1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Charles Stanley

Some Papers on the Second Coming of Christ and on Prophecy, Part 6 - Questions of Interest Relating to the Coming of Christ and His Reign on Earth

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Is there any certainty in the study of prophecy, and in looking for the coming of the Lord? Various periods seem marked out by “weeks” and “days,” and some mysteriously, as “time, times, and a half”; and these have set many to foretell the time of the coming of the Lord, calculations which have again and again proved erroneous: the periods passed and the Lord did not return. Now, seeing that the scripture gives the materials by which to foretell the date (however man may have failed in interpreting them) how can this agree with our habitual looking for the Lord’s return?”

This question shows clearly the need of seeing that all Scripture is from God, and that all prophecy is connected, one part dove-tailing into another, if such an expression be allowable. It was never intended by God that any part of prophecy should explain itself irrespective of what is revealed in other places. “No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20-21). We need to understand in some measure at least the general scope of prophecy before we can grasp the meaning of any part. It may be compared to a dissecting map: each piece must be placed in its right place, or there can be no complete map; and one piece misplaced may throw the whole into disorder.

Most of the prophecies, whether they are found in the Old or the New Testament, are concerning God’s ancient people, the Jews, and are connected with the earth. Many do not see this, and apply these prophecies to the church, and this throws all into confusion.

Another constant source of error is that Christians do not recognize that the church holds a peculiar place in Scripture. If what God calls “the church” did not commence until Pentecost — and this seems plain from Scripture — and will be complete when the Lord Himself shall come to fetch it (1 Thess. 4:15-18), it is easy to see that as there were “saints” on earth before the church was commenced (Old Testament saints), so there may be saints on earth after the church is taken to glory (Rev. 13:7).

Another popular error is the not keeping the prophecies that refer to the Jews perfectly distinct from any that refer to the Gentiles and to the church. “Spiritualizing” (as it is falsely called) the prophecies respecting Israel so as to apply them to the church is also a sure means of preventing their being understood.

A right interpretation of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:25-27 will throw great light upon the questions asked. Without entering at all fully into the prophecy, it may just be pointed out that sixty-nine weeks are kept separate from the seventieth week. If the weeks are weeks of years, and the sixty-nine weeks refer to 483 years, and they began when the command went forth to build Jerusalem (not the temple) in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1); and if the true date of this is B.C. 455 (the date given by Usher, Hengstenberg and others), it would bring the cutting off of Messiah to about A.D. 29, and this is believed by many to be the true date of the crucifixion.

This leaves the last week unaccounted for. The prophecy relates to the Jews, and there is not anything in their past history that answers to some prince making a covenant with them for one week (seven years), so that it is evident that this last week is yet future when the Jew, according to many prophecies, will be again gathered to their own land, and then the prophecy will be resumed.

Now if this is so, its importance to us is that it shows the church comes in as a sort of parenthesis, and has nothing to do with these weeks: it was begun after the end of the sixty-nine weeks, and (as seen by other scriptures) will be taken to glory before the last week begins. So that we can have no place whatever in this prophecy.

It will also show that we have no part in other prophecies where dates are referred to. Thus Daniel 9:27, when speaking of the last week, also refers to “the midst of the week,” thus dividing it into two halves. Now this agrees with Daniel 7:25, where the oppressor is spoken of as wearing out the saints of the Most High, for “a time, times, and the dividing of times”; and this well agrees with the latter half of the last week, three and a half years. This last half of the week is also referred to in Revelation 12:14 as “a time, and times, and half a time,” when the woman (Israel) is nourished from the face of the serpent.

The desire to know the time when our Lord will return for His saints does not evince a healthy state of soul, but rather the reverse. If we knew that it was yet future, we could then say, “My Lord delayeth His coming” (Luke 12:25), and be careless and indifferent as to being ready when He should come.

It is declared that “the secret things belong unto the Lord our God”; and it is but a morbid curiosity that desires to pry into what is not revealed, and is often accompanied by neglect of what is plainly revealed. The apostle warns us against being beguiled of our reward by intruding into things we have not seen (Col. 2:13).

With some the effort to discover when the Lord will return may be mere curiosity, but in others it arises from their dwelling upon one or more subjects of prophecy to the neglect of others, and, as we have said, in their not seeing the unique place of the church. The whole area of prophecy concerning the coming glory of the Lord Jesus on earth, and the return of the Jews to their own land in great blessing, after sore tribulation, is all complete in itself, without touching the question of the church, and the special hope set before the saints of this present dispensation.

Thus it is clear that many (and we may say all) of the dates referred to in Scripture do not in any way apply to the time the church is on the earth, nor to the event of the coming of the Lord. Indeed, all those teachers referred to as calculating the time when our Lord would come may well have spared their labors; for our Lord, when the disciples, after His resurrection, asked Him, “Wilt Thou at this time restore again the

kingdom to Israel?" And He said unto them, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power" (Acts 1:6-7). Now mark, it does not say that the times are contained in the prophecies, and if they would search there, they would find them, as we might suppose by the many who have devoted their labors to find the date of our Lord's return. How is it that such do not heed the words, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons?" The Father has them in His own authority.

It is therefore not true that the Scripture gives the material by which to tell the date of our Lord's return. As we have seen, it is expressly said we are not to know the times; and again and again in the gospels has the exhortation to watch, been based on the fact that the time is not known. Thus after the parable of the wise and foolish virgins we read, Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh (Matthew 25:13). Again, "Watch ye therefore; for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning; lest coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch" (Mark 12:35-37). This is the true attitude of the Christian — watching and waiting for the Lord, without any desire to know when He will come. The expectation is conducive to a healthy condition of soul: to be always ready, with an earnest desire to be with the Lord and like Him forever. It is a glorious hope for all His saints.

Some Papers on the Second Coming of Christ and on Prophecy, Part 7 - Questions of Interest Relating to the Coming of Christ and His Reign on Earth

"If the proper attitude of the Christian is to be at all times expecting the return of his Lord, when did this attitude commence? Paul is said to have completed the scripture as to doctrine (Col. 1:25-26), though he was not necessarily the last who wrote. Did Paul expect the coming of the Lord? Apparently John was the last who wrote any part of the New Testament: Did he expect the coming of the Lord? If the apostles thus expected the Lord, how is it that God begot a hope in them which HE knew would not be realized? And how is it that the hope of Christ's coming was not handed down in the church along with all the commonly received truths of Christianity? We find little or nothing of it until about sixty years ago."

It should be borne in mind, that whether we are personally expecting the return of our Lord or not, it is plainly revealed in scripture that He will surely come again. While those who saw Him ascend from this earth were looking up into heaven, it was said, "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" (Acts 1:11). That the Lord Jesus will bodily come again to this earth, is, we take for granted, commonly believed by all Christians. The simple question at issue is, ought we to be watching and waiting His return, or shall we be expecting other events to happen, and not His return at present? If the latter, what are the events? and where are we told to be watching for them?

To ask these questions seems almost to answer them, for passage after passage occurs to the mind which tell us that we are to expect our Lord. Indeed, before He suffered He began to teach that this should be our attitude. Listen to what He says: "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord, when he cometh, shall find watching" (Luke 12:35-37). Can words be plainer? And if a servant should say in his heart (though he might not express it in words), "My lord delayeth his coming," his portion would be with the unbelievers!

It is a solemn thing, therefore, to be putting off the coming of the Lord, and to say that He delayeth His coming; for here this is associated with dissolute living. On the other hand, it is declared that those who cherish the hope of His coming, and the being with Him and like Him forever, purify themselves, even as He is pure (1 John 3:3).

It is remarkable that the first allusion to the return of our Lord, after His ascension, was made to the Jews. In grace, they were again exhorted to repent, and be converted, for the blotting out of their sins, that God might send Jesus Christ, whom heaven had received (Acts 3:19). Alas, they repented not; but, as we know, the casting of them away was salvation to the Gentiles.

The first epistle that was written, was by Paul to the Thessalonians, and it is in this very epistle that those saints are commended who waited for God's Son from heaven. And it is there also, that Paul speaks by the word of the Lord — a special revelation — of the sleeping saints and the living ones being caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:15-18).

Thus we see this blessed hope was taught by our Lord when He was on earth, and was more fully explained after His ascension in the very first epistle that was written. That Paul expected the Lord is quite clear: notice how he says, in the above passage, "We which are alive and remain"; he does not say, "they," as if referring to those who would be alive in some future period. Again, he showed the church a mystery, and said, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51).

As "the hope" was fully revealed in the epistle that was written first, so the last book in the New Testament (and perhaps the last written) also names it again and again, and closes the whole word of God with this self-same thing: "Surely I come quickly." To which is responded, "Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." There cannot be a question that the return of the Lord Jesus was the common hope held by the church in the days of the apostles. Peter did say that he was shortly going to put off his tabernacle; but how did he know that? He tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ had showed it to him (2 Peter 1:11). So we see that an apostle did not know that he would die and not be alive when the Lord returned, except by a special revelation. Paul also, when he had finished his course, and was a prisoner, was able to say, "The time of my departure is at hand."

It is not right to say that God sets before the saints a hope that will not be realized. It has been sometimes stated that we are to expect the Lord in our lifetime; but Scripture never states it thus. As we have seen, the Lord Himself taught His disciples that they were to be looking for His return: this was to be the habit of their mind; they were not to look forward for death as their hope, but life and glory by the return of the Lord Himself. And should they fall asleep, that would not destroy their hope: it would be realized just the same: at the coming of the Lord "the dead in Christ shall rise first," and their hope will then be realized. Let us remember that the Lord Himself is waiting. He became man, and suffered the shameful death of the cross: He is now exalted, and is ready to come forth to receive His saints, and also ready to judge the quick and the dead. But He waits for the moment when the last one forming the church shall be gathered in, and for the Father's time to arrive,

which He keeps in His own authority. The living believers and the dead in Christ also wait that moment.

That the hope of the coming of the Lord, and many truths held in the early church, were soon lost sight of, or were given up, in no way disparages what is taught in the word of God. See how almost entirely the knowledge of the doctrine of justification by faith had died out before the time of the reformation, but what Christian thinks of calling it in question on that account? We believe that there are glimpses of the coming of the Lord as a hope being held at various times in the earlier history of the church, though they may have been very faint. But supposing that it was quite lost sight of, does not this rather agree with the description in the parable of the ten virgins? They went forth to meet the bridegroom; but they all slumbered and slept — the wise as well as the foolish, and slept until the cry was raised, “Behold the bridegroom cometh: go ye out to meet him.” Happy those who have heard the cry, and have gone forth in spirit to meet their Lord, and who are still watching and waiting for that blessed moment that will bring them to the Lord they love. Because He tarries, the tendency is to sleep again. May the Lord brighten the hope in the hearts of all His beloved people. He will soon be here.

Holiness and the Second Coming of Christ, Holiness and the Second Coming of Christ: No. 3

We will now turn to 1 Thess. 1:9, 10. The gospel, as preached by Paul for three weeks, had the most blessed effect in this Gentile city. (See Acts 17) He could now say," how ye 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." Holiness is a nature separate from all evil. Such was Jesus here below. Such were the effects of the gospel, and such the connection with the coming of Jesus from heaven. They were born of God, had the divine nature, turned to God from all the evil and iniquity of idolatry. From all false gods they were separated, to serve, in this new nature imparted to them, the living and true God. This is holiness. Turned to God from all evil, the eye lifted up to heaven, waiting for His Son. No other hope or expectation; as Paul says, further on, " For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (Chap. 2:19.)

What a test of true holiness—holy separation from all evil—waiting for Jesus from heaven. Now if this were more the condition of our souls, should we not shrink from anything unsuited to Christ? Could we be waiting for Him from heaven at the concert, the shows, the bazaars, and amidst the follies of Christendom? How separating that blessed hope! Would it make any practical change in your behavior, if really waiting every day for Jesus, if your eyes and ears were fixed upwards, and you heard Him say, " Surely I come quickly”? Do not talk of holiness, if you are saying in your heart, " My Lord delayeth his coming." Do you believe the gospel which they believed when they heard it, that Jesus must needs suffer, and rise again, and that this Jesus is the Christ? Has His precious blood washed you whiter than snow, and fitted you for His presence in light? Are you ready to meet Him? Are you expecting Him—waiting for Him? Lord, grant us more of this practical holiness. Yes, Thou art coming quickly, who loved me, and gave Thyself for me!

Soon we shall meet the Son from heaven, even Jesus. Being holy by calling and the new birth, we long for that moment when we shall be unblameable in holiness before God. And the more power this hope has in our souls, the more we love one another. "And 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.”

This is the blessed state of spotless purity of all believers at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We may see and mourn over many failures in ourselves, and in one another, now; but the more we think of that unblameable holiness in which we shall all eternally share at His coming, the more we shall love one another. Does it not make us long for His coming? How intimately, then, are connected holiness and the coming of the Lord! If we are holy by new birth, holy by calling, and about to be with Him unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father—yes, before God, even our Father—what motives are these for holiness of life now! Surely nothing can be more sanctifying, then, as to practical walk, than the coming of the Lord. When He shall be manifested, we shall be manifested with Him in glory, unblameable in holiness.

We will now notice, in these epistles to the young assembly of the Thessalonians, two very distinct aspects, or events, in the coming of the Lord. First, His coming for believers; and, secondly, His coming with them in judgment; and the practical application of both. However much it may have been overlooked, yet, it is certain they will come with Him. "At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (Chap. 3:13) " Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." (Chap. 4:14.) But, before this can take place, He first comes for them. “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive, and remain, unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them which are asleep. 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 which are alive, and remain, shall be caught up, together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord." (Chap. 4:15-17.) What comfort and rich consolation as to those that are asleep! We shall not be changed in a moment, and taken to meet the Lord, and leave the bodies of the saints in the grave; no, they shall rise first at that assembling shout. Then we shall be changed, and caught up with them, to meet the Lord in the air. " Wherefore comfort [or, encourage] one another with these words." What motives to encourage each other in holiness—separation from all the abounding evil! We know not the moment; it may be before we lay down this paper. It is the next event to faith. No one can show us a single thing that must take place before this event. Just think: this day we may be, with all the saints, caught up to meet the Lord. The more our souls dwell in faith on this, the more shall we seek holy separation from the world, which is hasting fast to judgment.

2nd. After this the Spirit brings before us a very different part of the subject—the day of the Lord. "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape," &c. (Chap. 5:2-8.) Yes, we learn from the lips of Jesus, that these shall be taken with as great surprise as the inhabitants of Sodom. " The same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed;” or, " as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man." (Luke 17—read 24-30.) Yes, this is the certain doom of this deceived world, with all its politics, religiousness, and iniquity.

What a voice there is in all this to the Christian! a But ye, 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.” You will notice, that every precious precept that follows is based upon, and connected with, these solemn truths, however much they have been disregarded for centuries. See how the apostle sums them up,

and connects them with the coming of the Lord. "Abstain from all appearance of evil. And 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." (Chap, v. 22, 23.) Yes, if, in our inmost souls, we are expecting the coming of the Lord Jesus, surely we shall wish to abstain from all appearance of evil. We shall long, individually, to be wholly separated from evil of every kind, whether sensual, intellectual, or ecclesiastical. The very God of peace sanctify you wholly. This is evidently practical separation from all evil. This is very different from self-righteous pretensions to sanctification in the flesh. Such persons never pray to be separated wholly from all evil, but will generally mix with ecclesiastical evil, without a desire to be wholly separated from it.

But if the coming of the Lord be distinctly our blessed hope, and we really believe, further, that the Lord is about to come in judgment on a sleeping world, we shall pray, for ourselves and for others, to be found in all things well-pleasing unto Him, acceptable to Him, when He comes. And^ so far from self-righteous pride, there will be deep, humble dependence on God: " and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of OUR Lord.” Yes, it is our Lord that is coming. We do not, then, need and desire merely to be preserved from outward gross sins of the body, but we need preserving in our inmost springs of thought and desires. Yes, waiting for Jesus, may the meditation of our hearts, and the answer of our lips, be alike acceptable to Him, whose face in glory we shall soon see.

The apostle says elsewhere, " Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." Blessed as it is for us, sanctifying as it is to us, who believe God, to dwell on the coming of Christ to take us in one moment away from this scene, to be forever with the Lord; yet we feel it is due to all classes of men—especially unconverted professors—to dwell a little more fully on the terrors of the Lord at His coming to them; indeed, we shall find this to be largely brought out in the next epistle (2 Thess. 2). The Lord keep us from mere intellectual or reasoning occupancy with these subjects. Whether He speaks in the whispers of His love, or with the voice of thunder, may the people of God be awakened from their long, long slumber! Jesus said, " While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept." Lord, let the midnight cry be heard—" Behold, (he bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him."

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