2 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Charles Henry Mackintosh

Papers on the Lord's Coming, the Coming" and "the Day

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We must now ask the reader to turn with us for a little to the two Epistles to the Thessalonians. As we have already remarked, these Christians were converted to the blessed hope of the Lord's return. They were taught to look for Him day by day. It was not merely the doctrine of the advent received and held in the mind, but a divine Person constantly expected by hearts that had learnt to love Him and long for His coming.

But, as we can easily imagine, the Thessalonian Christians were ignorant of many things connected with this blessed hope. The apostle had been "taken from them for a short time, in presence, not in heart." He had not been allowed to remain long enough amongst them to instruct them in the details of the subject of their hope. They knew that Jesus was to return—that self-same blessed One who had graciously delivered them from the wrath to come. But as to any distinction between His coming for His people and coming with them—between His "state of presence" and His "appearing" His "coming" and His "day," they were, at first, wholly ignorant.

Hence, as might be expected, they fell into various errors and mistakes. It is amazing how speedily the human mind wanders away into the wildest and grossest confusion and error. We need to be guarded on all sides by the pure, solid, all-adjusting truth of God. We must have our souls evenly balanced by divine revelation, else we are sure to plunge into all manner of false and foolish notions. Thus some of the Thessalonians conceived the idea of giving up their honest callings. They ceased to labour with their hands, and went about idle.

This was a great mistake. Even though we were perfectly certain that our Lord would come this very night, it would be no reason why we should not, most diligently and faithfully, attend to our daily round of duty, and do all that devolved upon us in that particular sphere in which His good hand has placed us. So far from this, the very fact of expecting the blessed Master would strengthen our desire to have everything done as it ought to be up to the very moment of His return, so that not so much as a single righteous claim should be left neglected. In point of fact, the hope of the Lord's speedy return, when held in power in the soul, is most sanctifying, purifying, and adjusting in its influence upon Christian life, conduct, and character. We know, alas! that even this most glorious truth may be held in the region of the understanding, and flippantly professed with the lips, while the heart and the life, the course, conduct, and character, remain wholly unaffected by it. But we are expressly taught by the inspired Apostle John, that "every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). And, most surely, this "purifying" embraces all that which goes to make up our whole practical life, from day to day.

But there was another grave mistake into which those dear Thessalonians fell, and out of which the blessed apostle, like a true and faithful pastor, sought to recover them. They imagined that their departed Christian friends would not have part in the joy of the Lord's return. They feared that they would fail to participate in that blissful and longed-for moment.

Now while it is quite true that this very mistake proves how vividly these Christians realized their blessed hope, still it was a mistake, and needed to be corrected. But let us carefully note the correction: "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus [or are laid to sleep by Jesus] will God bring with Him."

Mark this. He does not seek to comfort these sorrowing friends by the assurance that they should, ere long, follow the departed. Quite the reverse. He assures them that Jesus would bring the departed back with Him. This is plain and distinct, and founded upon the great fact that "Jesus died for us and rose again."

But the apostle does not stop here, but goes on to pour a flood of fresh light upon the understanding of His dear children in the faith. "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 [or precede] 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 [that is, before the living are changed]. 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. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Here, then, we have presented to us what is commonly spoken of amongst us as the rapture of the saints—a most glorious, soul-stirring, and enrapturing theme—surely the brightest hope of the Church of God, and of the individual believer.

The Lord Himself shall descend from Heaven with a summons designed only for the ears and the hearts of His own. Not one uncircumcised ear shall hear—not one un-renewed heart be moved by, that heavenly voice, that divine trumpet call. The dead in Christ, including, as we believe, the Old Testament saints, as well as those of the New, who shall have departed in the faith of Christ—all those shall hear the blessed sound, and come forth from their sleeping places. All the living saints shall hear it, and be changed in a moment. And oh! what a change! The poor crumbling tabernacle of clay exchanged for a glorified body, like unto the body of Jesus.

Look at yonder bent and withered frame—that body racked with pain, and worn out with years of acute suffering. It is the body of a saint. How humiliating to see it like that! Yes; but wait a little. Let but the trumpet sound, and in one moment that poor crushed and withered frame shall be changed, and made like to the glorified body of the descending Lord.

And there, in yonder mental hospital, is a poor patient. He has been there for years. He is a saint of God. How mysterious! True; we cannot fathom the mystery; it lies beyond our present narrow range. But so it is; that poor patient is a saint of God, an heir of glory. He too shall hear the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, and leave his illness behind him for ever, while he mounts into the heavens, in his glorified

body, to meet his descending Lord.

Oh! what a brilliant moment! How many sick beds shall be vacant then! What marvelous changes shall then take place! How the heart bounds at the thought, and longs to sing, in full chorus, that lovely hymn,

Amen and amen!

How glorious the thought of those "rising millions"! How truly delightful to be amongst them! How precious the hope of seeing that blessed One who loveth us and who gave Himself for us! Such is the hope of the Christian, a hope concerning which there is not a single line from cover to cover of the Old Testament. "The word of prophecy" is of all importance. We do well to take heed to it. It is an unspeakable mercy for those who find themselves in a dark place to have a bright lamp to cast its light athwart the gloom. But let the Christian bear in mind that what he wants is to have "the day star arising in his heart"; in other words, to have his whole heart governed by the hope of seeing Jesus as the bright and morning Star. When the heart is thus filled and ruled by the proper Christian hope, then the eye can intelligently scan the prophetic chart: it can take in the whole field of prophecy as our God has graciously opened it before us, and find interest and profit in every page and in every line. But, on the other hand, we may rest assured that the man who looks into prophecy in order to find the Church or its hope there has his face turned the wrong way. He will find "the Jew" there, and "Gentile" there, but not "the Church of God." We earnestly trust that not one of our readers will fail to lay hold of this fact—a fact, we may safely say, of the very deepest moment.

But it will perhaps be asked, "Of what use, then, is prophecy? If indeed it be true that we cannot find aught about the Church on the prophetic page, of what possible use can it be to Christians? Why should we be told to take heed to it if it does not immediately concern us?" We reply, Is nothing of any value to us save what immediately concerns ourselves? Shall we take no interest in anything unless we ourselves form the immediate subject thereof? Is it nothing to us to have the counsels and purposes and plans of God laid open before us? Do we lightly esteem the high favor of having the thoughts of God communicated to us in His holy Word of prophecy? Surely it was not thus that Abraham treated the divine communications made to him in Genesis 18: "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?" And what was that thing? Did it immediately concern Abraham? Not at all. It concerned Sodom and the neighboring cities, and Abraham had no stake in them. But did that prevent his interest in the divine communication? Did it hinder his appreciation of the mark of special favor in his being made the honored and trusted depository of the thoughts of God? Surely not. We may safely assert that the faithful patriarch highly esteemed the privilege conferred upon him.

And so should we. We should study prophecy with all the interest arising from the fact that therein we have unfolded to us, with divine precision, what God is about to do on this earth with Israel and with the nations. Prophecy is God's history of the future; and just in proportion as we love Him shall we delight to study His history; not indeed, as some have said, that we may know its truth by its fulfilment, but that we may possess all that absolute, that divine certainty as to the future which God's Word is capable of imparting. Nothing can be more absurd, in the judgment of faith, than to suppose that we must wait until the accomplishment of a prophecy to know that it is true. What an insult offered—unwittingly, no doubt—to the peerless revelation of our God.

But we must now turn, for a moment, to the solemn subject of "the day of the Lord." This is a term of frequent occurrence in Old Testament Scriptures. We cannot attempt to quote all the passages; but we shall refer to one or two, and then the reader can follow up the subject for himself.

In Isaiah 2 we read, "For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up, and he shall be brought low. . . . And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty, when He ariseth to shake terribly the earth."

So also in Joel 2. "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand. A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains; a great people and a strong; there has not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations . . . the earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble; the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining . . . for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?"

From these and similar passages, we learn that "the day of the Lord" stands associated with the deeply solemn thought of judgment upon the world—upon apostate Israel—upon man and his ways—upon all that which the human heart prizes and longs after. In short, the day of the Lord stands in striking contrast with man's day. Man has the upper hand now, the Lord will have the upper hand then.

Now, while it is perfectly true that all the Lord's people can rejoice in the prospect of that day, which, though it will open in judgment upon the world, shall, nevertheless, be marked by the universal reign of righteousness; yet we must remember that the peculiar hope of the Christian is not that day with its awful accompaniments of judgment, wrath, and terror; but the coming or presence of Jesus, with its precious accompaniments of peace and joy, love and glory. The Church shall have met her Lord, and returned with Him to the Father's house, before that terrible day bursts upon the world. It will be her blissful portion to taste the sublime communion of that heavenly home, for an indefinite period previous to the opening of the day of the Lord. Her eyes shall be gladdened by the sight of "the bright and morning Star," long before even "the Sun of righteousness" shall arise, in healing virtue, upon the pious portion of the nation of Israel—the God-fearing remnant of the seed of Abraham.

We are intensely anxious that the Christian reader should thoroughly enter into this grand and important distinction. We feel persuaded that it will have an immense effect upon all his thoughts and views and hopes of the future. It will enable him to see, without a single intervening cloud, his true prospect as a Christian. It will deliver him from all mist, vagueness, and confusion; and further, it will divest his mind of all that feeling of dread with which so many even of the Lord's dear people contemplate the future. It will teach him to look for the Savior—the blessed Bridegroom —the everlasting Lover of his soul, and not for judgments and terror, eclipses and earthquakes, convulsions and revolutions, it will keep his spirit tranquil and happy, in the sure and certain hope of being with Jesus, ere that great and terrible day of the Lord come.

See how the faithful apostle laboured to lead his dear Thessalonian converts into the clear understanding of the difference between "the coming" and "the day."

"But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they [not ye] shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day; we are not of the night, nor of darkness"—The Lord be praised!—"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that are drunken, are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep [that is, are dead or alive] we should live together with Him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together and edify one another, even as also ye do"
(1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

Here we have the distinction set forth with unmistakable clearness. The Lord Himself shall come for us as the Bridegroom. The day of the Lord shall come upon the world as a thief. Is it possible for contrast to be more striking? How can any one confound these two things? They are as distinct as any two things can be. A bridegroom and a thief are surely two different things; and just as different are the coming of the Lord for His waiting people and the coming of His day upon a slumbering or intoxicated world.

Some perhaps may find a difficulty in the fact that the Church in Sardis is addressed in such solemn words as these, "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Rev. 3:3). The difficulty will vanish when we reflect that, in the case of Sardis, the professing body is looked upon as having a mere name to live while dead. It has sunk to the level of the world, and can only see things from the world's standpoint. The Church has failed utterly; it has fallen from its high and holy position; it is under judgment; it cannot therefore be cheered by the Church's proper hope; but is threatened by the world's terrible doom. We do not see the Church here as the body or bride of Christ, but as the responsible witness for God on the earth—the golden candlestick which ought to have held forth the divine light of testimony in this dark world, in the absence of her Lord. But alas! the professing Church has sunk lower and become darker than even the world itself. Hence the solemn threatening. The exception confirms the rule.

We shall proceed with this subject as presented in 2 Thessalonians.

It is a fact full of the richest comfort and consolation to the heart of a true believer, that our God, in His marvelous grace, ever makes the eater to yield meat, and the strong, sweetness. He brings light out of darkness, life out of death, and causes the bright beams of His glory to shine amid the most disastrous ruin caused by the enemy's hand. The truth of this is illustrated throughout the Scriptures, and it should fill our hearts with peace and our mouths with praise.

Hence it is that the varied doctrinal errors and practical evils, into which the early Christians were permitted to fall, have been overruled of God, and used for the instruction, guidance, and solid profit of the Church to the close of her earthly history.

Thus, for example, the error of the Thessalonian Christians in reference to their departed brethren was made the occasion of pouring such a flood of divine light upon the Lord's coming, and upon the rapture of the saints, that it is impossible for any simple mind that bows to Scripture ever to fall into a similar mistake. They looked for the Lord to come, and in that they were right. They expected Him to set up His kingdom on the earth, and in that they were right, as to the broad fact.

But they made a great mistake in leaving out the heavenly side of this glorious hope. Their intelligence was defective—their faith lacking. They did not see the two parts—the double bearing of the advent of Christ—His descent into the air to receive His people to Himself, and His appearing in glory to set up His kingdom in manifested power. Hence they feared that their departed brethren would necessarily be absent from the sphere of blessing—the circle of glory. This mistake is divinely corrected, as we have seen, in the First Epistle, chapter 4. The heavenly side of the hope—the Christian's proper portion—is placed before the heart as the true corrective for the error in reference to the sleeping saints. Christ will gather all (and not merely part of) His people to Himself; and if there is to be any advantage—a shade of difference in the matter—it will be on the side of those very people about whom they were mourning. "The dead in Christ shall rise first."

But from the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians we learn that those dear young converts had been led into another grave error—an error, not as to the dead, but as to the living—a mistake, not respecting "the coming," but respecting "the day of the Lord." In the one case they feared that the dead would not participate in the blissful triumph of "the coming"; and in the other case they feared that the living were actually, at the very moment, involved in the terrors of the day.

Such is the mistake with which the inspired apostle deals in his second letter to the Thessalonian believers; and nothing can exceed the tenderness and delicacy, and yet withal the wisdom and faithfulness of his dealing.

The Christians at Thessalonica were passing through intense persecution and tribulation; and it is very evident that the enemy, by means of false teachers, sought to upset their minds, by leading them to think that "the great and terrible day of the Lord" had actually arrived, and that the troubles through which they were passing were the accompaniments of that day. If this were so the entire teaching of the apostle was proved false; for if there was one truth that shone forth more brightly and prominently in his teaching than another, it was the association and identification of believers with Christ—an association so intimate, an identification so close, that it was impossible for Christ to appear in glory without His people. "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory." But He must appear in order to introduce "the day."

Furthermore, when the day of the Lord does actually arrive it will not be to trouble His people, but, on the contrary, to trouble their persecutors. Of this the apostle reminds them, in the most simple, forcible manner, in his very opening lines: "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth, so that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure; which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; and to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven and with His mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not

God [Gentiles], and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ [Jews]" (2 Thess. 1:6-8).

Thus, not only was the Christian position involved in this matter, but the very glory of God—His actual righteousness. If, indeed, the day of the Lord brought tribulation to Christians, then was there no truth in the doctrine—the grand prominent doctrine of Paul's teaching—that Christ and His people are one; and moreover it would impugn the righteousness of God. In short, then, if Christians were in tribulation, it was morally impossible that the day of the Lord could have set in, for when that day comes, it will be rest for believers, as their public recompense, in the kingdom—not merely in the Father's house; which is not the point here. The tables will be completely turned. The Church will be in rest, the Church's troublers in tribulation. During man's day, the Church is called to tribulation; but in the day of the Lord all will be reversed.

Note this carefully. It is not the question of Christians suffering tribulation. They are actually called to it in this world, so long as wickedness has the upper hand. Christ suffered, and so must they. But the point we want to fasten upon the mind and heart of the Christian is that, when Christ comes to set up His kingdom, it is utterly impossible that His people can be in trouble. Thus the entire teaching of the enemy, by which he sought to upset the Thessalonian believers, was proved to be utterly fallacious. The apostle sweeps away the very foundation of the whole fabric by the simple statement of the precious truth of God. This is the divine way of delivering people from false notions and vain fears. Give them the truth, and error must flee before it. Let in the sunshine of God's eternal Word, and all the mists and clouds of false doctrine must be rolled away.

Let us, for a moment, examine the further teaching of our apostle, in this remarkable writing. In so doing, we shall see how thoroughly he establishes the distinction between "the coming" and "the day"—a distinction which the reader will do well to ponder.

"Now we beseech you, brethren, by [or on the ground of] the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter, as from us, as that the day of the Lord is present."1

Now apart altogether from the question of various readings, a moment's reflection will suffice to show the simple minded Christian that the apostle could not possibly mean to teach the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord was not, even then, at hand. Scripture can never contradict itself. No one sentence of divine revelation can possibly collide with another. But if the reading given in our excellent Authorized Version were correct, it would stand in direct opposition to Romans 13:12, where we are plainly and expressly told that "the day is at hand." What "day"? The day of the Lord, most surely, which is always the term used in connection with our individual responsibility in walk and service.

This, we may remark in passing, is a point of much interest and practical value. If the reader will take the trouble to examine the various passages in which "the day" is spoken of, he will find that they have reference, more or less, to the question of work, service or responsibility. For instance, "That ye may be blameless [not at the coming, but] in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:8). Again, "Every man's work shall be made manifest, for the day shall declare it" (1 Cor. 3:13). "Without offence till the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:10). "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:8).

From all these passages, and many more which might be adduced, we learn that "the day of the Lord" will be the grand time for reckoning with the workers; for the divine appraisal of service; for the setting of all questions of personal.

PAGES 54 AND 55 ARE MISSING

Even him whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (verses 3-10) .

Here, then, we are taught that ere the day of the Lord arrives, the lawless one, the man of sin, the son of perdition, must be revealed. The mystery of iniquity must rise to a head. Man shall set himself up in open opposition to God, nay, shall even assume to himself the name and the worship of God. All this has to be developed on the earth before that great and terrible day of the Lord shall burst in judgment upon the scene. For the present there is a barrier, a hindrance to the manifestation of this awful personage. We are not told here what this barrier or hindrance is. God may vary it at different times.2 But we learn, most distinctly, from the book of Revelation that ere the mystery of iniquity culminates in the person of the man of sin, the Church shall have been removed from this scene altogether. It is impossible to read, with an enlightened eye, Revelation 4, 5 and not see that the Church shall be in the very innermost circle of heavenly glory ere a single seal is opened, a single trumpet sounded, a single vial poured out. We do not believe that any one can understand the book of the Apocalypse who does not see this.

We may have occasion to go more freely into this profoundly interesting point by-and-by. We can only now entreat the reader to study the subject for himself. Let him ponder Revelation 4, 5, and ask God to interpret their precious contents to his soul. In this way we feel persuaded that he will learn that the twenty-four crowned elders set forth the heavenly saints, who shall be gathered round the Lamb, in glory, before a single line of the prophetic portion of the book is fulfilled.

We should like to put a very plain question to the reader—a question which can only be answered rightly in the immediate presence of God. It is this, What is it you are looking for? What is your hope? Are you looking forward to certain events which are to transpire on this earth, such as the revival of the Roman Empire, the development of the ten kingdoms; the gathering back of the Jews to their own land of Palestine; the rebuilding of Jerusalem; the appearance of Antichrist; the great tribulation; and finally, the appalling judgments which shall, most surely, usher in the day of the Lord?

Are these the things which fill the vision of your soul? Is it for these you are looking and waiting? If so, be assured of it, you are not governed by the Church's proper hope. It is quite true that all these things which we have named shall come to pass in their appointed time; but not one of them should be allowed to come between you and your proper hope. They all stand on the prophetic page: they are all recorded in God's history of the future; but they were never intended to cast a shadow athwart the Christian's bright and blessed hope. That hope stands forth in glorious relief from the background of prophecy. What is it? Yes, we again say, what is it? It is the appearing of the bright and morning Star—the coming of the Lord Jesus, the blessed Bridegroom of the Church.

This, and naught else, is the true and proper hope of the Church of God. "I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2:23). "Behold the bridegroom cometh" (Matt. 25). When, we may ask, does the morning star appear in the natural world? Just before the dawning of the day. Who sees it?

The one who has been watching during the dark and dreary hours of the night. How plain, how practical, how telling the application. The Church is supposed to be watching—to be lovingly wakeful—to be looking out. Alas! the Church has failed in this. But that is no reason why the individual believer should not be in the full present power of the blessed hope. "Let him that heareth say, Come." This is deeply personal. Oh! that the writer and the reader of these lines may realize habitually the purifying, sanctifying, elevating power of this heavenly hope! May we understand and exhibit the practical power of those words of the Apostle John, "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure."

Answers to Correspondents: From Things New and Old 1858-1863, 126. Judicial Blindness, Etc.

“Marie,” Brixton Hill. Mark 4:12 is, as you may observe, a quotation from Isaiah 6, and sets forth the solemn sentence of judicial blindness passed upon the nation of Israel, because of their deliberate and long-continued rejection of the light and privilege so freely bestowed upon them. If you will turn to 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12, you will find a still more solemn sentence passed upon the rejecters of the Gospel testimony. “And for this cause, God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” Those who will not believe the truth of God, when it is put before them, will be left to the delusive power of Satan’s lie.

The advice of your friend has a measure of truth in it; but we believe it is quite right to wait on God for the unfolding of His Word to our souls. No doubt, we must take care of exercising mere intellect in the things of God; but if we wait on divine teaching—if we honor the Holy Spirit as the alone Expositor of Scripture—we shall be sure to grow in spiritual intelligence. We would repeat, here, a remark made elsewhere; namely, that the moral glories of Christ’s Person, and the living depths of God’s Word, will only unfold themselves to faith and need.

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