

The Coming of Christ

by G. Campbell Morgan

The New Testament teaches that the coming of Jesus Christ is a distinct and imminent event that will be preceded by certain signs and will not be preceded by the tribulation.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:9

Topics: "The Second Coming of Christ", "Hope and Expectation"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the certainty of Christ's second coming and the hope it brings to believers, contrasting various theological views on how the Millennium will be ushered in. He highlights the threefold attitude of believers: turning from idols, serving the living God, and waiting for Christ's return, which has been largely forgotten by the Church. Morgan points out that the New Testament contains numerous references to Christ's coming, urging Christians to maintain their hope and expectation. He distinguishes between the 'coming' of Christ for His people and the 'day of the Lord,' which will follow, emphasizing the importance of living in anticipation of His return. Ultimately, he reassures that the Church's hope lies in the imminent return of the Lord, which will lead to the establishment of His Kingdom.

Transcript

ALL Christian people are looking for the Millennium. It is an integral part of Christian teaching and of the living creed of the Church of Jesus Christ, that

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun

Doth his successive journeys run.

There is no difference of opinion among evangelical Christians concerning the certainty of that great future event which constitutes the hope of the world as well as of the Church. There are varying views as to how the Millennium will be ushered in; as to how the state of blessedness, foretold by prophets, and distinctly taught by the teachers of the new dispensation, will be brought about. All Christian people believe in the second advent of Jesus Christ, but differ concerning the time of His coming, the conditions under which He will appear, and the purpose of that advent. Probably the most popular view in current theology is, that the Gospel will be carried by missionaries of the Cross into land after land, until not only all peoples have heard the glad tidings, but, by the preaching thereof, have been brought into subjection to Jesus Christ. Those who hold this view necessarily believe that His advent will be post-millennial. Let me say, in passing, that the view of the coming of Christ is only two hundred years old, theologically; for, prior to the

period indicated, it was the general belief of the Church that the Millennium would be ushered in by His advent.

We are, however, not particularly interested in theological views as held then or now; but we are intensely anxious to know what is the teaching of the New Testament about this most important subject. In the first place, then, let us examine Paul's first Letter to the Thessalonians, to which we must refer more than once:

1 Thess. i.9, 10: "For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you; and how ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven."

The words revealed the threefold attitude of every believer in Jesus Christ, in the early days of Christianity. There was, first of all, the turning to God from idols; next, the serving of the living God; and, third, the waiting for His Son from heaven. That was a declaration of the position of the believer with regard to the past, the present, and the future. He had turned from the idols of the past to God; in the then present days he was serving God; and to-morrow- the coming of the King! There was repentance, turning from idols to God; there was the consistent Christian walk through the days, serving the living God; but there was, above it all, shining upon it in beauty, the hope which maketh not ashamed-waiting for the Son from heaven.

Now, with regard to the first two of those three positions, thousands of God's people are fulfilling them, in the measure in which it is possible to do so when the third is forgotten or denied. There has been the turning from idols to God; there is the serving of the living God in daily walk; and yet, alas! alas! for years the Church has lost its hope, and has not been living as a people waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If that be the Church's true attitude, the coming of Jesus Christ must necessarily be distinctly taught in the New Testament. I do not set any very particular value upon the figures which follow, but they are interesting for passing notice. In the New Testament there are no less than three hundred and eighteen distinct references to the coming of Jesus Christ. If you divide your New Testament into verses, one in twenty-five has to do with that blessed hope of the Church. And if you take these two letters to the Thessalonians the part of the New Testament which deals specifically with this great subject--one verse in four has a direct reference to the return of the Master.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable contributions, theologically, to the discussion of this whole subject in recent years--remarkable because of the source from which it has come--is the book which Professor Denney has written upon the epistles to the Thessalonians, in the Expositor's Bible Series. He has emphatically declared that the hope of the Church in those days was most unmistakably a hope that Jesus would soon come. He says, "It was this hope which more than anything gave its color to the primitive Christianity, its unworldliness, its moral intensity, its command of the future even in this life." And again, "That attitude of expectation is the bloom, as it were, of the Christian character. Without it, there is something lacking; the Christian who does not look upward and onward wants one mark of perfection."

I feel that something must here be said about the authority of the New Testament in this connection. I was speaking a little while ago, about this great subject of the return of the Lord, to a friend of mine, one who is in the ministry, a man of undoubted culture and also of spiritual devotion. He told me he thought it was a very beautiful dream, but only a dream. "Surely," said I, "you agree with me that it is taught in the pages of

the New Testament: for instance, in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians." His reply was, "I fully grant you that when Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians he believed the next event of importance in the history of man would be the coming of Jesus Christ." I said to him, "What do you mean by saying that Paul believed it?" He replied, "If you read his letter to the Galatians, written at a much later period of his life, you will find that he makes no direct reference to this subject, and has evidently outgrown that early belief." That was to me an appalling position with regard to the inspiration of the New Testament. I said to my friend, "Then you believe that Paul's inspiration was nothing more than his own particular view of truth at a certain period in his life." "That is exactly what I believe." "Well," said I, "how do you know that, if Paul had lived ten years longer, he would not have outgrown his view of Christian liberty as declared in the letter to the Galatians?"

I submit that every epistle from the pen of Paul was called forth by the necessities of local circumstances. In writing to Thessalonica, he was seeking to correct those who had wrong views of the return of their Lord; while, in his epistle to Galatia, he dealt with Christian people who were becoming enslaved by Judaism. Every epistle had its specific bearing upon local conditions; and I absolutely deny that there was any growth, on the line of my friend's remarks, in the writings of the apostle. At the very last, when death seemed imminent, Paul still lived in the belief that his Master would come; and when he spoke ever and anon of the possibility of death, it was by no means a denial of his earlier position as manifested in his writings that the Church's hope in the coming of Jesus Christ.

The subject is so full and many-sided, one hardly knows which particular point to take in order to emphasize the fact that the next immediate event for which the Church (and the world, moreover) waits, is the return of the Lord Himself. May I ask you to read the seven parables contained in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter. xiii. They give us a sevenfold aspect of the Kingdom during this dispensation. What, then, is the general teaching of these parables? Do any or all of them imply that this dispensation is to be one in which the whole world shall be gathered into the Kingdom of God, by preaching? Careful examination affords evidence that such is not their teaching, whether we take them singly or collectively. The first four parables which deal with outward manifestations in this dispensation were spoken to the multitude, two being afterward explained to the disciples; the last three view things from a Divine standpoint, and can only be fully understood by those who are linked in life with the King, and so were spoken to the disciples alone.

Does the first parable, that of the sower, teach that, at the end of the age, all men everywhere shall be won to the Kingdom? Assuredly not. There is mixture of good and evil seed falling upon good ground, some upon secondary ground, and some upon utterly fruitless soil; so that there shall be a harvest reaped out of the world, rather than the whole world be won.

In the next parable, that of the wheat and the tares, the truth assumes another form. Here are two sowings going forward—not only the sowing of wheat, but that of tares by an enemy; and when the servants came and said to the Master, "Shall we root up the tares?" He replied, "No, let both grow together till the harvest." "The harvest is the end of the age," said Jesus to His disciples; "and at that time there shall be separation between wheat and tares!" There is no teaching there that the sowing results in all wheat; but difference in kind, mixture, and final separation, are clearly marked.

Then there is the parable of the mustard seed which became a great tree. A tree, in Scripture, is always the figure of power. Nebuchadnezzar is spoken of under that similitude, and the king of Assyria, and Pharaoh; the great dynasties and forces of the earth are represented as trees. Our Lord simply teaches

that Christendom shall become a great power and force-nothing more. I suggest, for your consideration, that the fowls of the air are emblems of evil and not of good; and that their lodging in the branches of the tree teaches the corruption of even Christendom itself.

Much stress is continually laid upon the parable of the leaven, as teaching that Christianity must gradually win the whole world to Christ. Is it probable that, when the Lord has already given utterance to three parables which distinctly teach mixture of good and evil, He should contradict the whole scheme of the first three by the fourth? The Kingdom of Heaven is not represented by leaven; we must have the whole picture if we would know what our Lord intended to teach. The woman who uses the leaven, the leaven itself, and the meal into which it is put--all the parts of the parable must be considered in order to a just view of its meaning. Leaven here, as everywhere else in Scripture, is a type not of good but of evil; and if you will carefully search your Bible, you will find that in no single instance is there variation from this principle. The symbolism of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is never self-contradictory. If any have doubts as to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, they may find in what I have just said a point of profitable intellectual study. The symbolism of Scripture, with regard to color, numbers, figures of speech, in every case displays the closest harmony. In this particular case our Lord uses leaven as a type of evil. His picture is that of the manifestation of the Kingdom as being corrupted. With every desire to avoid fanciful interpretation, my own view of the case is that the woman who mixes the leaven with the meal represents the whole system of ecclesiasticism; and I believe it will be found that no part of the Church of Jesus Christ has escaped the corrupting and evil influence of that leaven. The master does not say, "Until the whole is corrupted, but until the whole is leavened"; and thus again you have the idea of mixture apart from the ultimate triumph of either good or evil.

Our Lord now turns from the crowd and speaks three parables to the disciples alone. First, a man finds treasure hidden in a field, and straightway sells all that he has, and buys the field that he may obtain the treasure. We will take the second of these parables in conjunction with the first; for it reveals the same aspect of truth. A merchantman seeking goodly pearls, finds one of great price, sells all that he has, and buys that pearl. These men of the parable are commonly regarded as types of the sinner seeking Christ. Indeed, one of our hymns runs:

I've found the pearl of greatest price

My heart doth sing for joy.

Such an interpretation pre-supposes that a sinner can buy the field and the pearl; but this contradicts the whole scheme of redemption as made known in Jesus Christ. He who finds the treasure in the field, and discovers the pearl of great price, is Christ. How can I purchase Him, if He be the pearl and I the merchantman? What have I to sell which will procure for me any right or inheritance in the Son of God? Nothing, verily. He emptied Himself of His glory, made Himself of no reputation, and purchased us with His own blood. Ah! wonder of wonders, mysterious grace, only He can understand wherein the Church is His pearl of great price. I know nothing more calculated to humble us in the dust than His estimate of us; for, as we know and live near to Him, we are increasingly constrained to say that we are nothing worth. He graciously declares, however, that we are worthy the purchase of His precious blood. If that be the true interpretation, again we have selection from the dispensation. The buying of the field to possess the treasure, and the purchase of the pearl. He has not only bought the hidden treasure, but the field. The whole world is His by redemption price. His work is not ended in it and with it, when He has gathered out the hidden treasure. He has other things to say to the earth, other deeds to do, other victories to win; but

the gathering out of the Church is the special work of this dispensation, as revealed in the parables we have just considered.

The last parable was spoken by Christ to His workers, who were to be like fishermen flinging a great net into the sea. Is the net designed to bring all fish into a state of goodness? No, it encloses both good and bad; then, at the end of the age, separation is to be made between the two. My sketch of these seven parables fails, because of its brevity to do justice to them; and they will well repay careful and prayerful consideration. The main thought, however, to be derived from them, and which I would fain impress upon God's people, is that our age does not issue in the conquest of the world for Christ; but in the gathering out of an elect remnant, leaving for a succeeding era another Divine work full of significance and blessedness, Bearing in mind the features indicated upon our Chart as characteristic of the present dispensation, a question of supreme interest arises. In an age of mixture, progressive selection, and ultimate separation, what is the next event for which we are to look? The return of the Lord Himself.

Let us rapidly trace the character of the age as revealed by various passages of Scripture. In 1 Cor. xi. 28, we have a phrase that bounds the Table of the Lord; and, as we sometime sing,

Thus that dark betrayal night,

With the last advent we unite,

By one blest chain of loving rite--

Until He come.

The conflict of the Church and of the believer is to end at Christ's appearing, or epiphany, a word used only by Paul among New Testament writers-sometimes (as here) in reference to the coming of Christ for His people; at other times, in regard to His coming with them. How long is patience to have its perfect work? "Until the coming of the Lord" (Jas. v. 7). How long am I to serve in the King's will in this age? "Trade ye herewith till I come" (Luke xix. 13). When am I to be crowned? The apostle Paul says that he is to receive his crown at Christ's appearing-again using the word Epiphany (2 Tim. iv. 8). When shall we enjoy reunion with departed loved ones? When "the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout" (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17). Then it is that we are to be "together with them caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." What ever you think of as characteristic of Christian life and service in this age, you find to be bounded in the New Testament, never by death, always by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh that believers had not lost their bright hope of the Lord's return, while they faithlessly and continually talk of death as their portion! True, we may "fall on sleep," and no man knoweth the hour of Christ's coming, save the Father; but the one bright hope of faithful Christian hearts is ever this-the Lord Himself shall come.

In his first epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul shows that there is a most distinct difference between the hope of the Church or the coming of Christ for His people, and the day of the Lord-His coming with them. The two things, are clearly seen on our Chart, where the coming of the Lord is indicated by His descent from the heavens and the ascent of His people to meet Him in the air; but the apocalypse of Christ, or "day of the Lord," is marked by a second line which shows His coming to earth with His people.

1 Thess. iv. 16, 17: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we that are alive, that are

left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air : and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

We need not pause; no one can possibly confound that statement with the thought of death -a thing which is there abolished. It is not death to which we are to go, but to the Lord Himself. The next chapter begins:

"But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that aught be written unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night."

Here is a very distinct difference between the "coming" and the "day" of Christ. The coming of Christ is His parousia, His presence; His coming in person into the midst of His people, that He may gather them to be with Himself. "But," says the apostle, "while ye comfort one another with these words, I need not write to you of the times and seasons. For ye know that the day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night." The day of the Lord is, in one sense, begun by His coming; but it is a whole period which stretches out beyond that coming, the Millennium itself being included in the phrase. The context is against any supposition that the day of the Lord and the day of Judgment are periods of twenty-four hours. We know that the day of grace has extended over nearly nineteen hundred years; and the day of Judgment will last, at least, a thousand years. What we are waiting for, however, is the King Himself.

After the resurrection the disciples asked Jesus, "Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" and He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons." This expression, "times and seasons," is no haphazard one; but in the mouth of Jesus and from the pen of the apostle it refers to the whole providential arrangement marked out by God from beginning to end, and upon which this dispensation is an unmeasured interpolation certainly, there is no measurement for the latter in Scripture. Continual pushing on and pulling back of dates has done more than anything else to bring this blessed truth into discredit. What, then, are we to do? Comfort one another with these words-the Lord Himself shall come. The duration of this age being known only to God, all His redeemed ones are to be ever living according to the Divine will, with their eye upon its consummation-the coming of the Master.

The people of Thessalonica misinterpreted Paul's first epistle, thinking that the day of Christ had come because they were in tribulation. Paul therefore wrote a second letter wherein he corrected this error, showing how that day must be preceded by certain signs, and that the Church waiting for her Lord, will not pass through the tribulation, but will be taken from the earth before it comes. In the opening verses of chapter ii. is a further wonderfully clear and concise distinction between the "coming" and the "day" of Christ. The words themselves are more important than anything which can be said about them:

2 Thess. ii. 1-4: "Now we beseech you, brethren, touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him; to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is now present; let no men beguile you in any wise: for it will not be, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, he that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped; so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God."

Before "that day" dawns, the final apostasy (the definite article is very distinct) is to be inaugurated by the revealing of the man of sin not a system, but an individual. Paul tells us that this mystery of lawlessness doth already work; only there is one that restraineth now until he be taken out of the way." Surely, to make Rome that restraining power would be setting Satan to cast out Satan, and evil to hinder evil. No; it is the Holy Spirit of God Who is restraining and checking the individualization of lawlessness. But when the

Church shall be withdrawn from among men, the Holy Spirit will depart with it; for the Comforter, in accordance with the words of Jesus, abides with believers forever. Then shall the unchecked mystery of iniquity be manifested, and focused in one who will assume the very place of Christ in God's temple.

My aim has been to set forth Christ's coming to take His people away from the world, as the next event in history for which His Church should look. I stay but a moment to deal with a common misrepresentation of this truth. Some will say, "Then, God is beaten, inasmuch as comparatively few are being gathered into His Church." That is a very shortsighted view. God has never for a moment been defeated in the course of human history. Event has followed event in God's progressive work of redemption and regeneration, all the details of which have been necessary. The Millennium cannot be realized until the preparatory work of this dispensation has been accomplished; and this embraced not only the gathering out of the Church, but the preaching of the Gospel among all nations, and the undermining of all false institutions and evil systems of religion. Men may not realize that their passionate desire for the dawn of a golden age is excited by the preaching of the Gospel; but it is so nevertheless. All pure and holy ambition, as manifested in the attempts of thinkers to discover the secrets of true life, has sprung from the Gospel of the grace of God. The great words which today indicate the higher movements of the times, such as brotherhood, disarmament, socialism, solidarity, are the children of the living Word of God, the offspring of the Logos. Every gleam of light that is falling upon the darkness of men is a part of the essential Light.

"They me but broken lights of Thee;

And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

All dreams of a golden age have their inspiration in the Gospel of the Kingdom.

In order that this longing of humanity may be satisfied, the Church must be taken away to allow of sin working out its full and most fearful manifestation. Then shall Christ appear with His people, to destroy antichrist by the brightness of His coming and to set up His golden reign upon the earth. No other outlook can be so full of roseate views and of hope for the Church and the world, as this triumph of God's rule and the accomplishment of His purposes in the way which He hath aforetime declared.

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