

(The Challenge of Missions) 4. THE LORD'S COMING AND MISSIONS

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Transcript

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations: and then shall the end come" (Mat. 24:14).

"And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him: for the hour of his judgment is come" (Rev. 14:6-7). These two passages present to us the evangelization of the world in the light of the Lord's coming. Surely the double message which the Holy Spirit has been echoing and re-echoing all through these days is, "Behold, I come quickly" "Go ye."

I. The coming of Christ is the great end of creation and redemption. This is the day for which all other days were made, the one event to which all other things are tending.

Even nature itself foreshadows the New Creation. This fallen world with its minor key of sadness echoes in every tone the cry for something better than nature knows. "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body." Every radiant morn, every returning spring, every bursting bud and breathing blossom, and every humming insect emerging from its wintry tomb and opening chrysalis is but the prophecy of the resurrection and the Palingenesis, when He that sitteth upon the throne shall say, "Behold I make all things new."

Man's highest philanthropy aims to develop and improve the conditions of this old earth of ours so that some day it shall fulfill the dreams of that golden age of which poets have sung.

But it were a poor reflection upon God if this old world at its best were the best that His power and goodness have for the human race. When we think of the ravages of sickness, sin and sorrow, when we realize the malign elements in the earthquake, the tempest and the devouring sea, and when we look at the mouldering dust and the hopelessness and agony of death and remember that after all the fairest scenes of earth are but cemeteries and the spots that tell of broken hearts and blighted hopes, Well may we say,

"Were this poor world our only rest, Living or dying, none were blessed." Or as the Apostle has expressed it, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

No, God's wisdom and love have something better for our race than civilization, reformation, social reform and scientific progress; something better even than a spiritual millennium and the world-wide triumph of the Gospel and the grace of God.

Just as for the individual God's highest thought is not self-improvement, nor reformation, not the best possible result out of natural character and human culture, but a new creation, a regeneration so complete that old things pass away and all things are made new; so for the world itself God's plan is the same. The mark of the cross must pass upon the earth itself and through death and resurrection it must come forth a new earth to take its place with God's new heavens in the coming age. The City of God, does not spring up from the earth, but, as the new Jerusalem, it comes down from heaven. Jesus Christ is the "Nobleman who went into a fair country to receive for Himself a kingdom" and return. Ages have passed since He went away and He has been from generation to generation gathering the stones for that glorious city which in a little while will burst from the heavens upon an astonished world and take the place of all our puny structures and all our petty plans.

This was the vision of the ancient prophets, this was the promise of the departing Lord, and this is the great perspective that climaxes the vision of faith and hope throughout the whole New Testament.

The first chapter of Acts gives us a magnificent example of this perspective.

First we have the "Passion" or death of our precious Lord which stands in the foreground of the future. Next we have His resurrection in the nearer distance. Then just beyond is the promise of the Holy Ghost and the commission to be witnesses unto the uttermost part of the earth which fills up the Christian age.

Too long the church of God has closed the vision with this scene, and we have been working as though the establishment of the church and the conversion of the world was the real end for which the Spirit was working in this age. But if we look at the inspired record we find there is yet another scene in the picture that lifts our thoughts to a higher plane and a more distant horizon. It begins in the tenth verse, where two men stood by them in white apparel saying, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

Ah, this was needed to complete the perspective. Away beyond the church, the mission field, the present age, stretches the vista of millennial years with the glorious light of the Lord's return as the real goal toward which redemption is ever moving forward and the Holy Ghost is ever leading on. Until we get this fully in view we have not grasped the whole conception of God's great plan, we have not got our eye upon the true goal and our course will be unsteady and our work unbalanced.

It was for this the Apostolic church was ever watching, praying, working and waiting. This was the message which the Apostle preached to the Thessalonians and which made them "turn from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven." This was the comfort He held out to the bereaved and sorrowing saints as they bade farewell to the martyred forms of their beloved ones, that Christ was coming soon and they should be "caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air." This was the joy and crown of his own intense ministry that he might present his people to the heavenly Bridegroom in the day of His coming as his "crown of rejoicing in the presence of Christ at His coming." And this was his own inspiring hope as he was about to lay down his ministry and meet his Lord, "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, that righteous judge, will give me in that day."

Thus it was the supreme end which they ever kept in view. And to make it more impressive and emphatic, the Lord Jesus Himself came back to John at Patmos for one last revelation, and gave him the vision of the Apocalypse and the picture of His coming and His kingdom as "things that must shortly come to pass" and left him with this as the burden of the church's latest prayer and the Master's latest promise, "Surely I come quickly. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

When the apostles were starting out to the great task of the world's evangelization a great council was held in Jerusalem to settle certain principles for the guidance of the church of the present age. And to that council the Holy Ghost revealed through its leader, the Apostle James, as he quoted from the ancient prophet Amos, the divine order of events in the program of the Lord. The first of these steps was stated thus, "At the first God did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name." The second stage was as definitely stated in the next sentence, "After this I will return and build again the tabernacle of David that is fallen down." Here we find the Lord's coming presented as the sequel of their immediate ministry, the great event for which they were gathering out a people from the Gentile nations. If the church had ever kept this in view she would have saved herself the waste of much vain effort and bitter disappointment in her attempts to build up a permanent earthly institution and create on earth a kingdom without the King. For the church itself has been as much at fault in her objects and ambitions as the world in its mere human policy. Men have tried to found their kingdoms and cities as if they should reign forever and make this earth a paradise of pleasure without the Lord. And sin has cursed all their ambitions and policies and turned the vision of earthly pride and power into that fearful menagerie of wild beasts which Daniel saw when he looked at the governments of the earth as they appeared in the light of heaven. But just as foolish and short-sighted is the policy of the Christian worker who aims to establish even through the church the Gospel and the religion of Jesus Christ an earthly millennium. Earth offers no foundation stable enough for the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Our business is to gather stones, timbers and jewels for that glorious edifice and pass them on to the great Architect that is building over yonder "The city that hath foundations" and the "kingdom that cannot be moved." We are just like Hiram's carpenters and Solomon's stonecutters, working in the mountains of Lebanon and the quarries of Judah and passing the cedar and the granite to its future site. One by one we are gathering the souls which He is fitting into the living temple and in a little while the vision of its glory will burst upon our view and admiring angels will say, "Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife." And we shall behold "that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; . . . And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; . . . and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass. And the city had no need of the sun, nor of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which were saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it."

Beloved, this is God's glorious goal. This is the future toward which the cross of Calvary and the Holy Ghost are leading the generations on. This is the true end for which it is worth our while to work and pray. This is the transcendent outlook of faith and hope and love. This is the kingdom that Daniel saw, superseding the pride and power of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, when "the kingdom and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the most high, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and whose dominion shall never pass away." This is the glorious consummation which the voices of heaven celebrate in the eleventh chapter of Revelation when they cry, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever. We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, . . . because thou

hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned." This is what the Master meant when He said, "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and bend yourselves back, for the hour of your redemption draweth nigh." And this is the glorious thought of Peter when he admonishes us to be "looking for and hasting on the coming of the day of God."

That glorious day is to bring our full redemption. It is to give us transfigured bodies and glorified spirits, conformed to His beauty and glory and immortality. It is to restore to our arms the long divided friends of time and wipe away earth's latest tear of sorrow. It is to end earth's story of sickness and sin and death, to sheath the cruel sword of war, to silence the battle drum and to make real over all the earth the Bethlehem song, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will to men." And that day is to bring our glorious and long rejected Christ, His kingdom and His throne. Best of all, it is to bring us to be with Him and to be like Him as the partners of His throne and the bride of His love. Oh, do not our hearts exult to think, to know as we see the signs of His appearing in earth and heaven today that it is near and answer back,

"Morn of Morns, O haste Thy glad appearing, Day of days, speed on, speed on." II. The work of missions is the great means of hastening that end. The work of the Holy Ghost through the church was chiefly intended to gather out from all nations a people for His name, a bride for the Lamb. It was not God's purpose at the present time by any stronger compulsion than the persuasion of the Gospel and the influence of the Holy Spirit to bring men to acceptance of Christ as their Saviour and King. In the next age every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, but at the present time the Gospel is preached to men as a witness, the opportunity is given to everyone and then it is left to their voluntary choice. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." The purpose of the present dispensation is to give this universal Probation for a brief time to all the races of mankind, and after the opportunity has been given and all that are willing to come to Him have accepted the gracious invitation to close the day of grace and bring the nations before Him in judgment and then establish a visible kingdom on earth which shall compel the subjection of all mankind and bring earth's millions without exception to bow to His scepter. This is clearly intimated in the passage already quoted in part in connection with the council at Jerusalem. "God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name," that is the present mission of the church and the object of foreign missions. When this is accomplished the second stage will come, "After this will I return, saith the Lord." Then comes the final stage after His coming, "That the residue of men may seek after the Lord and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called." Then the whole race shall be brought under the Gospel and the reign of Christ and earth's generations for a thousand years in millions and billions shall own His sway and crown Him Lord of all. But today it is the few that He is calling, not the subjects, but the rulers of the coming age. Just as David called out the heroes that followed him in the days of his exile and afterwards made them the princes of his kingdom, so the Lord Jesus today is training the men and women who will share with Him the government of the age to come. This is our high honor and privilege to be kings and priests unto God and to reign with Him upon the earth.

Until the whole number of His elect shall have thus been called and gathered home, He cannot come. This elect company is universal in its scope, while limited in its numbers. It embraces the people of every language, tribe and tongue. The angel of the Apocalypse had the everlasting Gospel to preach unto every nation and kindred and tribe and tongue. Therefore, today the work of missions must be world-wide. It is not enough for us to be zealous in gathering a great number of converts among the favored people in Christian lands; God wants us to bring representatives of every earthly tongue, and when this shall have

been done, then, He tells us, the end shall come. The bride of the Lamb, like the Son of man, must represent humanity as a whole. The Lord Jesus is not a Jew, an Anglo-Saxon or a Greek, but He is the Son of Man, the representative of every race, the universal man. So His bride must be the daughter of humanity, the composite photograph, embracing every feature, every color and every kindred of the human family.

III. The practical bearing of all this on the work of missions.

Many persons who do not believe in the literal return of Jesus Christ try to prejudice this truth by saying that its tendency is to paralyze missions and to discredit the Holy Spirit and His work in the present age.

It is no discredit to the Holy Spirit for us to teach that the world will not be converted under His agencies, because Christ never said it would be. The Holy Ghost came simply to carry out Christ's plan, and His plan in the present age is to gather out of the world His own people. When He appeared to Paul in Corinth, He did not tell him that all Corinth would be converted, but He said, "I have much people in this place." There will be an age during which "the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea." But that is not the dispensation of the Holy Ghost. Of this age we have been told that "iniquity shall abound and the love of many shall wax cold." Again it is said that "in the last days perilous times shall come," that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse" and that "when the Son of man cometh shall he find faith on the earth?" It is, therefore, no dishonor to the Spirit for us to express the very conditions that Christ Himself predicted.

In regard to the other objection, that the Lord's coming paralyzes missionary effort, it would seem to be enough to say that the men and women who are today most prominent, earnest and successful in prosecuting the evangelization of the world, are in the majority of instances ardent believers in the personal and pre-millennial coming of Christ.

Consider some reasons why the hope of Christ's coming should rather encourage and inspire missionary efforts.

I. It gives us a definite and practicable plan of work. It does not send us out in some vague way to sweep in wholesale all earth's multitudes. But it teaches us that God's plan in the present age is "to visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name." He is only visiting the Gentiles; they are having their turn as the Jews had, and the day of opportunity is limited. The visit will end in due time.

And He is not doing this with the expectation of gathering them all into His kingdom, but rather of gathering out of them "a people for His name." It is a taking out, rather than a taking in. It is an election and selection, only each one has the casting vote for himself. It is not arbitrary, but voluntary. Knowing this to be God's present plan, our work is very clear and specific. We know that He has some people in every nation whom His Providence and Spirit are preparing to accept the Gospel, and our business is to find them and bring them to Him. We cast our nets into the great sea, but we do not gather all the fish that are in the sea, and when we shall have gathered all who are willing to accept the Gospel message, this commission is ended.

Now this is an extremely encouraging and practicable plan. If we were sent to convert whole nations we might well be discouraged. The Master did not do this; the early Church did not do this; the modern Church has not done this, even in Christian lands, during the past century. We are told that the number of heathen and Mohammedans has increased two hundred millions, so that numerically we are not making

any headway in converting the whole world. Our hearts might well sink in despair, if this were our aim.

But if, on the contrary, we are seeking "the other sheep whom He must bring," there is no failure; there is no discouragement. We are gathering first fruits; He Himself will gather the full harvest. We are "sampling" the race. We are seeking and finding the "little flock," the chosen bride, the hidden ones who are to unite from every land and tribe and tongue to sing the millennial chorus that is to Welcome the coming King.

2. Not only does this give us a practicable plan, but it also gives us a powerful motive and incentive. We know that our missionary work is not in vain but, in addition to the blessing it is to bring to the souls we lead to Christ, best of all it is to bring Christ Himself back again. It puts in our hands the key to the bridal chamber and the lever that will hasten His return. What a glorious privilege. What a mighty incentive. Do we long to see Him in His glory and to meet our loved ones once more? Then we shall work with re-doubled energy to spread the Gospel, to tell the story, to evangelize the world and to "prepare the way of the Lord."

3. The hope of the Lord's coming gives us also a message to the heathen. It was Jonah's message of the God that reigned in heaven and earth, and that was coming in judgment to Nineveh, that awakened that wicked city; and it is the message of the coming judge that is most fitted to awaken a careless world. Paul says of the Thessalonian Christians that, "they turned from idols to wait for His Son from Heaven." Paul had told them He was coming and thus aroused them to prepare to meet Him. Our missionaries sometimes tell us how the native chiefs of Africa listen with awe as they proclaim to these savage men that the Great Chief is coming soon to call them to account and to reward them if they are found true to Him.

In the fourteenth chapter of Revelation we have the vision of an angel flying in the midst of heaven, saying "the everlasting Gospel" to preach to all the tribes of earth, and we are told his message was, "Fear God and keep His commandments, for the hour of His judgment has come." Does this mean that in the last days the voice of our missionaries is to be raised in solemn and authoritative announcement of the immediate coming of the Lord, and that this message is to bring conviction to the heathen and to be followed and vindicated by the glorious coming of the Lord Himself?

O let us then His coming haste! O let us end this awful waste Of souls that never die! A thousand millions still are lost, A Saviour's blood has paid the cost. O hear their dying cry!

The Master's coming draweth near, The Son of man will soon appear, His Kingdom is at hand. But ere that glorious day can be, This Gospel of the Kingdom we Must preach in every land.

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