Matthew - Commentaries by Alfred Henry Burton

Christian's Library: Volume 5, Sons of Your Father.

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2. — THY FATHER WILL REWARD THEE.

(Read Matthew 6:1-18.)

ALMS, prayer, and fasting form the three- fold cord of a Christian's hidden life.

Alms, manward; prayer, Godward; fasting, selfward — all under the Father's eye, the Father's ear; and all when done according to the Son's teaching receive the Father's reward. They must be done for Him "in secret," not for man to see and applaud. Whose approbation do we seek, beloved? Then again, if the Father's approval be our delight, we shall not be discouraged by the conduct of others, for the mainspring of our life will be Christ, and the Father's reward will encourage us.

In Titus 2:12, also, Christian life faces three ways, — the grace of God teaches believers how to live, viz., "soberly," as concerning one's self; "righteously," toward men; and "godly," tard God.

Like three strains of a cord they are twisted together, by "the grace of God that has appeared," and by "looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

Alms. — Men are the recipients, but alms should not be done merely for the sake of men who need them. "To do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb. 13:16). Compare Philippians 4:18 and 1 John 3:17, where the spring of brotherly help must be the love of God. Note also Galatians 6:10, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."

Neither the public subscription list, nor attaching the founder's name to a so-called work or cause, or to a building or institution, can rank among alms given in secret, so that the left hand knows not what the right hand does. Beware lest the Lord should say of any of us, "Verily I say unto you, They have their reward."

"How much to give," can only be settled by each one before the Lord. The Scripture gives various rules and examples, some of which apply to all believers, others more especially to the rich or to the poor. Let us turn to a few passages. "Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him" (1 Cor. 16:2). Not merely once a year or once a month, but as each "first day of the week" finds us still on earth, our privilege is to set apart for communication to others as God has made us to prosper.1 Unexpected economies, salaries and receipts of all natures, go to make up the total. We should not wait to see if we have anything left over at the end of the week before we give, but as Israel began by setting apart the tithes for the Levites, so we should begin the week by "alms." "The willing mind" (2 Cor. 8:12) is what God specially appreciates, while the Lord Jesus Himself, "who for our sakes became poor," is the wondrous model proposed to us by the Holy Spirit (verse 9 of same).

Rich believers have their own special exhortation in 1Timothy 6:17-19.

Poor saints have a precious example in the widow who cast two mites into God's treasury (Luke 21:1-4). She had the Lord's approval.

("It is more blessed to give than to receive," are the words of the Lord Jesus. They teach us to labor — not only for our own needs, but also — to support the weak (Acts 20:35).

Dependence and waiting upon God for wisdom are necessary so that the giver be guided aright in his gifts. Unless such be the case, needs may be overlooked because unknown, and sometimes certain needs may be met in such a way as to damage or hinder the soul of the receiver. Believers, alas! at times fall into the habits of men and leave God out, or nearly so, when human knowledge and wisdom seem to suffice.

How different that is to the teaching of Christ in these verses, how continually He links all with the Father. "Thy Father which seeth in secret, Himself shall reward thee openly."

Prayer. — In the prayer the Lord Jesus here teaches His disciples, we have (it is needless to say) a prayer perfectly suitable for them at the time and very full of precious teaching for us. Only sons could pray in such terms, for the prayer is addressed to the Father. It is short, simple, and full, if we bear in mind that redemption was not yet accomplished when the Lord Jesus gave it. God's glory is the subject of the first three petitions, and the believer's needs come afterward. Christ who ever sought the Father's glory, ascribes the kingdom to the Father, though He Himself will reign in it on the Father's behalf.

Let us take up each petition shortly.

"Our Father which art in heaven." Though it be an individual prayer for the privacy of the closet (see vers. 5 and 6), the plural form "our" is used; it links all the other sons with the one who prays. "Father" is the precious relationship name which the Son alone could declare, and which the disciples at that time could grasp little if at all. "Which art in heaven" leads the heart away from this scene to the Father's place on high, which the Son had left for a while that He might do the Father's will on earth.

“Hallowed be Thy name.” Perhaps the first commandment of the law given by Moses — “I am the LORD thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3) — may help us to understand the import of this petition. God alone acknowledged, served, glorified; no other name allowed beside His.

“Thy kingdom come.” Compare chapter 13:43. “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Also chapter 26:29, “When I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” It is the coming time when Christ will have His disciples with Him; and when He will reign in glory and all be subdued unto Him.

“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This, like the first petition, is partially verified now in the hearts of the children (sons) of the kingdom (see chap. 13:38); it will be verified on a larger scale during Christ’s glorious reign, and will be fulfilled when “God is all in all” (1 Cor. 15:25-28).

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Daily dependence for daily food is the lesson taught here. We are not to desire stores and reserves for future needs, but only the necessary provision for each day. God will give the suitable answer. He will bestow whatever He finds fitting for each, and He will encourage us to trust Him daily till our pilgrimage is over.

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This conditional forgiveness is clearly laid down by the Lord in the verses which immediately follow the prayer. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” I hear someone asking: “How is this? I thought our forgiveness depended on Christ’s blood ‘shed for many for the remission of sins’” (chap. 26:28). That is so indeed; yet (it is needless to say) both statements are true, for both are Scripture, both indeed from the Lord’s own mouth. There is no contradiction in them. Our petition is based on God’s governmental dealings with His sons, and is stated in terms suited to a time when redemption was not yet accomplished. Certain parables of the kingdom of heaven present this governmental side of God’s ways, as in chapter 18:23-25. We need to bear this in mind, for God disciplines His sons (Heb. 12:7), to make them partakers of His holiness. In Ephesians 4:32 we read, “Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven us.” Doubtless you find this exhortation more suitable for those who have believed the “gospel of the grace of God.” Let us profit by it, beloved brethren, and we shall not fall under the edge of God’s government in this respect. Some of the Corinthians were weak and sickly, and some had been put to sleep; the object of the Lord’s chastening always is, “that we should not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:30-32).

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” If we are humble-minded, distrustful of ourselves, we shall desire to be kept from trial, to be sheltered and delivered from the onsets of the devil and from any or all the evil which surrounds us. Self-confidence was the cause of Peter’s fall (chap. 26: 33-35). When God sees fit to allow temptation (1 Cor. 10:13), He remains ever faithful; He “will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” The Church at Philadelphia had little strength, but there was faithfulness, so the Lord promised to keep it from the coming hour of temptation (Rev. 3:8, 10). Let us imitate that Church.

Then follows a beautiful doxology, which mistaken piety seems to have added in a few old MSS., but it did not form part of the prayer that the Lord taught His disciples.

Our private prayers may be long, if we have many persons and matters at heart, but each petition will be short if we remember that “your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him” (ver. 8). The object of prayer is not to give information to God, but rather to wait upon Him in childlike confidence and formulate our desires and needs according to the teaching of the Word.

We might add that believers pray by the Holy Spirit (Jude 20), but our purpose is not to give a full exposition of this precious subject; we desire only to draw attention to some of the lessons the Lord Jesus teaches in these verses. Fasting. — While the Lord Jesus was with them the disciples did not fast, but said He, “when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them, then shall they fast” (chap. 9:14, 15). Fasting is therefore suitable for the time of Christ’s absence, or the present dispensation of the kingdom of heaven.

Fasting lessens bodily strength for a while, and thus weakens a prop on which self-confidence easily leans. If practiced without prayer, spiritual pride might result from it; but in the Word prayer is joined with it. Compare Matthew 17:21; Acts 13:1-3, &c. Self-judgment, soberness, and keeping the body under, are all helped by occasional fasting accompanied by prayer. In the two passages of Scripture referred to, fasting and prayer are in connection with the Lord’s service.

Fasting is entire, or even partial, abstinence from food for a while, and should be done in moderation, not for one’s own glory or advantage, but with a single eye to the Lord’s glory. “And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” We should therefore have at heart to please God in it. That is the key or secret to fasting properly.2

F. M. H.

Christian's Library: Volume 5, Sons of Your Father.

1. — IMITATORS OF GOD.

(Read Matthew 5:44-48.)

CONDUCT suitable to God’s children, and not the way to become His children, is the theme of the Lord Jesus in this passage.

“Be ye followers (imitators) of God, as dear children,” is the apostle’s exhortation in Ephesians 5:1. God sends rain and sunshine both on the wicked and on the good; imitate Him therefore in loving enemies, in doing good and in praying for those who may harm us, thus shall we be proved to be the children (lit., sons) of our Father which is in heaven.

Similarly in Romans 8:14 we read, “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” Their walk shows it, their conduct glorifies God. Compare Matthew 5:14-16: “Ye are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Such conduct would be impossible to anyone who is not a child of God; indeed, the relationship of these sons with their Father is clearly shown in the very terms that the Lord uses: “That ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven.” But let us not overlook the fact that the exhortation of the Lord refers, not to the birth, but to the behavior of God’s sons: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

Perfect in filial conduct, as imitators of God to-day. Do you say this is impossible? Will it be more possible to-morrow, next week, next year? Do you read the passage aright, simply as it is written? Or do you import another sense into it, such as, try to become perfect, and hope to become more perfect by degrees? The Lord says, “Be perfect,” not “become gradually perfect.” Growth indeed there should be, growth in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. But growth is not the subject here, nor is there here, or elsewhere in the Scriptures, a question of attaining to any perfection half-way from here to heaven. Such an attainment would fall far short of likeness to Christ in glory, and it would add nothing to the perfect acceptance of the believer in God’s Beloved, which is the standing of every child of God. Beware, fellow-believer, of any half-way-house perfection. It is not good enough, it is not Christ.

“I want to become better, more Christ-like,” is the heartfelt cry of many a pious soul. Give up the former, the desire of becoming better, and listen to our Lord’s exhortation, “Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” In practicing this perfection day by day, you will indeed grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ; and when we see Him, we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2).

But perhaps you say again: “Does the Lord really mean what He says, Be perfect? Am I to be perfect to-day?” Yes, indeed, the Lord really does mean what He says, and He exhorts us to daily perfection in imitating God in His dealings with men. Do we fail, in this? Indeed we do. What can we do then? Confess it to God, humble ourselves to Him, learn of Him, and having restoration of soul by means of our Advocate, seek help through our great High Priest to go on in obedience to the exhortation of the Lord Jesus, “Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

Is anything less than perfection suitable to the Father? Can any lower conduct be suitable for His sons? Let us the rather praise God that He Vs called us to the privilege of such behavior.

“The privilege of such behavior,” what do you mean? someone may ask. I mean that only children can behave as children; or, to take an earthly example, only children of a king can behave in a way suitable to royalty. Great, therefore, is the privilege, in this respect also, of the members of the family of God, of those who are His children (sons) by faith in Christ Jesus.

To conclude, I will add just a word as to the Father’s name. We may notice that the Lord did not say in the Sermon on the Mount, “My Father and your Father.” (John 20:17); that revelation was only made after His resurrection, but the Father is the same Father, though our relationship with Christ as His brethren was not revealed in Matthew. Compare John 17:26, “I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it.” F. M. H.

Christian's Library: Volume 10, Nazarene, The

SOME readers and interpreters of Scripture seem to have confounded the word Nazarene with the word Nazarite. This is a mistake. It is written:

“He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene” (Matt. 2:23).

These words show that a Nazarene was one who dwelt in a city called Nazareth. If Jesus must be called a Nazarene, it was necessary that He should be “Jesus of Nazareth.” The providence of God, therefore, with a view to the fulfillment of prophecy, led Joseph, the reputed father of Jesus, to take up his abode in Nazareth when returning from Egypt after the death of Herod.

But a Nazarite was not necessarily an inhabitant of Nazareth. A Nazarite was a Jew of either sex, and from any quarter in the land, who bound himself by a vow of special separation to God. (See Numbers 6.)

But there was no particular prophecy, so far as we know, which foretold literally in so many words that Jesus should be called a Nazarene. In Matthew 2:23 no particular prophet is named, but it may be gathered that the prophets in general predict the Nazarene character of Jesus. For a Nazarene was a despised person. It is necessary to understand the force of the word Nazarene, as it was used in the Saviour’s day in order to see the full force of the teaching of the prophets on the subject.

We read that—

“Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:45, 46).

Nathanael’s question to Philip shows the disrepute in which Nazareth and the people of that place were held. It was a Galilean town, and this of itself was enough to lead the inhabitants of Judea to look upon it with contempt. But Nathanael himself, who asked the reproachful question, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” was a Galilean, and therefore Nazareth must have been laboring under some special opprobrium in Galilee itself, even to being the most despised town of a despised province.

But it seemed good in the wisdom of God that our Lord should come to be regarded as a native of this much-despised place.

In Acts 24:5 Christians are called “the sect of the Nazarenes,” a term, surely, of great reproach, but none the less it was as Jesus of Nazareth, or as Jesus the Nazarene, that our Lord first revealed Himself to Saul of Tarsus as he was nearing Damascus (Acts 22:26). It is plain that our

Lord came to be called a Nazarene, that He was much despised in consequence, and that His followers inherited the opprobrious title, and therefore the consequent place of dishonor. The force of the teaching of the prophets as to this seems to be that they foretold in a general way that Christ should be a sufferer, that He should be lowly and despised, “without form or comeliness,” “a root out of a dry ground,” and, as we know He became, “of no reputation.” These humble features of Christ’s character are spoken of by more than one of the prophets, and the despised name of a Nazarene appears to be chosen by the Holy Spirit to describe them. It was fitting that the lowly Jesus should be associated with the lowly city called Nazareth. He was entitled, of course, to claim the most elevated places and positions of human greatness, but He did not so choose.

When our Lord was born, David’s royal line was in a very reduced condition, and at His incarnation Joseph and Mary were in very reduced circumstances compared with many of their ancestors, including David and Solomon. Nothing is more manifest than their poverty, and it was at this stage that Jesus came in flesh. Humanly speaking, our Lord was exposed to poverty all His life. “He became poor.” The enemy, though without avail, sought to turn Him aside from this lowly condition in which He was found by offering to Him, on condition of disobedience to God, the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them.

But any other condition than that of poverty would have been unsuited to the doctrines that Christ taught. As it was, His own earthly position was perfectly consistent with the demand He made upon the young ruler to go and sell all that He had and give to the poor, and also with the charge to the disciples to sell what they had and give alms. This teaching was consistent with the lowly, despised Nazarene life He led, but it would not have been in harmony with a place of wealth and reputation in the world.

By becoming a Nazarene our Lord came into circumstances of life which peculiarly fitted Him to be at the head of a dispensation specially characteristic of suffering. In this He became a pattern for all Christians, and no one of His followers has departed from the pattern without suffering loss in His own soul. The result of becoming rich and increased with goods, of leaving the despised Nazarene position for one of social standing in this world, is very often blindness, suffering, and misery.

The apostle Paul maintained the despised position to the last, and by his writings, inspired as they are by the Holy Spirit, he sets forth the lowly path of suffering and shame for all Christians in every age.

When Jesus perceived that men were coming to take Him by force and make Him a king, He departed again into a mountain alone. The kingly position in an earthly way was not at that time the will of God for our Lord. It did not correspond with the purpose of God, which was that Jesus should die at Jerusalem for sinful men. Man would arrange that He should be a prophet and then a king, but God’s way was that He should be a prophet, next a priest, and afterward a king. But if a priest, then He must die. He could only be a priest by offering up Himself. It was thus that He pursued the pathway of separation from the world. He knew nothing, and would share in nothing, of its glory, greatness, and renown. “He was despised and rejected of men.” From of old it had been foretold, if not in so many words, yet according to the spirit of the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

The whole tenor of New Testament teaching brings the Christian into the same position.

The fact that Jesus chose in His incarnation to be named after a despised place like Nazareth, shows the low estimate that God forms of all earthly greatness in its present lost and unredeemed condition, and at times God sets over the kingdom of men the basest among them. Man was lost. Men were all sinners. They all needed to be reconciled to God. They might have great reputation among their fellows, but what did that signify in the sight of God from whom they were alienated.

Jesus did not seek honor from men. He testified against the world that it was evil. His principles could be best enforced in the position of a Nazarene. He testified that a prophet had no honor in his own country, and on one occasion, to avoid the honor which was not of God he deliberately returned to Galilee (John 4:43).

Not many mighty, not many noble are called. But those called from the higher classes are called to be of the sect of the Nazarenes. The position and principle of true Christianity is Nazarene still. And this is so, not only in a heathen country, but also in the most favored parts of Christendom. Let the Christian bear witness for Christ in the drawing-room, in the ballroom, at the garden party, or in any place of worldly resort, and he will soon find that he is out of fashion. There is in this world a place for everything but Christ, but there is little or no place for Him. Men of the world still hate Him. His home-truths condemn their lives. His claims are too exacting for them, because they interfere too much with their pleasures.

It is the will of God that we should be despised as Christ was. Further, that we should be willing thus to be. And if we know that His place in heaven is and will be ours, we ought to know also that the place of the Nazarene on earth is our place now. Our enduring substance is in heaven. Knowing these things may keep us from many snares and hurtful lusts, while the poor, the weak, and the despised may learn that their own circumstances are not unlike those of their Lord Himself as a Man in this world.

T. H.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Mary of Bethany.

THE Lord’s ministry had been rejected in this chapter (Matt. 26:1-16). All that wonderful display of grace, and gentleness, and love, and power, had been unappreciated. What a tale it tells of the heart! He was a lonely Saviour, lonely and unappreciated save by this poor woman. Her heart had been drawn to Him before; she had sat at His feet and heard His word — there was much in that. She had known the tenderness of His heart, and His power in the case of her brother, how He could raise the putrid body to life again — resurrection life; and there He was before her in resurrection.

She was not intelligent, but she acted instinctively. Her heart entered into the path the Saviour was going to take. She gave her all, and another was prepared to sell Him. It is a terrible picture, a gross and shocking picture, of the depravity of the heart. Judas was so near the path, but he never was in it. It is shocking, but, beloved, do we never do the same in less measure when we give up Christ as the object of the

soul for some lesser consideration? When a soul is struggling to give up the world the Lord has sympathy with it, but when it is seeking to have more of the world, there is no sympathy.

We often meditate over this scripture, but it always has something fresh for our souls, because it presents Christ to the heart. We may not be very intelligent, but it is the heart He wants. “Waste!” say the disciples, but He appreciates this. He says, “Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.”

ROCHFORT HUNT.

Christian's Library: Volume 7, Parable of the Ten Virgins., The

THE Church is the Bride of Christ according to Revelation 21, but in the passage now before us (Matt. 25:1-14), though the coming of Christ is likened to the coming of a bridegroom, yet Christendom is viewed as made up of individuals, some of whom are true believers, and others mere professors; hence these are spoken of as ten virgins, five of whom are wise, and five foolish. The Bride represents the Church in its entirety, and composed of nothing but true believers.

In this parable we get a brief but vivid picture of the whole history of the professing Church from start to finish.

1. The Attitude of the early Christians with reference to the Coming of Christ.

The early Christians all were expecting the return of the Lord Jesus. The coming of the Lord was no peculiar doctrine in those days; it was the universal expectation. “They all went out to meet the bridegroom.” A careful study of the New Testament will convince anybody of the truth of this. It would be impossible to enumerate all the passages which speak of it, but we would suggest to the Christian reader that he should read through the New Testament, and prayerfully note all the different allusions to this subject. We believe he will come to no other conclusion than this, that all the early Christians were waiting for Christ, and not only so, but that they were taught so to do by the Lord Himself and the apostles.

We shall briefly refer to one passage, and that perhaps the most easily understood. The two epistles to the Thessalonians are full of the subject, they allude to it in every chapter. Let us take the first epistle.

Converted to Wait. — The blessed gospel had reached these Thessalonians when sunk in all the darkness and degradation of heathenism. Some amongst them no doubt were Jews, but whether Jews or Gentiles, the same gospel met them both, and brought them into the enjoyment of the same blessings.

The gospel treats all men as being alike guilty and lost. It matters not whether Jew or Gentile, whether rich or poor, whether highborn or low-born, whether learned or ignorant, all are sinners in the sight of God, and all are lost. The gospel establishes the great principle that there is no difference, “for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); this is the “no difference” of man’s utter ruin. But, thank God! there is also in that same gospel the “no difference” of God’s free and sovereign grace — “for there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:10-11).

This blessed truth Paul announced at Thessalonica (Acts 17), when he opened and alleged from the Scriptures “that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead.” Here was the secret of the apostle’s success. He appealed to the Scriptures; and allowed the Word of God to act upon the souls of his hearers. Oh for more of this kind of work to-day! It is easy to work upon the feelings by music and fine singing, but the application of the Word of God to the conscience is fast dying out of the preaching of the day. The preachers that emanate from theological colleges come forth primed and poisoned with the infidelity gendered by “higher criticism,” Evolution, and other oppositions of science falsely so-called.

Except with rare and bright exceptions, less and less soul-saving work is done by the ordained ministers of whatever denomination, whether of church or dissent. Whatever time is not taken up in the study, preparing sermons based upon the destructive criticism of these rationalistic days, is largely devoted to getting up worldly bazaars and organizing entertainments to keep worldly people together by worldly means.

It is supposed that the old gospel has lost its power. It has not; and wherever preached in the power of God’s Spirit the same blessed results follow as were seen at Thessalonica. They “turned to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9); this was true conversion, it was a complete change of life. For the first time their hearts, their consciences were brought into contact with the living and the true God. Mere religiousness was done with; the dead routine of rites and ceremonies and religious observances became a thing of the past; they were brought to God — to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him.

But more than this, they were converted “to wait for His Son from heaven.” The apostle Paul had brought this blessed hope so powerfully before them, that from the moment of their conversion, and until false teachers began their dismal work amongst them (2 Thess. 2), they were expecting Christ to come, and were waiting for Him, not knowing but what He might come during their very lifetime.

But the days and weeks, and months passed by, and yet the Lord did not return. In the ordinary course of human life in this world, some of their number sickened and died. Their brethren left alive now were stricken with an excessive sorrow on their behalf. Doubtless they feared that those who had fallen asleep would in some way be losers of the joy and glory they were expecting at the coming of the Lord. This was the occasion the Holy Ghost took to make the further and fuller revelation, not only for them but for us as well, of how and where the joyful meeting would take place between the returning Lord and His saints, whether sleeping or living.

Others which have no Hope. — First the difference between the Christian and the man of the world with reference to death is clearly made known. There is nothing more terrible to the worldly man than death. When the grave closes over the body of one who has lived and died without Christ, all hope is at an end. The man or woman who dies unsaved can never be saved at all. The pearly gates will never open beyond the grave for those who depart this life without saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. “No hope” — awful words! This describes the dismal

future of the one who dies unpardoned and unreconciled. But it is not so with the Christian, “Ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13).

The apostle now recalls their hearts to the gospel that had brought them peace and deliverance at the beginning. He had preached to them, and they had believed “that Jesus died and rose again”; they were waiting, too, for God’s Son from heaven. Just as certainly as He had died and risen, and was coming back, so with the same absolute certainty would God bring back with Him those that had fallen asleep.

An entirely fresh revelation follows. Mark the emphatic manner in which the apostle declares that what he is now communicating comes with all the authority of “the word of the Lord.”

It is not Paul’s opinion, it is the revealed and inspired word of the Lord. “We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.” This word “prevent” is an old English word which means “go before,” or “get in front of.”

Notice, too, how Paul puts himself amongst the number of those who might be alive when the Lord did come back, for he says, “We which are alive and remain,” not “they.”

The living saints, then, will not get in front of the sleeping ones at the coming of the Lord. While it is ever our privilege to be looking for and expecting our Lord to come from day to day, yet if we are called away before He comes, we shall not be losers when He comes. So far from this the sleeping ones will be first thought of.

Caught up in the Clouds. — The apostle had said that the sleeping saints would come back with Jesus when He comes (vs. 14.). He was coming back to reign, for He was a King, and this the apostle had already declared to them (Acts 17:7). His kingdom will extend from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. The sleeping saints will not be absent from that glorious scene. But how can they possibly come back with Him when He comes to reign? The Lord is in heaven and they are in their graves, how can they come with Him? True, their spirits are with Him now; the moment the saint dies his spirit goes to be with Christ: this the Scripture most clearly declares (see Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:6, 8; Philippians 1:23). But nevertheless the body is in the grave, how then can they come with Him when He comes?

The answer is given in the following verse (1 Thess. 4:16). Those that are in their graves shall hear His voice, even so had the Lord Himself declared when here on earth (John 5:28, 29). The voice of the Son of God will be heard by all who are in their graves, both saved and unsaved, both believers and unbelievers. Not at the same time, for a thousand years will separate the resurrection of the saint from that of the wicked (Rev. 20:5).

But in the passage immediately before us there is something altogether special in the language used. “The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.” How precious are these words, “The Lord Himself!” He will not depute to another the performance of this loving service. He will not merely send an archangel nor a host of heavenly messengers to fetch us home, but He will come Himself! He will descend from heaven “with a shout.”

There is something peculiar in this word “shout”; it is the shout of a general marshalling his troops; a shout heard in the ranks of the general’s own army, and not in those of the opposing force. This “shout” is to be heard by the saints and not by the world.

The courts of heaven will be all astir to welcome the saints to their eternal home in glory. The time of their pilgrimage had lengthened out, many had been gently put to sleep by Jesus, but now the long-expected moment arrives, when with a shout of command, the Lord Himself descends from heaven to assemble together the scattered units of His heavenly army. More quickly than it takes to write or read these lines will the archangel’s voice carry the great Captain’s orders along the ranks of the redeemed host, and the trump of God shall sound out loud and clear. The figure here used is the awakening and calling together of a camp at its general’s command.

The Dead in Christ shall rise First. — Our great Captain’s army, we may say, is divided into two regiments, the “dead” and the “living.” Each of these is noticed. The Thessalonians had feared on behalf of the dead that they might be forgotten, but no, they will be first thought of — “the dead in Christ shall rise first.” It is not here a question of the first resurrection, when, as we know, the saints will rise a thousand years before the wicked. In this passage the word “first” is used with reference to the dead and living saints.

The living saints will not “go before” the sleeping saints; both are to be caught up together from the earth. Hence the first thing that takes place is the resurrection of the sleeping saints. “Raised in glory” (1 Cor. 15:43) they will be, and standing side by side with the living who will be changed in a moment, together they will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. No more parting, no more weeping, but forever with the Lord.

Thus then the difficulty was solved. The Thessalonians need not sorrow as those that had no hope, for when Jesus returns in His glory, the sleeping saints, no less than the living, will God bring with Him (vs. 14). The Lord Himself will come for them, both dead and living, before they return with Him.

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