

A.B. Simpson:

"Unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thes. 5: 23.)

The New Testament epistles have, as a rule, some specific quality or characteristic by which they are known. Romans is the epistle of gospel truth; Corinthians of the Church; Galatians of grace; Ephesians of the highest Christian life; Philippians of the sweetest Christian life; Colossians of the Christ life, etc. The letters to the Thessalonians are the advent epistles. The one theme that runs throughout the two letters like a sort of golden thread and appears in every chapter in connection with some important and practical doctrine, is the blessed hope of the Lord's coming. So prominently did this subject occupy the preaching of Paul during his visit to Thessalonica, that when his enemies brought charges against him before the rulers of the city, they made this the point of their accusation, that "these that have turned the world upside down have come hither also; . . . and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another King, one Jesus." It is evident from this that the general impression received from his preaching in Thessalonica was that the Christ to whom he bore witness was a real King, and was coming again to establish a kingdom on the earth. Otherwise there would have been no possible ground for jealousy on the part of Caesar's friends. Indeed, we know from the very first chapter of his epistle that he began with this theme in his first messages to the unconverted, and it was this that awakened their consciences while still heathen, and led them to turn "to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven."

The fact that the letters to the Thessalonians were Paul's earliest epistles, and that this subject occupies so prominent a place in them, makes it very plain that the doctrine of the Lord's coming is not an advanced truth that can only be understood by deeply spiritual Christians. It is one of the primary doctrines of the Gospel, and is part of the very essence of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

I. THIS DOCTRINE IS PRESENTED AS A MEANS OF CONVICTION AND A MOTIVE TO CONVERSION

"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus which delivered us from the wrath to come." (1 Thes. 1: 9, 10.) It is evident from this passage that it was the truth of the Lord's coming that led the Thessalonians to turn from heathen idols to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, a most appropriate message to preach to the unsaved and to proclaim to the heathen. It was a similar message carried by Jonah to the people of Nineveh that brought them to repentance, and awakened profound and universal conviction throughout the empire of Assyria. Our missionaries tell us that when they announce to the most wicked chiefs of pagan tribes that there is another Sovereign to whom they are accountable, and who is soon to appear to call them to account, there is an instinct in the human heart that seems to respond to such a message, and they are often led by it to deep conviction and awakening. Surely this is the meaning of "the gospel of the kingdom," which the Lord has commissioned us to give to the world as a witness before His coming. We are sent forth not merely as heralds to individual Christians, but as ambassadors to all nations, and we are to proclaim the King who is coming to call them to judgment as well as to deal with every individual conscience and life. May God give us wisdom as Christian workers and missionaries to understand and fill our great commission. If any reader of these lines is still unsaved, let us appeal to you by all the powers of the world to come to prepare for that great day! "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; . . . be you reconciled to God."

II. THE LORD'S COMING IS A MOTIVE TO FAITHFUL MINISTRY

"For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (1 Thes. 2: 19.) Here the Apostle bears witness that the Lord's coming was a motive in his own ministry and the inspiring hope of his own loving service for the souls of men. As he tells us elsewhere, he expects to present his beloved people to the heavenly Bridegroom as a delightful trust, and to find in their joy his joy and crown. Our service for Christ is to receive both wages and fruit. The wages are paid now, but the fruit we shall share with Him. To the faithful elders Peter says in this connection, "When the chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory that does not fade away." And a still more ancient promise declared that "they who turn many to righteousness [shall shine] as the stars forever and ever." There is one sense in which the souls we win for Christ shall be eternally linked with our happiness and reward, and be as jewels in our crowns of rejoicing. Are there any who are reading these lines who will wear a starless crown? Have you been accumulating blessings only for yourself, and will it be your sad record, as a man once cabled across the sea to his friends at home after an awful shipwreck in which his family had all perished by his side, "Saved alone"? "Your heaven," Rutherford used to write, "will be two heavens for me; your salvation will be two salvations to me."

III. THE LORD'S COMING IS A MOTIVE FOR CHRISTIAN LOVE

"The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." (1 Thes. 3: 12, 13.)

In the beautiful series of parables of the kingdom (Mat. 13) there is a progression in the parable of the treasure and of the pearl from the individual to the body. In the first of these two parables the Church is viewed as made up of innumerable persons, but in the second as one beautiful pearl. The unity of the Church must be accomplished before the Lord's coming. He is to meet not a number of virgins, but the Bride. The divisions of Christendom hinder His coming. It may be we shall never see all the denominations united as one organic body, but we do see something coming to pass which is perhaps God's substitute for this; that is, a gathering together of the spiritual elements of the Church of God in a deeper unity of heart and holy fellowship. They are being drawn to Christ as a mystical and spiritual body. As such we meet in our great conventions forgetting our denominational names, and it is this company whom Christ is calling out and training for the hour of His parousia.

Of course, it goes without saying that all individual bitterness, strife, and uncharitableness is an offense to Jesus Christ and a hindrance to His coming. You cannot expect Him to call you to the meeting in the air if there is anyone in that assembly with whom you stand in strained relations. There can be no adjustments and reconciliations there. You must be "found of him in peace" and love with all men. Beloved, are we ready in this regard for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints?

IV. THE LORD'S COMING IS A SOURCE OF COMFORT TO THE AFFLICTED AND BEREAVED

"Wherefore comfort one another with these words." This entire passage (1 Thes. 4: 13-18) contains the most comforting and tender picture of the Lord's coming in the Scriptures. Even the briefest enumeration of the point is full of instruction and consolation.

1. We are here most plainly reminded that those who sleep in Jesus are living still, for it is said: "Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." If God is to bring them with Him they must be somewhere. They cannot be mere dust and ashes in the grave, for He is to bring them to the earth. They must be real persons, or how can He bring them? And they must be with Him now in their disembodied state in order that He may bring them to meet their resurrected bodies.

2. Next, there is a beautiful provision for the reunion of long parted friends. The dead in Christ are first raised, and then the living believers changed. But there is a little time before the meeting with the Lord for mutual recognition and fellowship. They are caught up together and on the way what happy greetings, what mutual explanations, what tales there will be to tell of the years that rolled between, and the blended experiences of earth and heaven? Then when all tears are wiped away, and all longing satisfied, will come --

3. The meeting with the Lord in the air, and all lesser love will for a time be lost sight of in the rapture of His presence and the welcome from His voice.

V. THE LORD'S COMING IS A MESSAGE OF WARNING AND A CALL TO WATCHFULNESS

"But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Therefore let us not sleep as do others; but let us watch and be sober." (1 Thes. 5: 4, 6) . We are here reminded that the saints of Christ shall know enough of the time of His coming to be ready. The world will be surprised, but the Bride of the Lamb will know early enough to be in the attitude for translation. At the same time, there must be no carelessness, but a spirit of vigilance and a habit of constant preparedness.

VI. THE COMING OF THE LORD IS A POWERFUL INCENTIVE TO HOLINESS

"The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calls you, who also will do it." (1 Thes. 5: 23, 24).

"Without which [holiness] no man shall see the Lord," and doubtless this means at His coming. In the parable of the ten virgins, they were virgins who were pure in a sense, and even expecting their Lord, but who were not fully prepared to enter into the marriage because of the lack of the Holy Ghost. This verse contains a prayer for

the entire sanctification of the believers at Thessalonica in order that they might be fully prepared for the Lord's coming. The word "unto" should be translated "at," implying not that we are to grow into sanctification in view of the Lord's coming, but we are to receive it as a gift of the God of Peace, and then be preserved in it by His grace so that we shall be in a constant state of preparedness whenever the Lord may come, and we shall be "found of him in peace without spot and blameless." This preparation must be very thorough and complete, embracing our whole spirit, soul, and body, and including our abiding in Him so that we shall be "preserved blameless" and presented "faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." Such a high degree of grace is beyond human attainment, and therefore it is divinely provided and promised to those who will receive it. "Faithful is he that calls you who also will do it." Dearly beloved, by all the hopes and fears of the coming age, let us receive this grace and be clothed in the fine linen and white, which is the righteousness of the saints.

VII. THE LORD'S COMING WILL HAVE A VERY DIFFERENT ASPECT FOR THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

In the second epistle, chapter one, verses 7 to 10, we have the vivid picture of the other side of the advent, the coming of the day of God as it will appear to the unbelieving and ungodly. It shall be rest with us "when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe," but for them who "know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ," it will be "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." This doubtless describes the latter phase of the Lord's coming when He shall be revealed and openly manifested to all the world. This is not His coming for His saints, but His coming with His glorified Bride and His mighty angels to judge the nations and establish His kingdom on the millennial earth. It is in view of the terrors of that day that God's mercy now pleads with men to meet Him as a Savior and Friend, and not as a sovereign Judge.

VIII. THE LORD'S COMING IN CONNECTION WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE APOSTASY AND THE IMMEDIATE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

This is the subject of the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians in which the Apostle endeavors to correct some false impressions that had gone abroad among the disciples through false teachers, to the effect that the day of Christ had already come and that they had been left behind. These false impressions had been diligently circulated by forged letters as from him, and pretended revelations in the Spirit, and they were causing much distress and disturbance of mind to the brethren. Paul, therefore, takes occasion to tell them that the day of Christ will not come until some precedent events occur, and one particularly shall be fully developed. This one he calls the apostasy; and it is interesting to note some special features of this great movement of evil in order that we may be able to identify it in our own time, and be preserved from the disturbing influences of false views ourselves.

1. It is an apostasy. It is not an infidel movement. It is not a political combination of ungodly men. It is not some organized form of latter day evil, such as Spiritualism, Nihilism, Socialism, Fanaticism. But it is something that was originally Christian and has become perverted. Further: --

2. It is still professedly a religious movement, for "as God," we are here told, "he sits in the temple of God showing himself that he is God." It is Antichrist not in the sense of being opposed to Christ, but rather being a substitute for Christ, a usurper on His throne. It claims miraculous powers, and signs, and lying wonders, and appears to be a great religious system claiming supernatural authority and power, a sort of vicar of Christ on earth.

3. This apostasy was already working in the days of Paul, and only needed the removal of certain external restraints to work out its full development of evil. It was in the churches in the form of pride, ambition, worldly policy, human selfishness, and all the evils of the carnal mind. Even before the death of Paul and John we find the spirit of ecclesiastical pride shutting them out from their own churches and disciples, and claiming assumptions which already received the severest rebukes of the ascended Lord in His letters to the churches of Asia. Quite early in the history of Christianity we find the very ministers of Jesus Christ contending with each other about their respective rank and dignity, until finally the supreme question was which of the bishops should be the pope; and then the pope demanded a power supreme even above the emperor and the state. This spirit, however, of ambition and pride, was restrained as long as the Roman emperor retained his supremacy, but when Rome fell, the last barrier in the way of ecclesiastical pride was removed, and then there rose up in the place of the Caesars a spiritual power more despotic and even more universal and resistless than theirs, and for half the Christian age that power sat in the temple of God, showing itself as God, and it sits there still.

4. Behind all its religious claims it is the spirit of wickedness, a system of unrighteousness. Its "coming is after

the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders. And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish." It is the very mystery of iniquity. It even claims the right to call evil good and good evil. It assumes such infallibility that its dictums and decrees possess all the authority of the Word of God. Even the Scriptures must be interpreted by its canons and must be suppressed at its will. The grossest sins on the part of its numbers and officials are condoned by specious and plausible pretexts and canonized as virtues. It issues

authorized indulgences to sin. It opens the gates of hell and of heaven. It adapts itself to every age and clime, and when it cannot rule the king upon his throne, it can use a democracy, a political boss, just as effectually. It thrives on ignorance, and the illiterate and profligate are its favorite constituency, and are its most effectual allies and agents. Our readers have already anticipated its name. It is that system of iniquity which has grown out of a perverted Christianity, and has for more than a thousand years been the greatest menace to the liberties of the world and the rights of man. Its form has changed today, but not its spirit. There remains but one more development.

5. It will finally head up in a man of sin, the son of perdition. Some brilliant and perverted genius will yet grasp the reins of its world-wide power and organize it into the last great enemy of God and man, and then it will receive its death blow, "whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."

But the last blow is to be struck only when Christ shall come in His glorious Epiphany, not in His parousia. It will still go on after He has caught away His saints, evolving its most dreadful forces and forms of evil, and therefore, as far as the apostasy is concerned, it may be that all the conditions that must precede the coming of Jesus have already been fulfilled and that nothing may remain except that which is to be precipitated to its rapid ripening by the exciting conditions of the tribulation times. If this apostasy was in the days of Paul a reason for not immediately expecting the Lord to come, today it surely is the opposite, a reason for believing that that great event is near, even at the doors.

IX. FINALLY, THE PRACTICAL PREPARATION FOR THE LORD'S COMING IS NOT A FANATICAL EXCITEMENT

This preparation for His coming does not lead us to neglect any of life's duties, but a simple, faithful attitude of righteousness and fidelity to every trust, or, as the Apostle expresses it so finely (2 Thes. 3: 5) : "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ."

In the days of Paul a class of men had risen up who have never been without their successors, who abused this doctrine by turning it into an occasion for all sorts of irregularity in life and conduct. They neglected their families. They gave up honest work. They fell into fanatical practices, and they disturbed all religious social order. We have them still, long-haired, loud-mouthed talkers, too sanctified to live with their families, too spiritual to defile themselves with the touch of a handsaw or claw hammer, not even to say a dustpan or a wash tub. The Gospel of the Kingdom has no sympathy with such rubbish. The best preparation for Christ's coming is to be faithful in your calling, whatever it may be, and found at your post. The three classes of people whom the Lord singles out for translation are all engaged in ordinary things. One woman is grinding coffee for her husband's breakfast; one man is ploughing or harvesting in the field, and both go up instantly at the signal without needing to go home to change their clothes. The third is in bed, where honest people ought to be at that hour, and is translated just as readily as if he had been at an all-night prayer meeting. The idea seems to be that Christ expects us to be always ready, and then everything that comes in the way of life's duties is equally sacred and heavenly. The old Massachusetts senator was right when he refused to vote to adjourn the legislature, because the awful darkness that had come on seemed to portend the day of judgment. Said he, "If this is not the day of judgment there's no need for this fuss; and if it is, I for one, prefer to have the Judge find me at my post."