

"The Lord is at hand."

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This inspired, inspiriting cry was vouchsafed to the Church almost as soon as the Lord had taken His place at the right hand of God. Nay, ere He left His disciples on earth, He encouraged their drooping spirits with the assurance of His speedy return; and after His ascension, in almost every communication addressed to His own through inspired penmen, He recalled their hearts to this blessed truth, finally closing His last message with the thrice-repeated word, "Behold, I come quickly." (Rev. 22: 7, 12, 20.)

If, moreover, the connection in which this truth is found be carefully examined, it will be seen that it has always a practical application. If the soldier is weary of the conflict, or daunted by the power of the foe; if the labourer faints in his service; if he who runs the race grows careless, by losing sight of the goal; if the oppressed, the sorrowing, and the afflicted are becoming hopeless through the fiery nature of their trials, the anodyne, the consolation, the encouragement, the stimulus administered is the hope of the Lord's speedy return. The step of the weariest traveller becomes elastic, the thirsty soul of the pilgrim, passing over the sands of the desert, is immediately refreshed, the almost defeated combatant is at once nerved with new courage, and sufferers of every kind are cheered and sustained under the power of this blessed hope.

It is a characteristic indeed of this truth that it is never formally stated or defined, but is rather inwoven with the very essence of Christianity. Left out, therefore, Christianity is incomplete, and lapses into worldliness or Judaism. The calling and position of the Christian, the character of the church, and indeed the future of this world, would alike be an enigma apart from the second coming of our Lord and Saviour. The fact of its having been forgotten immediately upon the death of the apostles (for not a trace of it, in its Scriptural statement, can be found in any extant writings from the end of the first down to the close of the eighteenth century), explains the character of Church history. The annals of Christianity, said an unbelieving historian, are the annals of hell. Whatever abatement may be demanded from this verdict, it would yet be difficult to discover more unblushing sin and iniquity than was often seen in the bosom of the professing church during this period. Adopting the language of the prophet, it might be truly said that "darkness, gross darkness, covered the people." There were undoubtedly, and God be praised for it, thousands who, amid the prevalent corruption, maintained, by the grace of God, holy and devoted lives — lights shining in the dense gloom that had settled down upon the Church; but these only rendered the general darkness more visible.

It was, then, a most signal mercy when God caused the hope of the Lord's return to be revived amongst His people. And the fact can never be overlooked that this was connected with the restoration of the truth of the Lord's table. It must have been so. The Lord Himself inseparably linked these two things - the truth of His table and that of His coming — in the words given to Paul, "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's

death till He come." (1 Cor. 11: 26.) Thus it was that, when the simple commemorative character of the Lord's supper became corrupted, when the eucharist was turned into a sacrament, and even into a sacrifice, and the idea of a completed redemption was thereby utterly lost, of necessity the hope of the Lord's return was extinguished. But when the Scriptural teaching concerning the Lord's Supper exposed the superstitions of patristic and sacerdotal inventions, and the Lord's table was again duly ordered to the joy of His people, the beams of the bright and morning star immediately gladdened their hearts. There are some now living who passed through the blessed experiences of this signal period, when the Bible once again resumed its rightful place in the hearts of God's people, and when they searched it daily as for hidden treasure, while its pages seemed to glow with a light that shone down directly from the presence of God. They found in these days that the Word was both living and powerful; and they, on their parts, delighted to lay bare their inmost souls to its searching, convicting, and sanctifying power.

It was no wonder, therefore, that they lived in the power of the expectation of their Lord. This was seen in many ways. In the first place, they began to judge themselves, their houses, their surroundings, associations and pursuits in the light of His presence for whom they waited. Was this, was that, they anxiously enquired, suitable to His eye? The knife was unsparingly applied according to this test. As a consequence, they became unworldly. Their hope was fixed on One outside of this scene — on One who was coming at any moment to receive them to Himself, and perforce they assumed the place of strangership in this world. Henceforward they *knew* what it was not to be of the world even as Christ was not of the world; they now recognized that their character and calling were heavenly, and could not, therefore, have community of feeling with the world in its ways, habits, and pleasures. Another feature of that day was, that those who received this truth were drawn together in the most intimate bonds of Christian fellowship. As in the days of Pentecost, though in feeble measure, they that believed were together, and (in principle, at least) had all things common. Together with this — and this feature should never be omitted — there was intense activity in the ministration, in various ways, of the truth of God. It is sometimes alleged that those who profess to be waiting for the Lord's return are careless as to the publication of the gospel; but the history of that, as well as of more recent times, proves the statement to be utterly unfounded.

Fifty years have passed away, and instead of hundreds there are thousands who now declare their faith in the Lord's second coming. Other men have laboured, and we, without a struggle, and in many cases without an exercise, have entered upon their labours. What was revealed to them after long meditation, fervent prayers, and painful experiences, has come to us by inheritance. These witnesses have departed — departed to be with Christ, there to wait still in fellowship with Him; and their torches have been put into our hands. It is this fact, beloved, that suggests so many questions — questions which crowd upon us even as we write these lines. Do we, then, really expect, wait for, the return of our Lord? Is this our constant attitude of soul? Just as a man may read the Scriptures, and, seeing clearly, assent to the truth that all are guilty sinners, and yet never take the place of such before God for himself, so is it possible to hold the doctrine of the second coming of Christ without being influenced by it. Indeed, we might be able even to state the truth to others without one particle of response to its claims. We need to challenge ourselves on this point. Are we; then, we again ask, in the power of the expectation of seeing our blessed Lord? Is this blessed hope daily before our souls? Does it govern our actions? mould our conduct? Does it detach us from the world and worldliness? show us the vanity of the

world's distinctions, manners, and ways? Paul could write of some in his day, "In every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and 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, Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." (1 Thess. 1: 8-10.) Would this description in any measure be true of us? Do our ways before the world proclaim that we have no resting-place here? that we are only sojourners waiting to be fetched by our Lord? Do our homes and households, in their ordering and arrangement, proclaim this blessed truth? In a word, is this the testimony of our lives, of our walk and ways?

Questions like these may soon be answered, if we are honest with ourselves, and the very attempt to answer them would lead to blessing. For in how many instances would it lead to the painful discovery that with this truth on our lips we have been denying it in the life; that while we have been saying that we are but strangers and pilgrims here, we have been settling down in ease and comfort, making plans for worldly advancement, if not for ourselves yet for our families, seeking to raise ourselves higher in the social scale, and striking root in every direction in the soil of this world? Is it not possible that God has a controversy with us on this account? that this will explain the sorrows that have befallen us — the sicknesses that have so often visited ourselves and our families? For God must have reality with His people. He loves them too well to permit them to go on in self-deception — deceiving themselves and deceiving others also. Therefore He is speaking to us by His manifold dealings and chastenings, warning us of our danger, and recalling us to the sense of our responsibility as His witnesses in the world. May He Himself give us the opened ear to His voice, that we may humble ourselves before Him in lowly abasement and self-judgment, and seek His restoring grace, so that in all the fervour of our first love we may testify once again in living power to the truth of our Lord's return.

Another observation may be permitted. Nothing so tends to obscure our vision of the bright and morning star as the thought that signs are to be expected before He descends from heaven. We have been plied with temptations of this character. Voices other than that of the Good Shepherd have beguiled even saints. Pyramids and conjunctions of planets (which after all were, of no extraordinary kind) have been adduced to prove that the Lord is at hand. The carnal wisdom of men has thus been allied with the teachings of the word of God. If we build upon such things our faith will soon be rudely shaken. God needs no confirmation from, nor will He be indebted to, men. These things, indeed, are a wile of the enemy to divert our gaze from the Coming One to circumstances or to earthly events. No; our hope rests alone on Christ and His word. According to the words of a French hymn "He has promised, He will return." — this, and this alone, is the foundation of the "blessed hope." It is quite true that the moral characteristics of the "perilous times" will be discerned by the instructed soul; but these are detected by a knowledge of the word of God. Our danger lies in being lured from the voice of our living Lord to listen to the words of men. The more we are shut up to the Lord Himself and His own word, the more intense will be our expectation of His coming.

To some it may seem that He has long tarried. But if He yet wait, it is but while God is still working in the activities of His grace to gather in His elect — the co-heirs with Christ. While therefore He would have us to be ever waiting and ever expecting, it must be in full fellowship with His own heart. If we wait, He also waits; if we desire His return, much more ardently does

He look forward to the moment when He will rise from His seat to claim His own. But the moments of waiting will soon now be over. Louder and louder the Spirit and the Bride say, Come; and it is He Himself who puts this word into our lips, while He responds, "Surely I come quickly." What then can we do but bow our heads in His presence as we reply, "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus?"

"And now, at length, behold, He comes

To claim thee from above,

In answer to the ceaseless call,

And deep desire of love.

"Go, then, thou loved and blessed one

Thou drooping mourner, rise!

Go; for He calls thee now to share

His dwelling in the skies.

For thee, His royal Bride — for thee,

His brightest glories shine;

And, happier still, His changeless heart,

With all its love, is thine."

E. D.