

Studies in Pauline Eschatology.

II.

ST. PAUL'S DOCTRINE OF THE SECOND ADVENT.

THE other section of Pauline eschatology which it is proposed now to consider is St. Paul's teaching with reference to the time of the Second Advent.

It is now quite customary to regard our Lord and His Apostles as having committed themselves to teaching concerning the nearness of the Second Advent which the course of history has definitely falsified.

With regard to our Lord's teaching, I assert with the utmost confidence that on no occasion did He ever say or imply that His Second Advent would take place soon after His departure. On the contrary, He taught the very opposite of this—viz., that it would be only after an almost incredibly long delay that He would at length return. The teaching by parables is acknowledged to be the form of teaching that is least liable to error in transmission; and it is in two of His most striking parables—viz., the Ten Virgins and the Talents—that He has embodied this particular lesson.

But it is with St. Paul's teaching only that we now have to do, and to this we turn.

We may group the possible references to the nearness of the Second Advent into two classes: First, what may be called the "we" passages—*i.e.*, those in which the writer apparently unites himself and his readers with those who will be alive at Christ's return; and, secondly, a number of passages in various Epistles which have been understood to convey the idea that the Second Advent was very soon to be expected.

The former group need not detain us long. It consists of such statements as 1 Thess. iv. 15, "We that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep"; 1 Cor. xv. 51, "We shall not all

sleep"; Phil. iii. 20, 21, "We wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of His glory"—this last passage apparently suggesting that St. Paul and the Philippians would be amongst those who should be alive at Christ's return, and should experience that instantaneous translation from the earthly into the heavenly body which is referred to in 1 Cor. xv. 51-54.

The argument, however, from all such passages as these, is conclusively met by the fact that the same writer, in a precisely similar form of speech, apparently unites himself and his readers *with those who will have died before the Lord's return*. The passage is 2 Cor. iv. 14: "Knowing that He which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also with Jesus, and shall present us with you." The explanation in each case is that the writer is using the pronoun in an indefinite sense, as happens continually in the case of all preachers and writers.

The passages contained in the second group require individual and very careful examination; for it is only by a scrupulously exact exegesis of each passage in its own full context that the Apostle's meaning can be ascertained. Let us take them in their chronological order.

1. First, then, let us consider that remarkable and, at first sight, most perplexing utterance which occurs in 1 Cor. vii. 29-31: "But this I say, brethren, the time is shortened, that henceforth both those that have wives may be as though they had none; and those that weep, as though they wept not; and those that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and those that buy, as though they possessed not; and those that use the world, as not using it to the full: for the fashion of this world passeth away."

The superficial interpretation of this passage is that St. Paul regarded the return of the Lord Jesus as being so near that practically nothing mattered—neither marriage nor celibacy, neither sorrow nor joy, neither business nor wealth. But when we penetrate a little below the surface this interpretation appears

by no means so obvious. If we allow the word *ἵνα* to retain its natural force, the Apostle is, on this interpretation of the passage, committed to the assertion that the time remaining until the return of Christ has been cut short (*συνεσταλμένος*) by God, in order that the married may be as though unmarried, the sad as though they were not sorrowful, and so on. In other words, that the advent of Christ was to be hurried forward in order that all the affairs and relations of life might in the interval be more or less dislocated! So that when his words, in this interpretation of them, are thus put quite plainly, St. Paul appears to be writing sheer nonsense. And even if we understand *ἵνα* to denote consequence instead of cause, the question still arises: Why should the shortening of the interval preceding the Second Advent result in the lessening of the value of all human emotions and relationships? Would not joy, at all events, be enhanced for the believer, instead of being as though it were not? Such an attitude as this, in view of the possible nearness of the Lord's return, would be wholly contrary to the teaching of Christ. His ideal is that every servant should be at his post, doing faithfully and fully his appointed business. It is difficult to imagine either that St. Paul was ignorant of this teaching of our Lord's, or that, being aware of it, he would put before his converts so entirely contrary an ideal of duty and of life.

Again, there is nothing in the context to show that *ὁ καιρός* must necessarily mean the interval preceding the Second Advent. It is not the nearness of the Advent, nor indeed the Advent at all, about which the Apostle is concerned in this section of his Epistle, but the relations between the sexes in the Corinthian Church, and their social duties in general. We find him accordingly giving the most detailed instruction and advice with regard to the relations of the sexes (vi. 12—vii. 40), and it is in this immediate connection that the words under our consideration occur. He tells his readers that under the distressing circumstances then present it is a good thing for a man to abide as he is. If he is married, let him not attempt to realize a purer ideal of life by living apart from his wife; and if, being un-

married, he is able to be continent, let him remain unmarried. The Apostle then gives a very broad hint that under existing circumstances in Corinth those who sought marriage were looking for trouble. In giving his permission, however, to marry he lays before the Corinthian Christians a new fact—new, that is, for them since they had become Christians—which ought to have a very important bearing upon the marriage relationship, as indeed upon all the conditions and circumstances of their life. This new fact is that from henceforth—*i.e.*, from the time of their accepting Christ—*every occasion of life has for them been limited* (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστὶν τὸ λοιπόν). Nothing in their life is for the future to monopolize their attention as formerly it may have done. A fresh element has come into their life, demanding a share, and that the predominant share, in all their interests under all conceivable circumstances: this fresh element is their allegiance to Christ, and His personal interest in them. Is a man married? his marriage is not to fill for him his whole horizon, however precious it may be to him. Even this occasion has been limited; another interest must share with it his care and attention. Christ and Christ's interests have to be considered, just as though the man had never married; even in his new-found bliss the bridegroom cannot live to himself, for he is the Lord's.¹ And this new element, invading every condition and relationship of life, will have the effect of giving balance and steadfastness to character, and will tend to make the Christian superior to the accidents of life. Weeping will lose its sense of desolation, and even joy will not prevail to sweep away on its flood tide the whole man. Wealth will not mean what once it stood for; and he who uses the world will not seek to drain to the dregs the cup that it offers, for, having in Christ something that abides, he will value only at its true worth the passing fashion of this world.

The explanations which follow in verses 32 to 40 entirely bear out this interpretation. The Apostle is all through intent on safeguarding the Lord's interests in His people: the key-

¹ Compare verses 32 and 33.

note throughout is the *μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ* of verse 39—"only in the Lord." The idea of the Second Advent comes in nowhere at all.

The expression of the universal Christian hope and expectation in the "Maran atha," *Our Lord cometh*, of 1 Cor. xvi. 22, need not detain us here.

We turn next to the Epistle to the Romans in order to deal with the only two passages in that Epistle which by any stretch of imagination can be considered to refer to the near approach of the Second Advent, viz., xiii. 11-14 and xvi. 20. We shall first deal with the latter of these passages, because it can very easily be explained. The words are: "And the God of Peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." It is just conceivable that this statement may be regarded as referring to the same event as the words of 1 Cor. xv. 24, 25: "Then cometh the end . . . for He must reign till He hath put all His enemies under His feet." The inference in that case would be that as the Apostle in Rom. xvi. 20 declares that the subjection of the arch-enemy is shortly about to take place, he must be considered as asserting the speedy arrival of "the end" referred to in 1 Cor. xv. 24, 25. But a very brief examination of the former passage shows that the subject with which St. Paul is dealing has nothing to do with the Second Advent. He is here discussing the divisions and occasions of stumbling (verse 17) which were being caused in the Roman Church by certain adversaries of the truth; and while praising the obedience of his readers and giving them helpful counsel, he cheers them with the assurance that the God of Peace will shortly bruise under their feet the great adversary of whom these disturbers of their peace were but the human agents. In other words, they should soon triumph over all that was creating strife and disorder in their midst.

The other passage, Rom. xiii. 11 to 12, is as follows: "And this, knowing the season, that now it is high time for you to awake out of sleep; for now is salvation nearer to us than when we first believed. The night is far spent and the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us

put on the armour of light. Let us walk decently as in the day."

These words are generally understood as asserting the Apostle's conviction that the Second Advent was very near. The *σωτηρία* (*salvation*) of verse 11 is regarded as equivalent to the *ἀπολύτρωσις* of St. Luke xxi. 28 (your *redemption* draweth nigh). "The night" is interpreted to mean "the lifetime of the world—the power of darkness," a similar expression being "the world-rulers of this darkness" in Ephes. vi. 12. "The day" is the day of resurrection and of judgment; and so on.

Now, if the crucial words employed in this passage were at all capable of bearing, in this context, the meaning which has been put upon them, then we should indeed have here a clear and decisive instance to show that St. Paul not only believed, but also definitely taught the doctrine of the speedy return of Christ. When, however, we study the passage as a whole, the Apostle's meaning is seen to be something entirely different from what has been suggested above. The clue to the true interpretation of the passage is found in the *ὡς ἐν ἡμέρᾳ* (*as in the day*) of verse 13. It must be evident to even a casual reader that "the day" of verse 13 must refer to the same thing as "the day" of verse 12. But when the Apostle writes, "Let us walk decently, as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness . . .," he is clearly referring to the time now present, and not to the time of the Second Advent. He is giving the Roman Christians directions for their life in this world, not for their behaviour in the world to come. Let us try, therefore, to get a connected idea of the whole passage in the light of this fact. St. Paul is exhorting his readers to awake out of their sleep; to be up and doing. Their salvation, he tells them, is nearer to them—a more real and personal thing to them—than when they first believed: they are more intimate with it; they realize more fully its privileges, its obligations; and this very realization ought to be to them an incentive to be more keenly alive to their opportunities, and to throw off all their drowsiness of spiritual indifference. Thus understood, the words constitute a

real and cogent argument and appeal ; but if we take the word "salvation" to mean the Second Advent, we commit St. Paul to the incredible stupidity of solemnly informing the Christians of Rome that the Second Advent is nearer to-day than it was a year or two ago!

To return, however, to the Apostle's argument, he is in truth sounding a bugle-call to the Church at the dawn of their day of Gospel light and Gospel privilege and Gospel opportunity. He cries to them to awake, for the long night of their ignorance and unbelief and moral darkness is well-nigh departed, and Christ, the Light of the world, has dawned upon them. "The day is at hand," the morning is come, the true light is already shining : garments of the night, works of darkness, are now indecent in this daylight ; let us therefore cast them off ; let us clothe ourselves with armour that can bear the light of day : *ὡς ἐν ἡμέρᾳ εὐσχημόνως περιπατήσωμεν*—"as men who are in the daylight let us walk becomingly" ; not in revelling and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy ; but clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself ; exhibiting Him to all beholders in our daily walk and conversation, and refusing to make provision for the flesh so as to gratify its lusts. Having thus stirred the hearts of his readers by this rousing call, St. Paul proceeds, in the remainder of the Epistle, to show in fuller detail what is involved in that putting on of the Lord Jesus Christ which alone can enable us to walk becomingly as in the day.

The passage thus interpreted is in closest accord with that section of the Epistle to the Ephesians in which the subject that is being discussed is practically the same. Consider, for example, the following sentences : "For ye were once darkness, but are now light in the Lord : walk as children of light . . . and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them ; for the things which are done by them in secret it is a shame even to speak of" (Ephes. v. 8-12). "Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee"

(Ephes. v. 14). "Look therefore carefully how ye walk ; not as unwise, but as wise, buying up the opportunity because the days are evil. . . . And be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephes. v. 15-18).

The exceedingly close correspondence of subject-matter, context, idea, and expression between these passages in the two Epistles must convince even a reluctant student that St. Paul is not referring at all to the Second Advent in the passage from the Epistle to the Romans, but that the day which is at hand in the case of the awakened Christians at Rome is identical with the shining of Christ upon them in the case of the awakened Ephesians ; and that the works of darkness, indecent in the daylight that had dawned upon the Romans, were just those very things which used to be familiar to the Ephesians when they were once darkness, but which it was shameful even to mention now that they were light in the Lord.

There is no other passage in the Epistle to the Romans which refers, even indirectly, to the date of the Second Advent. We thus arrive at a result which, when it is bluntly stated, must surely afford food for reflection to those who so incessantly and confidently assure us that Christ Himself and the whole of the Apostolic Church were practically obsessed with the conviction of His speedy return—viz., that in this great treatise, the Epistle to the Romans, in which St. Paul leaves hardly anything unnoticed that can be regarded by his readers as important, the nearness of the return of Christ is never once so much as mentioned.

There only remains for consideration one sentence which occurs in Phil. iv. 5 : "The Lord is at hand."

Here, again, the context makes the meaning plain, and shows convincingly that there is no reference whatever to the Second Advent of Christ. The whole passage is as follows : "Rejoice in the Lord always : again I will say, Rejoice. Let your forbearance be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. In nothing be anxious ; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."

Here we have an exhortation to rejoice, followed by an encouragement to prayer as a remedy for all anxiety; and standing between the two, looking as it were both ways, is the assurance, "The Lord is at hand," or, more exactly, "The Lord is *near*" (ὁ κύριος ἐγγύς). Now, we may well ask, What sort of help could it afford to a man who was bringing his troubles to God in prayer if he were informed that the Second Advent was soon going to take place? What sense would there be in this statement under such circumstances? But when we understand ἐγγύς to mean nearness *in place*, so that the Apostle's encouraging assurance reads, "The Lord is with you, close by you," at once we see the force and fitness of his words. We recall the Saviour's own encouragement to prayer: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." And the very words that the Apostle uses seem to come straight from the LXX version of two places in the Psalms, either or both of which may well have been in his mind when he dictated the sentence: ἐγγύς κύριος πᾶσι τοῖς ἐπικαλουμένοις αὐτόν (The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him); and, ἐγγύς κύριος τοῖς συντετριμμένοις τὴν καρδίαν (The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart).

We have now considered all that there is in St. Paul's Epistles which may be supposed to refer to the nearness of our Lord's return, and we have seen that nowhere does he even express his own private opinion that the Second Advent is near, although at times, as in 1 Tim. vi. 14, we seem to catch a glimpse of a hope that it may be soon. The disciple does not go beyond his Master. All that St. Paul can say is that the day of the Lord will come suddenly, as a thief in the night (1 Thess. v. 1-4), even as the Lord Jesus had said.

The conviction that our Lord and His Apostles definitely taught a doctrine of the near approach of the Second Advent

which has been completely falsified, has served as a starting-point for leaping to the conclusion that all the Lord's teaching concerning His return must now be ignored. "What for him was matter of confident expectation," says Dr. Latimer Jackson in his recent Hulsean Lectures, "has not only turned out otherwise, but, in the shape in which he announced it, is absolutely inconceivable to modern minds. . . . The catastrophic ending looked for by him has not come about . . . He has not so come—Will He, then, yet so come? If in days of old it was asked in mockery, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' the religious consciousness of to-day is untroubled by the question . . . no such external coming of the Son of Man is to be looked for."¹ Well, the religious consciousness of to-day may perhaps prove to be something larger than Dr. Latimer Jackson imagines; there may even be "modern minds" which are not modernist; and to those who still retain their former faith, it may be helpful to realize that just as the Lord Jesus Himself never made any statement that time has falsified, so His great Apostle to the Gentiles, whose letters we have been studying, has written nothing that we need surrender as untrue.

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¹ "The Eschatology of Jesus," pp. 342, 343.

