

The Coming of Christ
The Heavenly Calling,
and the Mystery of the One Body.

Acts 1, 7, 9.

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PART THIRD. EARLIER MINISTRY, CONTINUED.

The name of Acts of the Apostles has been given to this book; but it contains rather the acts of Peter and Paul. The object of the Spirit of God in it is the setting up of the testimony of God here in the world, both to the circumcision and uncircumcision. It does not go beyond that. Nothing of what we find in the epistles is in it. It begins with Peter, James, and John to the circumcision, and ends with Paul to the uncircumcision. One thing which very remarkably comes out in the book is the self-will of Paul, and how it gets corrected by God. The result of that is in the last chapter. We see that he is content to go to the Gentiles; but before that he was always seeking after the Jews, although his commission was mainly to the uncircumcision.

We were looking last week at the symbolic teaching in Scripture with respect to earthly and heavenly things. In Old Testament times the symbols used were very inferior to that to which they pointed. By a symbol I mean something laid alongside of another to give an idea of it; *e.g.* a map descriptive of a country. In teaching about earthly things God always uses symbols. Thus in Daniel a glorious empire is symbolized by an image — a tree, beasts — all *inferior* to the things they are intended to show forth. And in Revelation there are the same kind of illustrations, so in teaching us God uses something of the same kind; but He uses that which is part and parcel of the thing itself. There are three striking examples of this teaching in the Acts, in which the three great doctrines of the coming of the Lord, the heavenly calling, and the mystery of the one body, are set forth. These seem to form a background to these three things connected with the Church.

Acts 1. I believe that the very first teaching as to the coming of the Lord that was apprehended is contained in this portion. It is a simple recital of a most marvellous fact, while the disciples' hearts were still occupied with thoughts about the earthly kingdom. Here is a cloud in which He rises up, and they are left behind widowed. While He is speaking to them He rises, steps into the cloud, and is received out of their sight. The person of the Lord was gone from amongst them; He was no longer with them, as while walking to Emmaus, and appearing and disappearing among them; but they looked up, and saw His person going away. They were not in particular sorrow or distress; they were preparing for testimony, and the light comes from a Person whom they loved disappearing from them; and the assurance is given that He who so went would so come. This is the chief bearing of the chapter.

My impression of the coming of the Lord is, that it never was known until *Christ went up on high*. It is one thing for God to reveal a thing, and another for *us to know it*. It was a very different thing to be thinking that some fine day a Person would come down upon earth, and take up things here just as

they were, and go on with them, and to have God's thoughts about the Messiah. We find here the disciples did not know the Lord's mind. They had been closeted with their Master; but they understood Him not. He said to them, "You wait here until you have power from above;" but they were gazing up into heaven.

This was a moral as well as a physical position, like the Thessalonians, who were called to wait for God's Son from heaven. "I wait for the Lord. He is gone up, and what has become of Him there? What can this mean? He is the One we love." It is Himself they want, and the word is given them, He "shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven." Think of their position. They had had a loved Master, One who loved them most deeply; and now seemed just the time for the kingdom, and He is gone and left them. What can they do? What can the heart find to delight in when the Saviour is gone? They are left there in the widow's position to bear His rejection. They have not yet *experienced* it; but that was their calling. They had, as it were, stepped into the shoes of their Master — "as sheep for the slaughter" — to be witnesses for God. They were to go into that dark scene of sorrow and rejection which they had never calculated on; for they had never thought how low He must go; never calculated on death and resurrection, and that they would have to take that place of death, and wait for His coming again. I do not say it was not revealed, but they did not understand it; though while their hearts were beating about the kingdom, having their own low thoughts about it, He says, "Do not trouble yourselves about time and season. I shall launch you there in time; but meanwhile you are to be my witnesses. You are to be in the place of obedience, and to have power given."

He departed, and they went back to Jerusalem, keeping together in communion as disciples of the Lord Jesus. The buddings of the actings of the Spirit of God now show themselves. Peter, in taking up the retrospect, sees that one has failed. This was not of Peter's flesh to discern; for he applies passages of Scripture, which seem to belong to antichrist, to Judas.

This preparation for testimony is very remarkable, the promise of the Lord's return, and their waiting position. It may be said, Why do you set so much importance on the coming of the Lord? I believe there is no testimony without it; you have no right goal. Everyone is a witness for something. Lot was a witness of what a divided heart is; Abraham of what the, walk of faith is. If a person is going to be a witness for God, he must have his goal marked out. If your goal is that "the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth" through the present preaching of the gospel, you will set yourselves to work out of your own resources; you will be pumping up from nature; for your goal is a false one, and much of your work will be burnt up, though love to Christ in the heart will be recognized. This will be the result of setting an end before you God has not shown. The coming of Christ from heaven for you is the pole-star for the Christian. If a Christian is not looking for this coming, you may be sure that his testimony is not according to the mind of God.

There is uncommon peculiarity in the aspect of the Lord's coming, as given in Acts 1, which is very corrective of any false thoughts about it. My own first thoughts about His coming were quite Jewish. I looking forth, say, upon Europe, ask, Can this thing be brought up to the glory of God? No; the stone cut without hands will break it all to powder. I now see why this was allowed; for I was thoroughly settled down in the world, and God let the sharp edge of His truth come in and sever my link with the world, and it came in just where needed. Then afterwards some of us took up the coming rather in connection with the circumstances then surrounding us, and it should be so used; but I think that these are not the normal, simple ways in which God would have us look at it. It is rather this — the *heart* never can be satisfied until we have seen the Lord Himself. The disciples were gazing up, and they saw Him whom they loved enter the cloud. This did not produce anguish, but watching. Would He not appear again in some other part of the heavens? They wanted Himself. (vv. 9, 11.) This completely

comprehends the double coming. They saw Him go up, but nothing beyond; He was lost to sight. We shall see Him. above the created heavens first, and then coming down to earth.

Here are two grounds of pre-eminent importance. To begin with the lowest, I find people turning away from prophecy, as they say — those who really have this heavenly hope in their hearts. After a reading-meeting lately, in which we had been looking at Eph. 1, and were very happy, a brother, fresh in the sense of grace, came up to me and said, "Oh, I am sorry you have been speaking so much about prophecy, I never enter into it!" I made no reply, but shortly after said to him, "You have no thought of seeing the Lord Jesus?" "Indeed," said he, "it is my one thought, I shall never be satisfied until I see Him." "But you will not see Him in the Father's house?" "Oh, yes, indeed; it is there I want to see Him!" "But it will be in some spiritual way," I added. "How can you go into the Father's house?" "Oh, I am to be changed; I shall be there!" "Ah!" I cried, "this is the very kind of prophecy that I care about; *your heart is waiting for Christ*; you have there the earnest of the inheritance, the Holy Spirit of promise." People must not confuse prophecy with certain hard questions about the future. But if souls are dealt with we shall often find that God has put the hope into the heart. Then we can say, "I hold you to what I find wrapped up in your heart; — you have the root of the matter there." Then, secondly, it is important with respect to testimony. When I have the goal, it shows me the right road I am. to take. Am I, for example, to set about reforming Italy? If I am looking for Christ's coming from heaven to take me up, I can pick up every heart to show that Christ is what it needs. Again, I do not get the right form of the hope before my mind unless it is Christ Himself that I wait for, and not His things only. I do not give my proper testimony, as part of the bride of Christ, without seeing it is the person of Christ with all His possessions. All that He has in heaven and earth is nothing compared with the relationship. We are espoused as a chaste virgin to Christ. I have a place in His heart, and that enables me to meet all the difficulties and all the disappointments of the way. Is not your heart so forward as that, whatever your position here, you cannot be satisfied without Himself? That is, what the disciples were feeling here. The coming of the Lord, then, is connected with two things; first, the loving heart finding the sweetness of His *presence; and, secondly, the character of the testimony.

Acts 7: In the testimony borne by. Stephen we have the HEAVENLY CALLING of the Church. The landmark of the grace was to be Jerusalem, "beginning at Jerusalem." It was a clear, clean work of grace, and the one who cursed and swore was the very one to speak about the grace. The result of it is that hearts seethe and boil at such a presentation of grace. They say, "We cannot have this; away with him 1" Not satisfied with having rejected Christ, they reject the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the person of Stephen. Then Christ shows what He is to His rejected people. Here is a man, as it were, covered with bayonets, looking up: the cloud parts, and the power of the light of God communicates itself from Christ, and shines down into the bottom of Stephen's heart, and he is without any fear. He sees Christ *standing up*, a new position (His sacrificial work was done). Stephen there gets the sympathy of Christ for His rejected servant. Christ was looking down to cheer and comfort while he was being stoned. The proper answer to the sorrows of earth is the sympathy in heaven. There ought to be more rejection on earth than there is, and then there would be more of the consciousness of Christ stooping down to pour in all the riches of His grace from the throne of God. This scene shows the Church is here. Christ is not hidden as in Acts 1, but heaven is opened, and all the glory streams down. The whole bearing of chapter 1 is showing a risen Christ preparing a testimony which was to be given in the power of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 9 gives a view of the incompetency of *earth* (not only Jerusalem) to receive the testimony from heaven. All had failed. This now comes to our position here. How much more ready we are to be a testimony where it is irrespective of *God's glory*, and merely for the salvation of souls. There is so

little readiness in us to tell out what God is and what Christ is. This is very humbling, but we ought to be ready to speak out God's grace, "whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear." But there was a sweet savour of Christ to God in those that were saved and in those that perish. Stephen bore the testimony though they would not receive it, and he suffered the consequences. If he had been silent, he would not have been stoned.

There is then in Acts 1, the personal hope; Acts 7, the sympathy of Christ with His rejected servant. Acts 9 shows us communion with an individual on the highest possible ground of grace Christ had dealt differently with Peter. Before He commissioned him ("Feed my sheep"), He tested his conscience about his denial; but He finds Paul, who had been a rejector of the Holy Ghost, and mad against Christ, and shows how heaven will give testimony if earth will not; "And you, Saul shall *tell* how I have some who were sinners one body with Myself." Here was the revelation of the *mystery*: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *Me*?" Those whom he persecuted were a part of Christ Himself. This is more than in chapter 7, where the testimony was, that there was room for the Church in heaven, though they would not have it on earth, and that sympathy from the heart of Christ was flowing down to those who were treated as He had been Himself. But here in chapter 9, it is something Godlike; indeed, it is properly divine sympathy, not towards a *servant*, but to one as part of Myself, "Who touches you touches *Me*. You have not only touched poor Nazarenes, but *Me*;" and now Saul the blasphemer is to be a vessel of that grace in the midst of that scene of desolation. "He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit."

Weigh well whether you are bearing testimony to these three great truths connected with chaps. 1, 7, 9. Are you happier to meet Christ's feelings about testimony than your own? It is strange how little we understand the freshness of Christ's feelings now. Would we wound the heart of a loved friend? But surely Christ is more easily wounded than the dearest earthly friend, and surely we cannot say that He deserves to be thought of last. You think of yourself, I think of myself; but Christ is saying, "There is a member of My body," and yet we do not like to go and bear testimony where we think it will be rejected. There is something most solemn in this vital union with Christ. Does He see us thus a member of Himself, and yet content to go down and live in Sodom, saying, "I know I am saved from hell, I shall have a place in the New Jerusalem, so I shall not trouble myself"? God has taught the Church the coming again of Christ as He had never taught it before. It was never divinely received in human minds until after Christ left His disciples. They knew that the "seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head;" but the prophets did not understand how He would come a second time, and while the hearts of the poor remnant in the coming day will be dragged through their trials without understanding their position, it is the portion of the Church now to be expecting the Lord from heaven. The Church is the special witness of this hope, and thus it may be said, No coming of Christ, no Church at all.

One passage shows that the very essence of the Church is connected with the coming, and proves that while the truth of the Church was not revealed before, God had it in *His mind*. Eph. 1 just speaks of the riches of His grace, but in verse 8 of His wisdom and intelligence — "having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in Him, in whom also we have an allotment* . . . who first trusted," or who forehoped, "in Christ." We have even now an inheritance. It is Christ. We have a special place — His bride: what Christ is, and what He has, is mine in heaven and earth. Is the property of the husband the wife's glory? No; it is himself. Therefore our place is special. This is our allotment even now. Having the full mind of God as to His counsels, we hope before they are developed — we (it

is in the plural number) we Jews, as he might say, were put in the place of hope before you got yours. There is a comparison, then, between the Church's position and what the Jews will have to go through in the sifting. The Church gets the doctrine of death and resurrection when Christ gets it, before the glory. Israel will look back and learn how they might have seen it, and the Gentiles also; but the Church is in the same position with Christ taken up to heaven now, and we are taken up and let into all the secrets of God's counsels of love. He teaches us that flesh is nothing — but He has rent the veil, and has looked out from heaven and called me by *name*, tells me I am a member of Christ's body — and that all His sympathies are in exercise towards me, and that *He Himself* is my inheritance, and that all His glory is mine. He would say to us, "Let this sympathy you have with Me shine out, and that you are a *body of forehoppers* taken up and blessed, not in flesh as others were, but in spirit taken up there to be enabled to be a *body of forehoppers* down here." We are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, but here we are to go through the experience of His rejection, while having the hope of His return. God develops the Church in the position of this utter rejection. He (Christ) found the earth so poor a place that there was no prepared spot for His foot, so He calls out a people to pass through the same, but to be forehoppers.

*The same word as used for the division of the tribes.

This brings out the hope of the coming properly taught. There is an earthly and heavenly way of looking for the Lord. Ours is not that connected with the nation — we must begin at the other end, where Paul began — vital union with the risen and heavenly Christ. We are fellow-members, being "one spirit with the Lord" one body, and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. If the foot stumbles, the hand instinctively without a thought goes out to the wall to save the body. Our hopes begin with His person, and we have fellowship in His hopes. There are things for which He is waiting. He has sat down waiting, or "expecting," until His enemies be made His footstool. It is, blessed to know that all connected with rejection here, cannot separate the Church's hope from the full favour of God. She is a widow, not drunken, but in full sympathy with the Son of man sitting in heaven, the fulness of Him who filleth all in all, though down here. Now what am I as such to expect while here? The favour of God as assured to Christ at His transfiguration. Then I cannot but realize the light of God's countenance upon me, though I cannot go round to all His possessions, and say "I have got them." I have God the Father and Christ, but here while waiting, though I have the joy of God in my heart, there is plenty of sorrow outside. If I take the pleasure of the world, and go its way, I shall have chastening, for I am left in the place where it murdered Him, and is ready to murder me if I am faithful.

In review, then, we see that the coming of Christ, though it had shone out, had never been in the heart of the person in such a manner as to say, "It is not His *goods* but *Himself* I love." We are not going through, and getting blessing in *nature as* the Jews and Gentiles, and then having to look back and seeing all was so, though they did not understand it. Do I really prize suffering *now*? Do I realize that all the rollings up, and breakings down in my path, and the rattling of the enemy around, are part of the result of this blessed position of fellowship with Christ — eating from the same plate, drinking from the same cup? And can I say to each fresh outbreak, There is another proof of my fellowship? Alleluiah!