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## THE SECOND ADVENT IN RELATION TO THE REIGN OF CHRIST

DURING the last hundred years a great change has taken place among evangelical Christians in their attitude to the Second Advent of our Lord Jesus. One is impressed in reading a book such as David Brown's *Christ's Second Coming*, published in 1849 in defence of the post-millennial view, by the fact that he is defending what he calls the "ordinary view" against novel doctrines which had only recently made their appearance; though he recognises that modern pre-millennialism is in fact a revival of the ancient error of Chiliasm.

Pre-millennialism or, as the early fathers and the reformers termed it, Chiliasm, is the expectation of a thousand years' reign upon the earth after the Second Coming of Christ, and this idea, the revival of which was regarded as such a novel development in the early nineteenth century, has now become a standard of evangelical orthodoxy and one of the fundamentals of fundamentalism.

The post-millennial view held by most evangelical Christians until about the middle of the nineteenth century agrees with the affirmations of the ancient creeds of the Church in which the personal Advent of Christ, the resurrection-rapture of 1 Thessalonians iv. and 1 Corinthians xv., is presented as the final event which terminates human history and introduces the final judgment. The teaching of 1 Corinthians xv. gives very strong support to this view and, if it were permissible to base a doctrine upon one passage of Scripture, the post-millennial advent would be conclusively established by the following points which the chapter so clearly emphasises:

(1) The personal return marks not the beginning of Christ's kingdom but the end of it (verse 28).

(2) Contrary to pre-millennial teaching, Christ does not come in His personal second advent to put down His foes. He comes when He *shall have* put all his enemies under His feet (note the repeated use of the future-perfect in verse 28).

(3) The very last enemy to be destroyed is death (verse 26)

and this is annihilated instantaneously by the resurrection-rapture (verses 52-4). This fact emphasised in 1 Corinthians xv. is in perfect harmony with the teaching of the Apocalypse. There in chapter xx death is shown symbolically as being destroyed after the end of the millennial era.

That the last enemy is destroyed by that event itself means of necessity that every other enemy must have already been dealt with prior to the Second Advent. The age-long warfare has then resulted in the complete victory of our great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. He does not intervene by force to accomplish this mighty victory; He intervened only in weakness and apparent defeat in the incarnation and crucifixion. The conflict is a spiritual one throughout as far as the winning side is concerned; for though the enemy often uses such instruments as imprisonment, torture and physical death "the weapons of *our* warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds". A victory of supernatural force such as that visualised by the pre-millennialist would be in fact no victory at all but the utter defeat of Christ and the triumph of evil.

The writer of Matthew's gospel says of Christ, quoting Isaiah, "a bruised reed He shall not break and a smoking flax shall He not quench till He send forth judgment unto victory" (Isa. xlii. 3 f. ; Matt. xii. 20). This is his method throughout—as the Isaiah passage says, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law"; there can be no departing from it till victory is accomplished.

The teaching of 1 Corinthians xv. has been stressed because we have there, in clear language, logical arguments relating to the personal return of Christ and its relationship to His victory over evil. The pre-millennial theory, with its teaching of the Second Advent taking place at a time when evil is still dominant in this world, is in the face of this exceedingly difficult to maintain.

*A great objection.* Writers like David Brown and B. C. Young, in their struggles as valiants for the truth against the incoming flood of pre-millennial doctrines, had one great disadvantage which lost them the battle as far as their generation was concerned. That was that they had no satisfactory answer

to the outstanding objection of the pre-millennialists to the ordinary post-millennial view. The objection was this, that Christ's Coming is repeatedly shown in the New Testament as something which has a sudden thief-like character, coming unexpectedly upon an evil world, and for which the Christian of every generation must be ready and watching. If that is so, says the pre-millennialist, how can we also expect a vast era of peace and blessing to intervene between the present time and His coming?

*A great misconception.* The failure of the post-millennial teachers of the last century to answer this great objection was, it would seem, due to a misconception which they held in common with their prophetic opponents.

That misconception was a failure to appreciate the greatness of the doctrine of the Coming of Christ; the multitude of allusions to the coming in the New Testament all referred in their view to an isolated event at the end of the ages which they called the Second Advent, whereas in fact that event is the glorious consummation and completion of the Coming, anticipated in the Old Testament, begun in the lowly incarnation and in the crucifixion and resurrection and giving of the Holy Spirit, and going on through the whole course of history which Christ dominates and directs.

*The disciples' question.* Our Lord's personal teaching on the subject of His Coming was prompted by a question put by His disciples, "What shall be the sign of thy coming and the consummation of the age?" Were they thinking when they asked that question of the Second Advent, the personal return? Nothing could have been further from their minds, for they had not yet even grasped the fact that He was going to die, let alone be raised from the dead, ascend to heaven and then eventually return.

What they did have in mind was the fact that the Messiah had indeed come. They believed in Him, but He was unrecognised by His own nation and by the world; His Coming so far had been unheralded and obscure as far as the world generally was concerned. When was the great fact of His Coming going to be known generally and His power manifest on a world-wide scale? What shall be the *sign* of thy coming?

*Our Lord's answer.* Our Lord's answer is a survey of the whole of history; and the consummation of that history, so

troubled in its earlier stages, is that era when all nations shall see Him coming in the clouds of heaven (Matt. xxiv. 30). It is right at the end of that era that the Second Advent takes place (Matt. xxiv. 31).

*Coming in the clouds.* It is important that we should clearly understand that statement about His coming in the clouds. It is a quotation from Daniel vii, the vision from which our Lord takes His title Son of Man. The wild beasts of that vision, that is the great universal empires, rise to power out of "the sea", representing the peoples and nations of the world. In contrast to these Empires is the kingdom of the Son of Man, destined to overthrow and destroy them, and in contrast He comes to power in the "clouds of heaven" and this expression is clearly interpreted in the latter part of the chapter as meaning "the saints of the most High". The coming of the Son of Man begun in the Divine Man of Nazareth is continued in the lives of those who are His, the saints of the most high, the "clouds of heaven", till eventually, to quote again from Dan. vii, "the kingdom under the whole heaven" shall be given to them.

In this connection we should recall our Lord's words to the high priest: "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." These two activities are concurrent and provide the clue to the meaning of history. He is reigning, but His reign is expectant—"Sit thou on my right hand until I make thy foes thy footstool". His kingdom is being made effective not by supernatural might or compulsion but by His coming in the clouds of heaven, that is in the formation and expansion and ultimate world-dominion of His Church.

*Coming in judgment.* There are two important phases of the Coming of Christ. The first is coming in judgment. This is most clearly stated in 2 Thessalonians i. 6-10, which is a message addressed to those troubled by persecution. They were to rest in the certainty of the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His mighty angels "in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ".

The book of Revelation is in its middle chapters especially concerned with this aspect of His Coming. Chapters xv and xvi, dealing with the seven vials of wrath, contain a quotation from these words of St. Paul; the executors of these judgments

are represented as seven angels clothed in pure and white linen, and these, we are told later, represent not angelic beings in the ordinary sense but John's fellow-servants who have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The vial judgments are the great catastrophic political events of this era represented as judgments on the "Beast", that is the kingdoms of this world; I—IV represent four successive stages in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, V the dark ages which followed the collapse of the Western Empire (his kingdom became full of darkness), VI the Moslem invasions—"the kings of the east", VII the great revolution, political, social and economic, of the last one hundred and sixty years which has so radically altered the world in which we live—the "great earthquake" culminating in the "great hail"—the fearful destruction of the wars of the twentieth century.

It is these events to which 2 Thessalonians i refers. It is addressed to those who are persecuted and they are reminded that God is going to deal with the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting and persecuting powers in the great judgments of history. We must note, however, that these are not supernatural catastrophes devised by God to bring external pressure to bear on the course of history. They arise from purely spiritual causes from within, from the world's failure to know God and to obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence the judgments proceed from those who proclaim the gospel and thus ultimately "from the presence of God and from the glory of His power".

*Coming in blessing.* The second of these two phases we are now considering is even more important. Not only is He coming in judgment but coming in blessing. The same passage in 2 Thessalonians i states this phase of the coming clearly. There are two answers to the persecuted saints' cry, and two reasons for resting in faith, each introduced in that passage by the word "when". The one we have already considered, the revelation of Christ in judgment. The other is contained in verse 10 which looks beyond these destructive happenings to the realisation of the coming of Christ in glory *in His saints* (a similar thought to "coming in the clouds") which, says Paul, is the direct result of the faith and testimony of the first-century Christians passed on to subsequent generations. It is the triumph of the gospel, the fruit of persistent and faithful witness through the centuries.

*Coming suddenly.* We must consider another important feature in His Coming, that is its sudden thief-like character. Scripture does not lead us to expect a gradual process of Christianisation and conversion, a slow but sure advance of the kingdom by progressive evangelisation. Such an idea is not only contrary to Biblical teaching but to the hard facts of history. True, there were great triumphs in the early centuries and there has been great progress in world evangelisation in the last hundred and fifty years but that is offset by two considerations: (1) the almost equal progress of other religions, such as Islam, in the mission field and (2) the sad fact that the countries from which the gospel has gone are themselves becoming more and more pagan and we now see the rise in Europe of an anti-Christian movement affecting millions of souls.

We can best illustrate the New Testament teaching concerning the dramatic suddenness of His coming by a reference to the book of Revelation and the epistles to the Churches in particular. To each of these seven Churches (except one) there is a promise of His coming and a definite coming to that Church: "I will come unto *thee*."

How the coming was realised in that specific way to the original Churches we do not know but there is a deeper meaning in those epistles. It has become the fashion to decry any application of these letters to seven successive periods of Church history but it must be pointed out that: (1) It is absolutely in keeping with the manner of apocalyptic writing to divide history in this manner. (2) It is clearly indicated in the introductory vision to the mystery of the seven churches—we are told they concern, firstly, things that are, and secondly, things that shall be hereafter. (3) There is a striking correspondence between the actual description of the Church and the successive periods of Church history.

The first reference to His coming in these letters is in the first, that to the Church at Ephesus; it is a coming in judgment. "I will come unto thee quickly and remove thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent." It is not difficult to see how this coming to the Church which had lost its apostolic zeal was fulfilled in the epoch-making events of the early part of the fourth century.

Passing over intervening letters we come to one which very clearly illustrates this sudden, thief-like character. The Church

of Sardis represents in history that era of terrible spiritual decadence which set in soon after the zenith of papal supremacy was reached in the thirteenth century and lasted till the early sixteenth century. To this Church the message is given: "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." How true that was! The sixteenth century dawned with spiritual life at its lowest possible ebb, a Borgia on the papal throne and moral corruption throughout the Church. Then with dramatic suddenness, utterly unexpected, comes the glorious Reformation and within the short space of ten or fifteen years the light of the gospel has shone throughout the whole of western Europe.

*The great climax of His Coming.* These early demonstrations, however, only imperfectly realise the great power and glory of His Coming. There is a great climax to His Coming hinted at in the last Church epistle, and described at full length in the later chapters of the Revelation. It is that time of which our Lord spoke "when all nations shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven" and it introduces the glorious millennial reign of Christ. We should note carefully the manner in which this comes—like the Reformation, it comes suddenly as a thief in the night when the world is in its darkest hour. We must note:

(1) It is preceded by the sudden destruction of an apostate Church (Rev. xvii, xviii). This is effected at the hands of political opponents used in the over-ruling purpose of God to effect His will (Rev. xvii. 16 f.). This violent disestablishment comes suddenly in "one hour", evidently indicating a brief period of history. We perhaps see slight hints of the possible beginnings of this great judgment in recent developments in Eastern Europe.

(2) It is also preceded by the emergence of a revived, purified and united Church (Rev. xviii. 7, 9) and by the calling out of specially selected servants to be His instruments in the coming conflict: "they that are with Him are called and chosen and faithful" (Rev. xvii. 14). When these two conditions are fulfilled, and we must here and now do our part in fulfilling that vital second condition by watching and by prayer, then shall we see the launching of the great anti-God movement, the possibilities of which we already see in Europe and Asia today.



(3) This brings me to the third point about this great climax of His Coming. *It issues out of a great conflict.* Old Testament prophecies view it as an attack upon Jerusalem by all nations (e.g. Joel iii and Zech. xiv), and in the light of the New Testament we know this to be the spiritual Jerusalem, the Church of Christ. The Revelation describes it as "the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (chapter xvi) and in chapter xvii there is the important statement that "these [that is, ten great powers] shall make war with the Lamb and the Lamb shall overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with Him are called and chosen and faithful". We have the full length description in chapter xix.

Pre-millennialists would make this conflict to be a literal scene of carnage somewhere in Palestine in which Christ's enemies fight against Him with literal weapons and He with supernatural force. How absurd and how utterly degrading to the character of the King of kings! A victory of force would bring Him down to the level of earthly conquerors, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon and Hitler; a victory of force would in fact for Christ be no victory at all but complete defeat and the triumph of Satan.

*A great spiritual victory.* The picture given in chapter xix is of a great spiritual victory, a mighty and decisive triumph of the gospel. The vision commences with heaven opened, a Biblical expression for abundant blessing. Then emerges the rider on the white horse, a vision of the conquering Christ. We saw the same symbol earlier in chapter vi, there representing the initial going forth of the gospel and its early triumphs. Here it is again on a grander scale, the gospel going forth in great and irresistible power.

The weapons make the nature of this conflict absolutely certain. (1) The sword which proceedeth out of His mouth is "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" (Eph. vi. 17). (2) The rod of iron (a quotation from Isa. xi. 4) is another symbol of the word of God in its mighty power to overcome all foes. "Is not my word like as a fire and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. xxiii. 29). (3) "He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God." This decisive weapon and instrument of His victory is the cross of Christ. The reference is to Isaiah lxiii. 3: "I have trodden the

winepress alone." The cross was the supreme revelation of God's wrath against the sin of mankind as well as of His great redeeming love. In this great triumph of the gospel the presentation of Christ crucified is of supreme importance. Here we see the triumph of the cross and remember our Lord's words: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

This great victory results in that great era of peace and blessing and prosperity foretold in such glowing terms by the Old Testament prophets. Though inevitably a time of natural and material blessing its basis is essentially spiritual; it rests in deep and widely diffused knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

*The final conflict—after the millennium.* It is not difficult to understand that after a long era of peace and blessing there should take place a decline in the level of spiritual life. This results in the re-emergence of the spirit of unbelief symbolised in the rising of Satan from the abyss. This leads to the third of the great wars of the Revelation, the war against the city of God (Rev. xx. 7-10).

This conflict and that of chapter xix both have references to Ezekiel xxxviii and xxxix, suggesting that the conflict there described is applicable to both pre- and post-millennial wars. This post-millennial apostasy is met and overcome by a mighty operation of the Spirit of God, the "fire from heaven".

The scale of this final conflict is vast and its importance tremendous because in it Christ *finally* proves His superiority to every foe. Unbelief is now for ever banished (Rev. xx. 10). Everything is now ready for the final Advent, though we are given no indication as to the time which lapses after the last conflict before this takes place.

*The Resurrection-Rapture.* Our Lord's victory over evil being absolutely complete, He now has the title to abolish death which is the result of sin; and so takes place His personal appearance, that last judgment which sums up the course of history, the resurrection of the dead and the translation of the living, the passing of heaven and earth and the introduction of the world to come.

There is a great need at this time for reconsideration of the doctrine of the Second Advent and its relationship to the reign of Christ. The most serious consequence of what is now the

ordinary evangelical view is that it involves a profoundly pessimistic outlook and looks forward to the ultimate triumph of evil. Its advocates would strenuously deny this charge by asserting the future conquest and reign of Christ which their teaching maintains. But the victory in which they believe has no spiritual basis; it is "by might or by power" and not "by My Spirit".

Another view has come to the fore in certain evangelical circles quite recently and that is a-millennialism. Though it avoids the literal and materialistic interpretations of pre-millennialism it is deeply unsatisfying. It offers a truncated view of history. Nothing is brought to fruition or completion. To use the words of Habakkuk, the people will have laboured in the very fire and wearied themselves for very vanity if indeed the earth is never to be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

In these days when she is faced with the rise of militant opposition the Church has an urgent need to be emancipated from these defeatist theories, to be rallied to the great battle heartened and encouraged by the certainty of the total triumph of her Lord within the course of history, and to be strengthened by the realisation that the weapons already in her hand, the word of God and the glorious gospel of Christ used in the power of the Holy Spirit, will yet bring to the lowly Jesus "dominion from sea to sea and from the river even to the ends of the earth".

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