. From the moment they met him they knew that he was in a higher place than they were. What a wonderful promise this is when we see its true meaning. ‘Where I am there you will be also’. How much better a glorious spiritual reality now, than some future physical mansion in the sky!

Mansions

The King James English Version of the Bible has the words: ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions.’ Many hymns have been written and many sermons preached about beautiful mansions waiting for us in the skies. The original Greek word *monee* does not mean a mansion, but simply a dwelling or abode. It occurs again in verse 23: ‘We will make our dwelling with him.’ and nowhere else in the new Testament. The related verb *meno* meaning to remain or abide, occurs many times. Notably in the following chapter we read: ‘Anyone who abides in me, and I in him, will produce much fruit.’ The word *dwelling* is the most natural English translation of the word *monee*, but the word *abode* relates better to the thought of abiding in Christ.

The many mansions of our Father's house are not luxurious dwellings for us to live in hereafter. They are yourself and myself, the human dwellings where our Father has chosen to dwell here and now.

The Clouds

We will now turn to the theme of clouds. Five separate writers or speakers in the Bible, including Jesus, refer to clouds in connection with his coming. Three are clearly quoting the first who was the prophet Daniel.

1. Daniel said: 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.' (Daniel 7:13).
2. Jesus said: 'They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky' (Matthew 24:30).
3. Two angels said: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven,' (Acts 1:11) after Jesus had ascended in a cloud.
4. Paul wrote: 'After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.' (1 Thes 4:17)
5. John wrote: 'Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him' (Rev 1:7).

Both Greek and Hebrew, like many other languages, have only one word where English has two for sky and heaven.

These 5 quotations invite the question, Why should clouds play such an important part in the coming of the Son of Man? After all they're just gaseous molecules of H₂O. These days you can fly up through them and way above them in aeroplanes. Can water vapour really play such an important part in the coming of Jesus?

Let's think a bit more about clouds. Clouds consist of pure heavenly water. They are formed by the heat of the sun causing water to evaporate from the sea or the land. Sea water that is salty and barren, or muddy water from the land, is drawn up from the earth and purified and transformed into a rarefied state in which it can exist in the heavenly realms. From there this pure water returns to the earth and gives life to everything on it.

What a perfect picture this is of God's work in us. By nature we are like sea water, salty, polluted and barren. God draws us up by the warmth of his love and purifies us and makes sit in heavenly places with Jesus. He transforms us into pure life-giving water. We then impart that life to those on the earth below.

Jesus is not coming in or with or on clouds of physical water vapour, but in and with his people. Jude (quoting Enoch) actually says, 'Behold the Lord comes in (or with) myriads of his saints.' And in Hebrews 12:1 we read: 'Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses ...' So coming with the clouds is the same as coming with the saints.

It is natural that in ancient times people thought of the clouds as the dwelling place of God. As in many other ways God allowed people to have partial and incomplete concepts of his nature. We live in a time of fuller revelation and understanding and must be willing to move forward. God does not live in physical clouds, but in what those clouds symbolise - his people.

Clouds in countries like England are not always popular. They give us cold and gloomy weather and spoil our holidays! In other countries and to farming communities they are life itself. They bring that vital rain without which nothing can grow. They cause the desert to blossom as the rose. They bring life and growth where there was only barrenness and death.

Again what a picture of the saints of God. Those that are like Jesus do what he did. They themselves live in heavenly places, but they bring life and health and blessing to those that live on the earth.

Every Eye will See Him

'Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him' (Rev 1:7).

Suppose again we take these words literally, how can we understand them? Will Jesus be simultaneously visible in every part of the world? And will it be a cloudy day in every single country? Or will Jesus appear on television, as some have suggested, and thus be visible simultaneously all over the world?

Of course it is true that everything is possible with God. However, some things are consistent with his nature and with scripture and with reason, and other things are not. God could cause there to be clouds simultaneously over all the mountains, plains, deserts and seas of the world at the same time. Jesus could appear simultaneously in every part of the world with those clouds. Or he could appear in the clouds over one country, perhaps Israel, and have the world's press lined up to photograph the event. God could do any of those

things, but this kind of interpretation does not fit with his revealed nature and purposes.

I believe the truth is better and greater. I believe he will come with the clouds and that every eye will see him; but I believe those who sit with him in heavenly places will be those clouds. When the sons of God have been transformed into his likeness, then those who want to see Jesus need only look at them.

When some Greeks came to Andrew and said, ‘We want to see Jesus’, and Andrew passed the request on, Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds’ (John 12:24). God is not content with just one son, but wants many more just like the first one.

One son was not enough for everyone to see. The firstborn son was the seed that had to fall into the ground and die, and produce a harvest of many more sons in his likeness. God was manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, the man of Galilee; but he also wants to be manifested in males and in females, in young and in old, in Europeans, Asians, Africans as well as Jews. He must be manifested in the clever and the simple, the strong and the weak, the educated and the illiterate and in the multitude of other variations that make up the human race.

This will be the manifestation of the sons of God of which Paul wrote to the Romans. The whole creation is groaning and travailing, not for a divine visitation from the sky, but for the manifestation of these sons of God.

Paul told the Ephesians that the many-coloured (literal meaning of Greek πολυποικιλος wisdom of God would be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in heavenly places. **There will be a rainbow in the clouds!**

The Words of the Angels

We have rightly begun by considering the words of Jesus about his coming. With a better understanding of what he said, we can now consider the words of others. All too often we have begun with the words of Paul, and then tried to make the words of Jesus fit with what we think we have understood. Paul, as he himself tells us, saw through a glass darkly. Jesus saw face to face.

Acts 1:11 records the words of the angels to the disciples. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who

has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

Were the angels referring to a physical return of Jesus due to take place in the same manner as his departure, but approximately 2000 years later?

The last recorded conversation of Jesus with his disciples was immediately before his ascension. They wanted to think about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. He wanted to tell them more about the Holy Spirit. He told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the promise of the Father. He said that they would receive power after the Holy Spirit had come upon them, and that they would be his witnesses. He said this would happen in a few days' time.

Jesus was comforting and encouraging his disciples by telling them of an event in the immediate future. We would not therefore expect the angels to point the disciples to an event that was going to happen in something like 2000 years' time. We would rather expect them to say something that would reinforce what Jesus himself had just said. The words of the angels appear to point the disciples away from what Jesus had just been talking about to an entirely different event. This cannot be right, and we must therefore have a new look at the words of the angels.

Further to this, if Jesus was soon going to come back out of the sky in exactly the way he had just gone, it would seem like good sense to keep on gazing up into the sky to catch the first glimpse of him coming back!

At his ascension Jesus disappeared in a cloud. This may have been a cloud of water vapour, or it may have been a cloud of glory. On the day of Pentecost Jesus reappeared in a cloud. However he did not appear in a physical cloud as his disciples may have expected. It was a cloud made up of them themselves and his other followers. They were now a cloud of witnesses lifted up into the heavens, and he appeared in them. Just as the angels said, it was the same Jesus. The same Jesus that had walked and talked with his disciples for 3½ years was now in them, and manifesting himself through them. He was appearing with great glory in a heavenly cloud of witnesses.

His physical visitation of his people when he came to earth 2000 years ago was something of great wonder and a multitude of the heavenly host was sent to announce it. His spiritual visitation of his people on the day of Pentecost was more wonderful and more powerful still. His visitation which is yet to come will show the day of Pentecost to be only the first fruits of a harvest far beyond the thoughts or imaginations of those first apostles.

Finally we may detect a hidden rebuke in the way the angels addressed the disciples. They did not call them men of God or maybe followers of Jesus but just men of Galilee. They were acting and thinking (as many have done since them) in a carnal and human manner, and so the angels addressed them with a title that referred to their human and earthly origin.

So are we saying that Jesus returned at Pentecost or are we saying that his return is still future? Both! He certainly did come again at Pentecost, and his presence with his disciples was better and more wonderful than when in human form he had walked the dusty paths of Galilee by their side.

But that coming was not the full and final fulfilment of his promise. Rather it was the first instalment. It was a foretaste of greater things to come. Now at the end of the age we come to the time of that greater fulfilment.

Paul's Words

To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, 'For this we say to you by a word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain till the coming of the Lord will not precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ will rise first: Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so we will be with the Lord for ever' (1 Thes 4: 15-17).

Many readers of the Bible take these words absolutely literally and believe without question in a physical appearing of Jesus in the clouds and a physical rapture of the saints to meet him there. In the verses preceding these Paul is clearly talking about those saints who have physically died; and so at first sight it is logical to take these verses literally as well. However, why is it that at this point Paul has a 'word from the Lord'? I believe it indicates that he is moving from the literal to the spiritual.

His language to the Corinthians is similar. After speaking about the resurrection of the dead, he writes, 'Listen, I tell you a **mystery**: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed -- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed' (1 Cor 15: 51,52).

A mystery is very different from a miracle. A mystery is difficult to understand, whereas a miracle is difficult to believe. A whole lot of bodies coming out of their graves and coming to life would be a miracle rather than a mystery. It is difficult to believe, but not too difficult to understand. The idea of a spiritual rapture and transformation, on the other hand, is difficult to

understand. Literal interpretations of these passages may be difficult to believe, but they are not difficult to understand. They cannot therefore be called mysteries. Spiritual interpretations can be described as mysteries as they are difficult to understand rather than difficult to believe. They are hidden from the natural mind. What I am saying is that rather than look for a physical rapture we must search for a spiritual understanding of these words of Paul.

Let us then consider other ways of understanding the various statements of this passage.

Three of the most important events in scripture will help us.

- The law-giving at Sinai
- The birth of Jesus
- The day of Pentecost

The Lord himself will descend from heaven

This is the foundation of every great divine event. In God's first great manifestation to Israel he descended on Mount Sinai. Jesus himself fulfilled these words when he came down from heaven and took human form and was born in the manger at Bethlehem. Pentecost was another divine descent of hitherto unimagined grace and glory. In each case, as in the event we are considering, he came down to bring man up. Each of these events had consequences of unimaginable magnitude for the human race. This next descent, dare we believe it, will have consequences yet wider and yet greater.

With a loud command

When the Lord came down he spoke. On Mount Sinai he gave 10 commandments and followed them with the most significant and powerful verbal revelation that the world has ever received. **The Law came through Moses**. God spoke a word through the angel Gabriel to Mary, and the word was made flesh in her womb. At Pentecost the tongues of the assembled company were loosed, and they spoke the word of God with hitherto unprecedented power.

In each case the word of command had global effects. The 10 commandments, the gospel of Jesus, and the effects of Pentecost have spread throughout the world. The coming and presence of the Lord will have even greater impact.

With the voice of an archangel

The scriptures tell us little about archangels. Only Michael is clearly described as one. By tradition he was the intermediary through whom the law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai (referred to by Stephen in Acts 7:38). To Gabriel was given the privilege of announcing the birth of Jesus, and according to tradition he is the angel named in this passage

With the trumpet of God

Trumpets were used to announce the great festivals of the Lord. The events of Mount Sinai occurred on the 50th day after the Exodus from Egypt, and prefigured the day of Pentecost which was 50 days on from the resurrection of Jesus. On Sinai the trumpet sounded loud and long, and the day of Pentecost was like a spiritual trumpet. Jesus also associates the sound of the trumpet with his coming (Mat 24:30). I believe the passage we are considering describes the fulfilment of the Festival of Tabernacles (see The Festivals of Israel).

The dead in Christ will rise first

To the Romans Paul wrote, **‘We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.’** He was not referring to physical death, but to spiritual death.

Many of us, I believe, are now undergoing a death experience. The Day of Atonement, which in some ways symbolises death, preceded the Festival of Tabernacles, as death precedes resurrection. Before we can reign with Jesus in the glory of that coming festival we must experience his sufferings and death. We must die to ourselves and to the world. As long as this world has a claim on us we cannot reign over it. The world has no claim on those who have passed through physical death. They are no longer subject to any of its laws or customs. They have gone. This spiritual death will have the same effect.

Those then who are spiritually dead in Christ will experience a spiritual resurrection.

We who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so we will be with the Lord for ever.

Will we meet Jesus in physical air? The Greek word for spirit - πνευμα - originally means breath or wind. Both of these are moving air. We have already talked about the meaning of clouds as those who have been purified and drawn

up to God. The air then is the realm of the spirit where those clouds dwell. There is where we are and will be with the Lord.

We may note in passing that Paul himself did not live till a physical rapture took place, which further indicates that this passage cannot be taken literally.

Parousia

The title of this writing is The Coming of the Lord. Many times in the new testament, the Greek word translated coming is παρουσία. The literal meaning of this word is **being beside** (παρα-ουσια) and hence **presence**. Because you cannot be present without having come, it goes on to have the meaning **coming**.

Sometimes I believe God leaves words of double meaning in the Scripture when the time is not yet ripe for a particular revelation. The full truth is hidden till God wants to reveal it. Though both *coming* and *presence* are legitimate translations of the word παρουσία, I believe we will understand God's purposes more clearly if we retranslate it *presence*.

In human terms, an arrival can be a dramatic and emotional moment, but what happens after the arrival is more important than the arrival itself. The **presence** of Jesus is more important than his **coming**.

In Matthew's gospel the last promise Jesus made to his disciples was that of his presence. His words were '**surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**' Jesus was undoubtedly present with his early followers after he physically left them. He has been present with his people in their sufferings and victories throughout the centuries from then till now; and he is undoubtedly present with and in us today. However I believe that we will soon experience that presence to a much greater degree than ever before.

Paul told the Ephesians that they had received a deposit or down payment of their inheritance (Eph 1:14). The implication is that there was much more to follow. The main thing was yet to come. Pentecost was wonderful. It was the greatest outpouring of God's grace that the world had yet seen. It far exceeded all that went before it. Yet it was small compared with what now lies ahead of us.

See next teaching The Man of Lawlessness

Conclusion

Millions of Christians have been taught to expect a literal and physical personal second coming of Jesus to the earth. This teaching has been based on certain key scriptures such as:

- ‘I will come again and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am’.
- ‘They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky’.
- ‘This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’
- ‘After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.’
- ‘Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him’.

We have considered a spiritual fulfilment of these scriptures rather than a literal one.

This is not the path of unbelief, but is exactly what Jesus did himself. When he told the disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, they took him literally and thought he was talking about physical bread. Actually he was referring to the doctrine of the Pharisees. When he spoke about destroying the temple and building it again in 3 days, he was not referring to the literal temple. He was talking about his own body, the real temple of God.

Many members of the early church had seen and talked with Jesus in the flesh. No doubt they found it difficult to relinquish their ideas of his literal presence with them.

At first sight it takes faith to believe in a physical return of Jesus to this earth and a physical rapture of his saints to heaven. Is it real faith? Or is it just sticking to a doctrine?

Real faith is not a set of beliefs about the future. Nor is it sticking to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Rather it is hearing and receiving the word of God, and acting on it.

Clinging to a particular teaching about the future is not real faith. All that this does for people is to consolidate their membership of the particular sect or

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doctrinal grouping to which they belong, and to separate them from everyone who holds a different view.

Seeing the real spiritual meaning of the scriptures strengthens our faith and walk with God.

May he grant us that **the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Eph 1: 18,19).**

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2 Thessalonians 2:1-10

We request you, brethren, for the sake of the coming (presence) of the Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, That you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message (logos) or a letter as if from us that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for it will not come unless the apostasy (falling away) comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, Who opposes and exalts himself above everything that is called God or worshipped, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you I said these things to you? And now you know what restrains him, so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already working; only he who restrains will do so until he becomes out of the midst (literal translation). And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath (spirit) of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming (presence); whose presence (coming) is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs (miracles) and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who are perishing, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

Introduction

This writing is a study of part of the second chapter of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians quoted above. In it Paul writes prophetically about the man of lawlessness who will one day be revealed.

Students of prophecy have identified the man of lawlessness with the Antichrist spoken of by the apostle John.

Much of what he wrote has already been fulfilled in history, and continues to be fulfilled up to the present. Its greatest fulfilment, however, is probably in the near future. Now is the time of preparation. If we can understand the past and the present, we will be better prepared for what is to come.

We must recognise the man of lawlessness now before he is revealed, and not be caught unready in the future. Even more, we must recognise Jesus now, that we may not be ashamed before him at his appearing.

The Context

Verse 1 gives a context for the discussion that follows: “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to Him.”

There are two interesting words in this sentence. The first is the Greek word παρουσία (*parousia*) translated *coming*. Literally it means *being beside* or *presence*. In most places in the New Testament it is translated *coming* as in the verse we are considering. In many passages, as in this one, we can substitute the word *presence* for the word *coming*. This gives it both a present and a future aspect. In God, both are one. If we enjoy the presence of Jesus now, we will be ready for his future coming, whenever and however it may take place.

The second interesting word in verse 1 is the Greek επισυναγη (*episynagoge*) meaning *assembling upon*. We can easily recognise the English word *synagogue* in it. This also has a present and a future application. There is a present assembling whenever and wherever two or three people meet in the name of Jesus. There is a future application when he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four corners of the earth.

Underlying both present and future aspects of assembling there is a spiritual aspect. The assembling is not just assembling. It is assembling **to him**. A physical assembling of God’s people is simply an outward manifestation of a spiritual coming together to Jesus. If we are spiritually assembling ourselves to Jesus in the heavenly realm, we will automatically find an outward expression of that assembly on earth. If there is no assembly in heaven, the assembly on earth is valueless. The vital thing is that each one of us obeys his instruction, “Come to me”. More on this later.

We will therefore find it possible to study this passage in two ways. We can regard it as a prophecy yet to be fulfilled, or we can see in it present realities affecting our current walk with God. The same is true of many other passages in Scripture. Both aspects, I believe, can be edifying, but the all-important thing is an understanding of the present. If we learn to walk with God now, we will find ourselves prepared automatically for whatever is to come.

The Pharisees were keen students of scriptural prophecy, but because they knew that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem they rejected Jesus of Nazareth. They thought they had the future worked out, but they got it all wrong because they did not know God in the present. If they had been able to recognise Jesus by spiritual discernment, their minor errors of mental understanding would soon have been sorted out.

To seek to understand Bible prophecies of the future, without a proper spiritual understanding of the present, is a pathway along which many have followed the Pharisees. The results are blindness, sectarianism and pride. If we do not learn to worship God in spirit and in truth it is far better not to increase our damnation by studying the scriptures! It is better to put the Book away and let it gather dust on the shelf.

The Day of the Lord

In verse 2 Paul moves on to the subject of the Day of the Lord. This was a subject with which readers of the Old Testament were familiar.

It was described by Isaiah as follows: “Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; And He will exterminate sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud, and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless” (chapter 13: 9-11).

Zephaniah described it in similar terms: “Near is the great day of the Lord, Near and coming very quickly; Listen the day of the Lord! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers” (chapter 2: 14-16).

The Day of the Lord is also spoken of by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Joel, Obadiah and Malachi. It is seen almost universally as a time of judgement.

The Thessalonians had evidently received messages or letters purporting to be from Paul and indicating that the Day of the Lord had come. It was obviously a frightening thought, and Paul wanted to reassure them that it was not true. He went on to give them signs by which they could recognise its approach. We will turn our attention to them now.

The Apostasy

In verse 3 we read that apostasy will come before the Day of the Lord comes, and the man of lawlessness will be revealed. Apostasy means a falling away (from God). Paul was once accused of teaching apostasy from Moses (Acts 21:21). Obviously, the apostasy had not taken place then, but has it taken place now? Let’s look at what’s happened since then. From the first century to the time of the reformation the church went progressively into ever deeper

darkness. I am no expert on church history and only want to give a bare outline. Persecution kept the church fairly pure until the time of Constantine. After he became Roman emperor in the year 312 he made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Everything then began to change. What should have been a blessing became a curse. Heathen temples were turned into churches and heathen festivals were christianised. Images and idols were worshipped. Ritual prayer replaced prayer from the heart. Bishops and church leaders began to be powerful and wealthy people.

Time passed and the church became more and more one with the world. Political and military power replaced spiritual. Armies set out in the name of Christ to recapture the Holy Land, slaughtering large numbers of Jews and Muslims and others wherever they went. Worse was yet to come. For several hundred years the inquisition terrorised Europe. This was the systematic torture and killing of all who disagreed with or stood against the teachings of the church. Millions of faithful followers of Jesus besides Jews and many others were put to death in the name of Christ and religion. Bibles were only available in Latin and only a few educated people could read them.

If the apostles had been given a preview of church history they would have torn out their hair in utter disbelief. If they could have foreseen the idolatry, the power struggles, the corruption and the bloodshed all done in the name of Christ, they would have sat down for 7 days like the prophet Ezekiel by the river Chebar astonished and dumbfounded.

If words have any meaning then the word *apostasy* describes the state of the church in the middle ages.

In the past century the western world as a whole has largely fallen away from any practical belief in God. In Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist countries religion is a visible part of daily life. However in those countries that have in the past been called Christian, public life continues with almost no reference to God. Anyone who speaks of his creator in public is now considered by most people to be fanatical or eccentric.

General apostasy from the Christian faith, in fulfilment of this verse, can now therefore be considered as an accomplished fact. The falling away of which Paul spoke has taken place.

We can easily see apostasy in history, but there is another apostasy of a more serious nature. It is the root of all apostasy and Jesus himself speaks of it in his message to the first church: **“I have this against you, that you have apostasised from your first love”** (Rev 2:4).

We do better to examine our own hearts to find apostasy there, than to analyse its outward expression elsewhere. It is because we have fallen from our first love that others fall from their belief in God.

It is better that we repent of our own sins than the sins of history. Revival and restoration of our own first love for Jesus will cause the world to turn from its unbelief and continued blasphemy of the name of God.

The Man of Lawlessness

We must now consider the various statements Paul makes about the man of lawlessness. He is lawless; he is the son of destruction (v3); he exalts himself; he takes his seat in the temple of God (v4); his coming and presence will be accompanied by all power and miracles and false wonders (v9). The Apostle John writes in similar terms of the antichrist.

Lawlessness is an established feature of modern society. You only need to read the morning paper or listen to the news to know this. Crime statistics are soaring in most countries. Less and less places all over the world are safe to walk around at night. Travel in many parts of the world is increasingly dangerous. More and more we need to ask for the Lord's protection in our daily lives.

Clearly we live in an age of lawlessness.

It is easy, but not very helpful, to dwell on the outward manifestations of lawlessness. Everybody knows about it. It is of far more value to look at its spiritual roots. Who were the lawless people in the New Testament? The Greeks? The Romans? The Sadducees? The Zealots? We find the surprising answer in Matthew 23:28. Jesus says to the **Pharisees**, “**Inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness**”. The whole chapter expands and explains this one verse and we do well to read and understand it.

The Pharisees didn't go around mugging people. Nor were they involved in football hooliganism. They were the Bible students of their day. They spent much of their time studying and teaching the law. How could they be **lawless**? They made two great mistakes. Firstly the law that they taught was largely not the law of God, but their additions to it. Secondly it was not a law written on their hearts and an inward part of their lives and experience. It was simply retained by much study in their heads.

When a bishop, ignorant of the law of God, proclaims his own views and opinions to the world, he is guilty of a far greater lawlessness than an ignorant soccer hooligan.

When a priest in a pulpit holds forth the views of his denomination, without ever searching to see if he has the mind of God, he is safe from the law of the land, but will give account on the day of judgement.

When a Bible teacher who claims to know God and to have heard the voice of the Holy Spirit rejects the word of God to proclaim the opinions of man, I believe he is the most guilty. James wisely says, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive a greater judgement”. If we see lawlessness in the world, we must search our hearts and root out the lawlessness from there. Judgement must begin at the house of God.

Who is in the midst?

We read in verse 4 that the man of lawlessness takes his seat in the temple of God.

It was a terrible day when Antiochus Epiphanes placed a statue of Jupiter in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem and offered a sow upon the altar. It was in Daniel’s words an abomination of desolation. But **the Most High does not live in houses made with human hands.**

There is a far greater and more important temple than any that ever stood or may yet stand on Mount Moriah. “**You are the temple of the Holy Spirit**”, wrote Paul to the Corinthians. The man of lawlessness wants to take his seat in the midst of God’s people. His great aim is to take Christ’s place. He wants to rule the people of God. He wants to sit in the midst of their assembly and dominate it with his presence. That is the real abomination of desolation. Beside this a mere pig on an altar of stone is nothing.

Is it possible that antichrist can take the place of honour in a gathering of true believers? We find the answer in verse 7. Literally translated this reads, “**He who restrains (will do so) until he becomes out of the midst**”. Jesus said, “**Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst**” (Mat 18:20). If Jesus is in the midst, there is no room for the man of lawlessness.

If Jesus becomes **out of the midst** there is then a vacuum waiting to be filled. Note the passive of the word gathered. God does the gathering, not we ourselves. The people of God come together in different ways. Some are truly drawn together by the Holy Spirit and genuinely meet in the name of Jesus. Jesus is then in the midst according to his promise. Others meet of their own or someone else’s will, or through habit, or because they think they should. Jesus has given no guarantee that he will be *in their midst*.

Church history illustrates and clarifies this for us. The early believers met together often against opposition and in personal danger, but they continued to meet, as they were powerfully drawn by the Holy Spirit and by love for one another.

Time passed and the initial flame burnt down. They still met, but *Ichabod* (*Where is the glory?* - see 1 Samuel 4:21) was written over their gatherings. The glory of God had departed. Jesus was no longer in their midst. Ezekiel's vision of the glory of God leaving the temple and the city (chs 10,11) had a second fulfilment. There was now a vacant seat. The man of lawlessness was ready to take it. Men began to dominate and rule and exalt themselves over the flock of Christ. Their claims became more and more blasphemous and their titles more and more exalted as the centuries passed.

This passage of 2 Thessalonians has been fulfilled historically, and is being fulfilled, and may be fulfilled yet more. It is of no value to meet if Jesus is not in the midst. Worse than that, it is dangerous. One is, at least in a small way, building a platform for the manifestation of the antichrist.

Many people imagine that as long as they are assembling, they are satisfying God's requirements. The instruction of Hebrews 10:25, "... **not giving up our own assembling ...**", is only obeyed if Jesus is in the midst. The same Greek word episynagoge is used there as in verse 1 of our passage. It implies meeting together upon him. If he is not in the meeting, it is better if we aren't either. Paul told the Corinthians plainly that they came together **not for the better, but for the worse** (1 Cor 11:17).

Miracles

The presence of the antichrist is attended by **all power, miracles (signs) and false wonders** (v9). It is a dangerous mistake to think that miracles are a proof of God's approval. Many churches in this country are obviously in a state of deadness. Others appear to have activity and spiritual life. Healings take place and spiritual gifts are manifested. Many people imagine that is enough. Provided things are happening and the church is growing, God must be pleased.

It is the consistent testimony of both scripture and experience that the supernatural can come from two different sources. The fact that it is occurring in the church or among real Christians is still no proof that it has come from God. Occult powers can work through people who have at least in some measure a genuine experience of God. Some have never properly been set free from the powers of evil. Others have opened themselves to the enemy's control by their desire for position and influence. Simon, in Acts chapter 8 had both believed and been baptised. Yet Peter said to him, "**I see that you are full of**

bitterness and captive to sin.” Before believing in Jesus, Simon had been heavily involved in the occult, and clearly was not yet free from it.

We find a parallel passage of Scripture in Revelation 13. The first beast in that chapter may well refer to the Roman Catholic Church. The second beast is a closer counterfeit of the truth. He has two horns like a lamb (v11). He performs great signs (v13). He deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs he is given power to perform (v14). If we learn to recognise deception now, we will not be deceived so easily when it grows to its ultimate. If we blindly follow signs and wonders we will fall an easy prey to the deceiver.

Destruction of the Man of Lawlessness

In verse 8 we read of the end of the antichrist. The Lord will slay him with the breath of his mouth. What does this sentence imply? Revelation chapter 19 describes the same event. “I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True; ... and his name is called the Word of God. And the armies that are in heaven ... were following Him ... and from His mouth comes a sharp sword ... and the beast was seized and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence ... and the rest were killed with the sword that came from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse.”

We should not imagine some star wars conflict between good and evil. Jesus will be accompanied by heavenly armies. His weapon is described by Paul as the breath of his mouth, and by John as a sharp sword in his mouth. Breath and spirit are the same word both in Greek (Pneuma) and in Hebrew (ruach). The sword of the spirit is the word of God. Thus it is the word of God, spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit that will destroy the evil one.

Are these armies angelic or human? I can't say for certain. Maybe they are both, but at least I believe they include humans. I believe they are those whom he has breathed on and filled with his Spirit; those who have his word upon their lips; those whom he has raised to sit with him in heavenly places. I believe God is preparing these people now for the great closing drama of this age.

Love of the Truth

In our last verse we find the reason people are deceived. “They did not receive the love of the truth and so be saved.” Truth is far more than accuracy of factual information or doctrine. Truth is reality; things spiritual and natural as they really are. We must be willing for the truth about ourselves, our families, our friends, our spiritual leaders, and everything that touches our lives. Sometimes the truth will hurt us; sometimes it will delight us. It will always set us free.

The Coming of the Lord

Today we face a flood of deception. False ideas, false information and false impressions are thrown at us with all the power of modern technology. False teaching is easier to propagate and there are more people with inclination to receive it than ever before. The first weapon in Paul's armoury was to have the "loins girt with truth". More than ever we need that now. Jesus himself is the truth. The central message of this study is, "***Look to Him; Come to Him; Assemble in Him; Follow Him.***"

May He be truly in our midst.

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