

The Message of 1 Thessalonians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the second Advent of Jesus in relation to Christian experience, faith, labour, and patience.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:9

Topics: "Christian Experience", "Second Advent"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the significance of the Second Advent in the Christian experience, illustrating how it serves as the foundation for faith, inspires labor, and fosters patience among believers. He highlights that the Thessalonian Christians, despite facing persecution, found comfort and motivation in the promise of Christ's return, which reassured them of their faith and the ultimate victory over suffering. Morgan calls for a response of sanctification in personal life, love for others, and honesty in the world, urging believers to live in anticipation of Christ's return. He warns against the dangers of losing sight of this doctrine, which can lead to unbelief and spiritual indifference. Ultimately, he encourages the church to embrace the hope of the Second Advent as a catalyst for active faith and service.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching

The Relation of the Second Advent to Christian Experience.

i. The final Argument producing Faith. i. 9,10.

To God from Idols.

To Order from Disorder.

The Completion of the Mission of the Son.

ii. The abiding Confidence inspiring Labour. ii. 19.

To serve a Living and True God.

By Faith in Suffering.

The Final Rewards.

Those won--at His Coming.

iii. The ultimate Victory creating Patience. iii. 13.

Personal. The Certainty of Perfection.

Relative. With God and the World.

II. The Abiding Appeal

The Response of Christian Obedience to the Second Advent.

i. In Life. Sanctification. iv.

Personal Purity.

Love of the Brethren.

Honesty in the World.

ii. In View of Death.

The Comfort of the Bereaved.

The Joy of the Living.

iii. In View of Judgment.

Sons of Day.

Appointed to Salvation.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

i. The Light that failed.

Therefore.

Unbelief. Idols.

Indolence. Strife.

Impatience. Sin.

ii. The Light obscured.

Knowing without Doing.

Waiting without Work.

Singing without Suffering.

iii. The Light shining.

The Passion for the Kingdom.

The Service of Love.

The Optimism of Hope.

II. To the Individual

Spirit.

Soul.

Body.

Waiting.

Serving.

This letter thrills with conflicting emotions. On the one hand there are evidences of the apostle's unbounded joy and satisfaction in the work accomplished at Thessalonica. On the other hand there are equally clear evidences of his concern for the Thessalonian Christians in view of the circumstances of peril in which they lived.

The letter differs from any we have already considered; not because it was written at an earlier period in the ministry of the apostle; but because the need calling for it was different. I draw attention to this, because it has been said that this was one of the first of Paul's letters, and that when he wrote the later ones he had entirely departed from some of the positions he held when he wrote this me.

All Paul's letters were written with some very definite, immediate, and local purpose. Paul did not sit down intending to write a system of theology or to write letters for the Catholic Church; but he nevertheless did both these things in the purpose and economy of the inspiring Spirit of God, though quite unconsciously to himself at the time. He wrote to the people whom he named, and on some subject of immediate importance to them.

In all the letters we have considered so far, some great doctrine of the faith, or duty of the Church has been discussed. Here there is no definite teaching of that kind. This is not a letter stating a great doctrine of the faith. This is not a letter insisting upon some special duty of the Church. In two verses only do we find anything in the nature of definite teaching which is new; "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 " (iv. 16, 17).

In that brief paragraph we have the only passage which is of the nature of positive statement. And let us be careful even in regard to this. It is not an announcement of the fact of the second Advent. It does declare the fact, but that is not the purpose of the statement of the apostle. Neither is it a defence of the truth of the second Advent. It becomes a defence, for it is an apostolic and inspired declaration; but that is

not its purpose. It is rather a simple statement of the order of events at the Advent, made for the comfort of bereaved Christians. It must be taken in connection with that which has preceded it, beginning at the thirteenth verse; "We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep."

Having written this the apostle gave the order of events, showing that at the second Advent of Jesus those that have fallen on sleep will take precedence of those that remain. That is the purpose of the declaration. Thus, the only positive statement of truth in this letter is, after all, an incidental part of the argument.

It is nevertheless patent, alike to the casual and most critical student of this letter that the fact of the second Advent of Jesus was paramount in the mind of the writer from beginning to end. Its glory gleams on every page and shines through every argument, and was the supreme matter in all that he had to say to these Thessalonian Christians.

Let us attempt to discover the reason of this. Paul's work in Thessalonica had been characterized by the most remarkable spiritual awakening, and that in spite of peculiarly vindictive opposition and persecution, the history of which is found in the Acts of the Apostles. He came to Thessalonica and for three Sabbaths he spoke in the synagogue; then he turned to the Gentiles, and there was a marvellous awakening, followed by most vicious opposition, so that Paul was compelled to escape from Thessalonica, to Berea, to Athens, and finally to Corinth. At Corinth he was joined by Timothy, whom he had left behind, and from whom he learned of the state of his Thessalonian converts. Only a few months elapsed between his first coming to Thessalonica and the writing of this letter.

These Thessalonian Christians were firm in their loyalty to the gospel which had been declared unto them; but they were enduring suffering, persecution, and affliction for the sake of the Kingdom of God. To these people Paul wrote; and the letter therefore was one intended to comfort those who were suffering for their loyalty to that King Jesus, for preaching Whom, the apostle had been sent away. What more natural then than that His Advent of vindication and victory should be uppermost in his thought? He could best comfort them by reminding them that the unseen King to Whom they were loyal would again be manifested, and would vindicate their loyalty in the grace and glory of His second Advent.

The essential message of this letter, therefore, is that of the relation of the second Advent to Christian experience. The letter does not deal doctrinally with the Advent; it takes the fact for granted, and applies it.

It does take the fact for granted. No man can read this letter without seeing that when Paul wrote it he believed that as surely as Jesus had been seen in this world, He would be seen again; that as certainly as He had once appeared, He would appear again; that as certainly as there had been a coming to suffering, there would be a coming to sovereignty. To go back to the brief paragraph already quoted; the simplest honest reading of it can leave no doubt that the apostle referred to an actual coming of the same Jesus Who had already come. That is the force of the introductory phrase, "the Lord Himself." Why the introduction of that word "Himself" unless it be to emphasize the fact of the personal Advent of Jesus? No comment is needed. Of course, it might be pertinent for us to discuss the question whether Paul was right or wrong. My business, however, is simply to emphasize what Paul said and meant. There are those who say that he was mistaken. In that view there is necessarily involved the question of the inspiration and authority of these letters. Our attitude is that of belief in their inspiration and authority. The teaching of Paul was in harmony with that of the Lord; "Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of My words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when He cometh in His own glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels." "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." Thus Paul reaffirmed Christ's definite declaration.

The central teaching of this letter then is that of the relation of the second Advent to Christian experience. This fact of the coming of Jesus is the final argument, producing faith. This fact of the second Advent of Jesus is the abiding confidence, inspiring labour. This fact of the coming of Jesus is the ultimate victory, creating patience. In the introduction to this letter the apostle declared that he remembered without ceasing their work of faith, their labour of love, and their patience of hope. These are the facts of Christian experience. The work of faith is that act of faith by which men become Christians. Said Jesus, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He hath sent." That work of faith is followed necessarily and inevitably by the labour of love. That labour of love is maintained through all circumstances by the patience of hope. These are the three attitudes of the Christian life.

Let us carefully notice how the first three chapters end. The first ends with the words "to wait for His Son from heaven, Whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come." The second ends, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even ye, before our Lord Jesus at His coming? For ye are our glory and our joy." The third ends, "To the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."

These are all references to the Advent. The first indicates that which I have named as the first fact, the relation of the Advent to Christian experience in its beginning. The final argument producing faith is that of the coming of Jesus. They turned from idols to God to serve God and to wait for His Son. The last argument producing faith was the declaration that the One Who had come was coming again. They were to wait for Him. Think of the actual circumstances of these Thessalonians; they were living in the midst of idols that could be seen; their Lord was unseen. They were men who had been brought up in the midst of idolatry, worshipping things seen and handled, which appealed to the senses; and they turned to an unseen God. What was the last argument persuading them to do this? The fact that He would yet again be manifested; and that at His Advent there would be the vindication of faith in sight. When they turned to God from idols, they turned towards a restored order, from the disorder in the midst of which they were living; towards the establishment of the Kingdom, from the anarchy in the midst of which they had been living, from the anarchy of idolatry to the Government of God. When they did that, they did it, determining to wait for the Son. Faith acted not only upon the declaration that He has come, but that He is coming again. Faith is a venture which trusts in the first coming, and waits for the second. Thus the second Advent is the final argument producing faith.

Then, as in the power of faith they turned to their labour of love, the second Advent became their abiding confidence, inspiring that labour. They turned "to serve a living and true God." When they turned to the unseen God, having heard the declaration that the Son should be revealed again, determining to wait for the Son, they turned to serve this living and true God. The reward of service will be received when the Son returns. In order to comfort these Thessalonian Christians in the midst of their suffering, Paul spoke of his own experience; "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even ye, before our Lord Jesus at His coming?" The reward of Christian service is, in its finality and completion, postponed until the second Advent. There is a sense in which rewards come in the act of service. In the Corinthian letter the apostle deals with that phase of the truth, "Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." The reward of service is in the service, in the immediate success of service; but the great reward, the ultimate gladness, will be when those whom

we have led to Christ by patience and by perseverance and persistence, in the midst of toil and travail, are presented faultless at His coming.

As I watch this apostle on his journeys, the intrepid missionary, pressing ever on to the regions beyond, suffering perils by land and sea, from enemies and false brethren; glowing in his heart forevermore, as the inspiration of his labour of love, is that glad hour when those who are won for Christ will be presented faultless in the glory of the second Advent.

Finally, the Christian experience is made up not only of the work of faith and the labour of love, but also of the patience of hope. The ultimate victory, creating the patience, is to be won at the second Advent. "To the end He may stablish your hearts . . . before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." That conviction of the heart produces patience. Patience in this matter of personal salvation, with ourselves; not with ourselves as severed from Him, or as apart from Him ; not with ourselves as disloyal to Christ. But even when loyal to Christ we are disappointed. If we are satisfied with ourselves it is an evil thing for us spiritually. How dissatisfied with ourselves we become whenever we think of ourselves ; but at His coming He will stablish us, unblameable in holiness. Not for a moment is this to be an excuse for carelessness in Christian life, but on the contrary it is to be a perpetual inspiration, driving us towards approximation to that final perfection, lest, as John says, we be ashamed from Him at His coming. We shall be patient with ourselves if we are loyal, in proportion as our hearts are resting in the glory of the Advent. We know that then we shall be perfected.

Then also this conviction will give us patience with God. We have all experienced hours in which, because of our frailty, we have been inclined to be impatient with God ; impatient with God about the world. If we have ever come very near the world's agony, there have been moments when it has seemed as though God were doing nothing. But when we see this fact of the second Advent, and know that by a crisis in the future, as definite as the crisis in the past, God will consummate the thing that to-day is being prepared for by processes, then the heart is patient with God, and with all conditions. Here suffer a word of personal testimony. If you take away from me the doctrine of the second Advent of Christ, which is to be a crisis in human history as definite as the first, I am the most pessimistic of men. If you tell me that the work of the missionary is to convert the world by preaching, I am hopeless indeed ! But when I realize that the work of missions is to evangelize the world by the preaching of the Gospel for a witness ; and that beyond the Advent there will be a new age in which human history will be perfected; then I wait with patience for the crisis which is to come, and serve, as God helps me, in order to hasten that coming, the coming of our Lord Himself.

Thus the central teaching of the letter is of the second Advent in relation to the whole fact of Christian experience. It is the last argument producing faith. How can I turn to God? He Who came is coming! Then I will trust and wait. The fact of that Advent is the abiding confidence which inspires labour. Then shall I know the real result of my toil, and that makes me quite careless about present statistics and figures. Then the sheaves of the harvest will be garnered; the statistics of God will be published. Then the heart will know its final joy, when in the presence of Christ we see men, women, and little children, whom we have tried to help and win for Him. The fact of that coming produces the patience which is the very strength of life, for then we shall be perfected and the ways of God vindicated.

The abiding appeal of this letter is that we should respond to this great truth of the second coming of our Lord. How are we to respond? First in our own life, by sanctification. The life of sanctification is the true response to the doctrine of the second Advent. The life of sanctification is that of personal purity; love of

the brethren; and honesty in the world. That is response to the doctrine.

If we believe that He may in any day disturb us in our work, or in any night wake us from our sleep by His own voice, how pure we shall desire our personal life to be, that we may be ready; how we shall love the brethren, lest He should come and find us quarrelling; how honestly we shall live before the world.

What is the response to this fact in the presence of death? First there is comfort for the bereaved. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him." Then, what rapture and gladness, what uniting of severed friendships when partings are no more. Oh, the comfort of it. "Comfort one another with these words." This is the transfiguration of death, the abolition of death.

If there come what men call death to the child of God, then the child of God will lay down his head and sleep, knowing that when the Lord shall come, he will be awakened before those who are left; that he will be changed first, that in their transfiguration there may be perfect reunion. Yet we wait not for death, but for Him.

In view of the judgment that lies beyond death what is the response to this truth? The Advent is not a question of times and seasons; would God the Church believed that! It is the study of this Advent in connection with calendars and almanacs that has brought the whole subject into disrepute. There is a Day of God of which the ancient prophets spoke, which will be a Day of Judgment; but we are not appointed to judgment but to salvation and to deliverance from the disasters of that day.

It is my own personal and strong conviction that this truth of the second Advent is the light that has failed in the history of the Christian Church. I am sometimes inclined to think that I am a very lonely man as an expositor today in the view I take of the second Advent. I believe that the results of the loss of this doctrine to the Church are: unbelief, and return to idols; indolence, which issues in strife; and impatience, which issues in sin; the opposites of the great things which Paul describes, as the work of faith, the labour of love, and the patience of hope. The measure in which this great doctrine becomes vital and real is the measure of faith, the measure of labour, the measure of patience.

If this is the light that failed, it is also a light which was given again, and then strangely obscured during the nineteenth century. God raised up certain men of vision, and restored this great truth; but the most amazing wonder and calamity is that they have so largely obscured the light by making it the one and only fact for which they have cared anything; waiting without working; singing about the Advent, without suffering in order to hasten its coming; treating the Advent as though it were a method by which God would gather them away to everlasting rest, while He let the rest of the world drift to darkness and death. That is a lie. It is a more terrible heresy than to forget the Advent. Belief in the second Advent of Jesus should be the inspiration of all things that are of service and sacrifice.

Paul ended his letter by the prayer, "The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly: and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, Who will also do it." The sanctification of the spirit, soul, and body, consists in that waiting for Jesus which is the waiting of unceasing service; not in gazing at the stars, not in attempting to decipher hieroglyphics, not in fatuous endeavours to fix a date.

With that music of the second Advent in our souls, with the assurance in our hearts that He Who came will come; we will wait and watch, while we love and labour. Thus waiting, the time will soon pass, and we

shall see Him and be like Him.

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