

# Waiting for Christ; or, The privilege of the Church to be always expecting her Lord.

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*Paper 10 of 20 'Plain Papers on Prophetic and Other Subjects'.*

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No one can deny that the natural, obvious sense of such expressions as "looking for the Saviour," "waiting for God's Son from heaven," "looking for that blessed hope," is that of actual, habitual expectancy of Christ's coming. Neither can it be called in question that numerous passages of God's word, if read by themselves, and left to make their own impression upon the mind, would at once be understood as inculcating this attitude of expectancy of Christ upon all who are His. They could not be understood otherwise, if read for the first time, and read with an unbiassed mind. "And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord." (Luke 12: 36.) "Waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1: 7.) "Our conversation is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil. 3: 20.) The Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven." (1 Thess. 1: 13.) "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." (Titus 2: 18.) "Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." (Heb. 9: 28.) "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly; Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Who can doubt that the natural, evident sense of these passages is, that it is the place of the Church to be continually in the posture of expectation of her Lord's return? Add to these the passages in which, again and again, the apostle, referring to that event says, "we which are alive and remain," "the dead shall be raised, and we shall be changed," and we see not how the conclusion can be avoided, that the Holy Ghost intended the saints to understand, that within the usual term of human life the coming of their Lord might take place, and they thus, without passing through death, be transformed and glorified.

But while such could scarcely fail to be the impression made by all these passages on an unbiassed mind, it is on the other hand to be admitted, that we are not to read passages, or selections of passages, by themselves, but to consider the complete testimony of God's word. The word of God is one vast, comprehensive, and consistent whole; and we must not so understand any of the parts of which this whole is composed, as to set them in contradiction to the other parts. Satan could quote an isolated text of Scripture to our Lord; but his reply was, "It is written again." Now it is freely admitted that we ought to hear and to weigh whatever may be urged on this ground of its being written again. "The Scripture cannot be broken." It must be in harmony with itself. The natural, obvious sense of the passages quoted above, and of many kindred passages, is what we have seen it to be, *if taken by themselves*. But if any should urge that other passages exist, *imperatively requiring* that these should be understood with some restrictions or limitations, we are surely bound to give such scriptures the fullest consideration; and should they

be found to have the meaning and force attributed to them, we ought surely to be subject thereto, and in the light of the latter passages correct our primary and mistaken apprehensions as to the former. The Lord grant to us that we may have nothing to maintain but His truth and His glory; and may He give us true subjection to His word in everything.

There are those, then, who affirm, that "if the one set of passages, taken by themselves, might seem to imply that Christ come *tomorrow*, or *any day*, even in apostolic times, there are whole classes of passages which clearly show that the reverse of this was the mind of the Spirit." What are those passages or classes of passages? We are told in reply that they are "those scriptures which announce *the work to be done*, and the extensive changes to come over the face of the Church and of Society, *between the two advents*." Now this is very intelligible language, and supposing it to be sustained by scripture quotations, very convincing also. *If there are scriptures* announcing work to be done, and changes to transpire, which *obviously* and *necessarily* required the lapse of more than a lifetime, or as has been said by some one, "*of many life-times*," ere the second advent should take place, then clearly the passages which speak of waiting and looking for that advent, would have to be understood in some modified sense. *But where are such passages to be found?* Let us examine such as are produced: but let the reader carefully note the words we have just used, and used advisedly. Any passages to be really applicable, must predict intervening events which *obviously* and *necessarily* required a lengthened period for their accomplishment. It is to no purpose to quote predictions, which, as a matter of fact, have been fulfilling for centuries. The question is, Are those predictions so expressed that Christians in apostolic times could be assured that centuries would be required for their fulfilment? Are they so expressed as to intimate *to them* with the measure of knowledge then possessed by them, that the return of Christ could not take place during their life-time on earth? If there be such, let them be produced; yea, and let them be received, and have their full weight on our souls. But let us carefully examine each one that is brought forward.

One passage most commonly produced, is that in which our Lord says to the eleven, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28: 18-20.) some of our readers may probably wonder what bearing this passage can have on the question before us. It is, however, the passage of all others in the New Testament, pleaded by anti-millenarians, not by one merely, but by most, as proving that the world had to be evangelized ere Christ could return. But how is it alleged that it proves this? First, the command to teach all nations is quoted, as in the margin, "disciple," or "make disciples of all nations;" and then it is argued, that if Christ sent His apostles to disciple all nations, and promised, that in doing this He would be with them to the end of the world, or age, the inference is to be drawn, that prior to the end of the age, and prior therefore to Christ's return, the nations were all to be evangelized or made disciples. It is contended, that the command to disciple all nations implies a promise that all nations shall be disciplined within the era to which the command applies — that is, within the present age, which all agree comes to a close at Christ's return. This is the argument, and it will be allowed that in stating it we have done it no injustice — it is dated in its full force. Let it now be fairly examined in the light of other portions of God's word.

To say the most, then, of this argument, it is an *inference*. It is not contended that our Lord says that all nations shall be made disciples ere He returns: but this inference is drawn from His command to go and disciple them. But is this a *necessary* inference? Do the Saviour's words *evidently* and *indisputably* imply what is deduced from them? We think not; and it seems to us that but a slight examination of kindred passages will make it evident that this is not the case. The eleven were sent to disciple all nations. This is granted; but what is the meaning of this language? Does it mean more than that this was to be their object? To refer to similar passages, was it not the object of John the Baptist's mission, "that all men through him might believe?" "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, *that all men through him might believe.*" Are we to understand from this, that the actual effect of John's mission would be, that all men certainly would believe in Christ? Are we to be told here also, that the command to John to go on this specific errand implied a promise that he should succeed? No one imagines this for a moment. He was sent to afford adequate ground for faith and opportunity of believing, to all to whom his mission actually extended. But no one thinks of inferring from the words, either that all men were literally to hear John the Baptist's testimony, or that all who did hear it would certainly believe in Christ. Then as to the mission into the world of our blessed Lord Himself, we have the statement, and that from His own lips, "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, *but that the world through him might be saved.*" (John 3: 17.) Does this mean that the actual effect of Christ's mission would surely and inevitably be the salvation of the whole world? Who could suppose this? If any one could, we have the refutation of such a thought in the next verse but one, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." God sent His Son into the world, as Christ sent His disciples to the nations, that the world through Him might be saved. But in actual result, the greater part of the world is condemned for the rejection of all this light and love, whether in the person of the Son of God, or in the ministry of His disciples. Again, as to the design of His own discourses, and especially of that one in which the words occur, our Lord says, "But these things I say, *that ye might be saved.*" (John 5: 34.) These words were spoken to the very persons of whom, in the same discourse, He says, "And ye will not come to me that ye might have life." Can anything be clearer, than that language such as we are considering is used to express, *not the actual, certain result of a mission or testimony, but the end to which it is directed*, and which would follow, supposing it to be received?

What may seem a case, not more in point but in some respects more exactly parallel, is the commission entrusted to Paul, as described by him in Acts 26: 15-18. "And he said . . . . I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles, *unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.*" The points of parallelism between this passage and the one in Matthew 28, will at once strike the reader, as well as the way in which it illustrates our argument. Were the words in Matthew 28 from the lips of Jesus risen? Those in Acts 26 were from the lips of Jesus *glorified*. Did the one commission extend to all nations? The other extended to "the people (that is, Israel) and to the Gentiles" — all nations in the strictest sense. Were the eleven sent to disciple all nations? Paul was sent "to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God." Did the commission to the eleven to disciple all nations imply, as is contended, a promise that all nations should be

discipled? Then surely the commission to Paul, to turn both the Jews and the Gentiles from darkness to light, equally implied a promise that he should succeed in doing this. Does the reader exclaim, that such a thought is out of the question? Assuredly it is so; but then there is really no better foundation for such an inference from Matthew 28 than from Acts 26. If it is out of the question in the one case, it is equally so in the other.

The difference between the two passages is this: the commission to Paul was evidently a personal one, and the mind at once perceives that there could be no such thing as a promise implied, that Paul himself individually should convert all the Jews and all the Gentiles. In the other passage the mind becomes confused as to the parties to whom the commission is given, and also as to those with regard to whom it was to be fulfilled; and it is in this confusion that any apparent force of the argument sought to be drawn from it consists. We would ask our brethren, who make such an inference from the command to disciple all nations, to whom do you suppose the promise you think implied in it was made? Were the eleven disciples themselves to disciple all nations? This would not be alleged in their case any more than in that of Paul. And does our Lord say anything to intimate that they would have successors in their work? Not a word. For anything the passage proves to the contrary, they were to be employed discipling all nations till the end of the age, and their Lord assures them of His presence with them in the work till the end of the age arrives. We know now, that the work left unfinished at their death has been taken up and carried on by others, who have for their comfort the same assurance; but there is no more intimation that the world should be actually discipled before the end of the age arrives, than that Paul should within his lifetime turn all, both Jews and Gentiles, from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.

We would ask again, who are the "all nations" that the eleven were commissioned to "disciple?" The expression must mean either the then living nations of that day, or the successive generations of all nations since that time, or the whole population of the earth at some given and yet future epoch. Take either of these alternatives, and the inference attempted to be drawn from the passage will be found equally inadmissible. Were they the then living nations of the earth? Then clearly there was no such promise of discipling them, as is said to have been implied in the command. *The then living nations were not discipled.* Were they all the successive generations composing "all nations" till the end of the age? *Neither have these been discipled.* Were they the nations of the then known earth, or did the expression include all the nations of those regions and continents since discovered, or the population of those countries which have since been colonized? If the former, there would be nothing incredible to the apostles, in the extending of their labours to the limits of their commission within the term of their natural lives, and the termination of those labours by the arrival of the end of the age. If the latter, they could not be hindered expecting their Lord, by the thought of the Gospel having to be preached to nations, of the existence of which they were not aware. The only remaining alternative is, that by "all nations" is meant the entire population of the earth at some yet future epoch, and this is the sense in which it is actually understood by those who use it as an anti-millenarian argument. But, then, if this be the sense in which the expression is to be understood, the question at once arises, whether the inference attempted to be drawn from this passage be in harmony with *actual testimonies of Scripture on the subject.* There are numerous testimonies of Scripture as to how and when the period of universal blessing will be introduced; and there are numerous and decisive declarations which prove that this will not be before the return of Christ. These

testimonies have been already in part presented to our readers; and until these testimonies are act aside, the only conclusion to which we can come with regard to the objection under consideration is this, that *it consists in setting a doubtful, unnecessary, unauthorized inference from one single passage, against the plain, copious, decisive testimony of numerous passages of God's holy word.*

If it should be urged that in Matt. 28 our Lord speaks of it all power being given unto him in heaven and in earth," and that from this we may infer the absolute efficiency of the mission with which, in the same sentence, he charged the eleven, saying, "Go, disciple all nations," here is the reply. In John 17: 2, where our Lord evidently speaks as in spirit beyond the cross, and does speak moreover of what was to be actually and efficiently accomplished, these are his words, "As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life," — not to all nations, but — "to as many as thou hast given him." "power over all flesh" perfectly corresponds to "all power both in heaven and on earth." But where the latter expression is used, the Saviour is sending his disciples on their public mission, and describing the end to which it is directed, and so he says, "Disciple all nations." Their mission was to all nations, and the object of it to make disciples. But where the actual result is described, where eternal life is said to be given, though the power is just as extensive, "power over all flesh," the absolute efficiency is restricted to a class — "to give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him."

We now turn to another Scripture which has been often adduced as affording proof that the Lord could not have intended His people to be habitually, from the time of His departure, expecting His return. We refer to Matt. 13 — a portion which has been thus used, not only by anti-millenarians, but by many who, believing Christ's coming to be pre-millennial, do not see it to have been always the place and privilege of the Church to be expecting it. The objection necessarily assumes diverse aspects as urged in support of these different views. It may be well to examine it on all sides.

By the former class of expositors it is in substance urged, that it "according to Matt. 13, a world-wide kingdom was to be formed, and to continue till the end of the age; that Christianity, under the figure of the mustard-seed, was to grow and increase, until, as a great tree, it should overshadow the world; that like leaven, working its way through the mass of human society, it should at length leaven the whole." It is asked "whether any intelligent Christian in apostolic times could rise from the study of these parables with the persuasion that the whole world might be thus overshadowed, thus leavened, thus externally subjugated to Christ, and the second advent arrive all in his own lifetime, or even in many lifetimes."\* Such is the reasoning of one school of prophetic interpretation; while others, who see nothing of the world's conversion in the parables of the mustard-seed and the leaven, do still regard the chapter as so foretelling a lengthened process of corruption, as by its very language to preclude any in apostolic times from actually waiting and looking for the coming of Christ.

\*Brown on the Second Advent.

In answer to the objection as first stated, we shall not reproduce here the arguments advanced when Matt. 13 was considered at length. We only now urge that the objection overstates the contents of the chapter. The chapter says, indeed, that the field in which the seed

was sown was "the world." and that both wheat and tares were to grow together till "the harvest" at "the end of the age."\* But the chapter does not speak of "the formation of a world-wide kingdom before the end of the age." Sowing seed *in the world*, and the continuance of the crop till the time for reaping it, is one thing: "the formation of a world-wide kingdom," as though the whole surface was to be sown, and yield a crop, is another. The former is what the chapter presents; the latter is a human idea, sought to be identified with the terms used in the chapter, but really and essentially distinct from them. So as to "the mustard-seed" and "the leaven." The chapter does affirm that the seed would become a great tree, and that the fowls would shelter in it; but it does not say that the tree would "overshadow the world." The leaven was, according to the chapter, to leaven the "three measures of meal;" but the chapter does not say that these "three measures" mean "the world," and it is mere assumption to reason from it as though they did mean this. Matt. 13 does not affirm that the world will be converted prior to Christ's coming. It teaches, as already proved at large, (see "*The Great Prophetic Question*,") the very opposite. The anti-millenarian argument from this chapter is based on the assumption that the chapter says what it does not say, and the conclusion thus arrived at is in direct contradiction to what the chapter does declare.

\*It may be well to guard here against a use often made of this passage, as though it taught the impossibility of exercising church discipline. Church discipline is not the subject of Matt. 13, and in fact belongs to an entirely, different category of ideas. The Church is the sphere for the exercise of church discipline, and disowning that a person belongs to the Church is the utmost extremity to which discipline can be carried. The field is "the world," and what the passage asserts is the continuance in the world, as matter of fact, of the results of Christ's work as a sower, and of Satan's work in the same character, till the end of the age. Popery does pretend to root up the tares by delivering excommunicated persons to the civil power; but separation from evil, or church-discipline, is no attempt to root up the tares

The objection, as put by those who admit that the advent is pre-millennial, deserves a fuller consideration. It is easy to see how a Christian, looking back on the dreary course of centuries, in which the corruption foretold in this chapter has been in progress, may suppose that Christians in apostolic times would necessarily look forward to some such protracted period, as requisite for the fulfilment of our Lord's predictions. In that case they obviously could not have lived in the habitual expectation of Christ's coming. But what is there in the chapter itself to have produced such an impression on the minds of the disciples, or of Christians in apostolic days? That the parables were so spoken, and so written, as to find their actual fulfilment in what has gone on for centuries, is beyond doubt. But it is here that God's perfect, infinite wisdom is manifested. While the fulfilment of the predictions has really occupied centuries, the predictions themselves were so expressed as not to suggest the inevitable postponement of the Lord's coming at any part of the period which has elapsed. Look at the chapter in question. First John the Baptist, and then our Lord Himself, had preached the kingdom of heaven. The ideas necessarily awakened in Jewish minds by its announcement, were those of the kingdom long and oft foretold by their prophets in days of old. But the Jews were not ready for this kingdom; they were even then rejecting their Messiah, and ready to consummate His rejection by putting Him to death. It is on this ground, as breaking all natural links with Israel according to the flesh. that He instructs His disciples as to the character of that anomalous period which was to intervene between Israel's rejection of their Messiah and His return in glory. It is in "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" that He in this

chapter instructs them. Now this very character of mystery, stamped on the period spanned by these parables, would prepare the disciples for its being brought suddenly to a close. Then as to the parables themselves, what is there in them necessarily to suggest the thought of continuance? How very early in the apostolic age were the disciples surrounded by circumstances so far fulfilling what these parables foretold, as not to find in them any necessary obstacle to their expectation of Christ's coming? A sower went forth to sow — this began to be accomplished by our Lord Himself while here, and was still further fulfilled by the disciples. An enemy sowed tares among the wheat. Can any one read the Acts, or the Epistles, and not see ample evidence that this had been already done when they were penned? The servants were not to pluck up the tares — both were to grow together till the harvest; and, at the harvest, angel-executioners of judgment were to do the work prohibited to the servants. Was there anything here to suggest delay? From the terms of the parable no one could gather that the sowing of the seed, the ripening of the crop, and the reaping of the harvest, would not all be accomplished in one generation. We know that it has been otherwise, and the terms of the prediction are in perfect accordance with the fact as it has transpired; but there was nothing in those terms to suggest that at any point in the past history of Christianity, the whole might not be wound up in a very short period indeed. The mustard-seed was to become a great tree; and we admit (see *"The Great Prophetic Question"*) that it is the growth of Christianity (previously corrupted, alas!) that is thus symbolized. But the passage does not define how great the tree was to become; and we have abundant evidence that within the lifetime of the apostles Christianity had made rapid progress, and spread through extensive regions. Paul speaks, in writing to the Colossians, of "the word of the truth of the gospel, which," he says, "is come unto you, as it is in all the world." (Col. 1: 6.) In the same chapter he speaks of "the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature under heaven." We have no idea that by this language is meant literally that every creature had then heard the Gospel. Still, it is language which could not have been used had there not been already a very wide diffusion of the good news. And when we think of the narrow limits of the then known world, the evangelist using the expression, as he does, of the Roman Empire alone; (see Luke 2: 1;) and when we remember that within the apostles' lifetime the gospel had certainly extended throughout the Roman Empire; it is evident that the predicted growth of the mustard-tree could present no hindrance to their continual expectancy of Christ. And if it should be replied, that we ourselves have taught that the parable sets forth, not only the growth of Christianity, but the growth of a Christianity already corrupted and become worldly in its character, we can only answer, that elements of worldliness and corruption were, alas! but too soon introduced; and when once there, they kept pace with the spread of that into which they had been introduced. If all Asia heard the word of the Lord from Paul's lips, (see Acts 19: 10,) he had to write ere long to his beloved Timothy, "This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me." (2 Tim. 1: 15.) And if he and his fellow-apostles were kept from worldliness, and the first freshness and energy of their love to Christ and zeal for His glory maintained by the power of the Holy Ghost, how deeply had he to lament the declension which was taking place among the converts to the faith. There were many, of whom he had to write weeping, because they were the enemies of the cross of Christ, minding earthly things. (Phil. 3: 18, 19.) So that even as to the worldly elements introduced into Christianity, and so corrupting it, in proportion as it outwardly grew and strengthened, the parable of the mustard-seed was so far fulfilled in apostolic days, that no one could say the end might not even then be close at hand: there was nothing in the parable to interfere with the habitual expectancy of Christ, which is the proper posture of the Church.

By Christians generally the difference is little estimated between the known world of apostolic days and the world as known in modern times. One whole hemisphere, and vast regions in the other, have been discovered since the Scriptures were written; and the spread of the gospel in modern times has been so connected with geographical discoveries, and European colonization, that it is difficult to say whether, setting these aside, the lapse of eighteen centuries has done more for the spread of Christianity than was accomplished in its early days. We say setting these aside; for evidently, on our present question, they have no bearing or influence whatever. Christians of the apostolic age could not be expecting the fruits of modern discovery and emigration ere their Lord could return: it is impossible that these could interpose between their souls and the immediate hope of Christ's coming. And granting that from our Lord's commission to His disciples, and from such parables as those in Matt. 13, they might anticipate a wide diffusion of the Gospel within the regions then known, and which to their apprehension constituted "all nations — the world," Scripture affords ample evidence that such a diffusion actually took place in their own day, as might well satisfy them that nothing further *necessarily* and *inevitably* intervened between them and their hope. And then, as to all the intimations of evil being introduced among themselves, we have declaration on declaration in the epistles that this had already commenced. "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work." (2 Thess. 2: 7.) "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; *whereby we know that it is the last time.*" (1 John 2: 18.) THE antichrist had not yet come; but the time had come, the last time, the era which was to be characterized by His coming: and already there were many of his spirit and character, many antichrists, by which the saints were to know that the last time had commenced. We cannot conceive a more decisive proof of the Lord's gracious solicitude that nothing should interpose between the souls of His people and the hope of His own coming. True, antichrist was to come, and he had not yet actually appeared; but the saints were not therefore to conclude that Christ's coming must needs be a long way off. There were already many antichrists, by which they were to know that it was the last time. There is, however, one passage as to the coining of the antichrist, which, more than any other, is relied on, as proving that the immediate hope of Christ's coming was not to be cherished by the saints. It is regarded as their stronghold by those who maintain that the certain occurrence of intermediate events was revealed in the word, and that Christians were warned against the idea that Christ's coming might be any day. It is to 2 Thess. 2 we refer; and as it is important that such a passage should have the fullest possible consideration, let us glance at the whole doctrine and bearing of both epistles, and then examine the argument for delay sought to be drawn from the second chapter of the second epistle.

It is worthy of notice that the Gospel was introduced to Thessalonica by the Apostle Paul himself. "For three sabbath days," we are told, "Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead, and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ." (Acts 17: 2, 3.) But while thus preaching Christ, in His death and resurrection, it is obvious from what follows, that he had not omitted to speak of Christ's coming kingdom and glory. Many, both Jews and Greeks believed; of the latter, indeed, a great multitude; and in the midst of their labours, the apostle and his companions were interrupted by a tumultuous assault on the house where they lodged. Jason, who had entertained them, was drawn before the rulers; and the gist of the accusation against them was such as to show the prominent place which Christ's kingly glory must have had in the preaching of the apostle. "These that have turned the world upside down are

come hither also, whom Jason hath received; and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there in another king, one Jesus." No doubt it was a perversion of their words to accuse them of any opposition to Caesar, or rivalry of his power; but it is evident that they must have borne a decided testimony to the kingdom and glory of Christ. Their labours, however, were cut short by the hand of persecution, and it appears from Paul's first epistle, that he had been driven away before he had communicated to them all that was in his heart to have ministered among them. The bearing of this on the doctrine of the epistles, and on our present question, will soon be evident to our readers.

In turning to the two epistles, nothing can be more manifest than that the coming of Christ is the central doctrine in both. The apostle thanks God for them, remembering without ceasing not only their "work of faith," and "labour of love," but also, their "patience of hope," in our Lord Jesus Christ. And as to what their "hope" was, he leaves no room for doubt. "Ye turned to God from idols," is his language, "to serve the living and true God, and *to wait for his Son from heaven.*" He does not chide them for being in this attitude of soul, or tell them of a number of events which must necessarily occur ere their hope can be realized. No, he states it as their proper, normal condition, as part of that to which they had been converted, by the mighty power which had attended his preaching amongst them. He reminds them of what he had suffered when with them, comforts them under the continued pressure of trial, expresses the yearnings of his heart after them; and, though hindered by Satan once and again from returning to them, he finds refuge

for his soul in the prospect of re-union with them, and full joy in them all, at the coming of Christ. "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ AT HIS COMING? For ye are our glory and joy." This closes 1 Thess. 2. In 1 Thess. 3 he explains to them his solicitude about seeing them again. He had been so anxious on their account as to send Timotheus, and had been greatly comforted by the report brought by him on returning, of their faith and charity, and of their desire to see the apostle. What a burst of holy affection follows. "For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith." Blessed as had been their reception of the Gospel, precious as had been its fruits among them, and abundant as was the joy of the apostle over them, there was still something in which he was anxious to instruct them; and as he was hindered seeing them, to teach them by word of mouth, he communicates in the next chapter, the truth which they still lacked. He commences by saying, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren." (1 Thess. 4: 13.) Surely it is the lacking truth which he is now about to minister to their souls. And what is it he imparts to them? Some corrective to their too ardent hopes of the return of Jesus? Something to cool down their expectations, and cause them to look for a train of intervening events? Far from it indeed. They were already waiting for God's Son from heaven, and he rejoiced over them that they were. In each chapter, thus far, he has treated of Christ's coming, connecting it with all their affections and joys, as well as with his own, and connecting it, besides, with the issues of a holy, obedient, devoted walk. And it is as to Christ's coming that he is about more fully to instruct them; not, however, to abate their expectation of it, But to place it more fully, because more intelligently, before their souls.

As to themselves, their one hope was Christ's coming; and they, at least, as will be admitted by all, were waiting for it, as though it might be any day. But while waiting thus, some had been removed from their midst by death; and they do not seem to have apprehended that their departed brethren would be raised to participate in their joy at the coming of Jesus. It is on this point the apostle now instructs them. Concerning them which were asleep, they were not to sorrow, as others who had no hope. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, (marking it thus as a new, special, revelation,) that we which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent (or go before) them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord." Thus does the apostle seek to perfect what was lacking in their faith. Already they knew that the Son of God was to return from heaven, and that on His return he would reign over the kingdom promised to Him of old. It was for this they had been waiting from the day of their conversion. Now they are told that their sleeping brethren are to have part in the glory of that coming kingdom; and that so far from losing anything by having departed, their resurrection will be the first event connected with the descent of the Son of God. The risen saints, and those who are alive and remain, are then to be caught up together. The meeting-place is to be in the air. Such are the additional truths contained in this transcendently important passage. Surely there is nothing here to place in the distance the hope of Christ's coming. "WE which are alive and remain," placed in contrast with "*them* which are asleep," would suggest anything rather than the *necessary* inevitable lapse of centuries ere it be possible for that event to transpire! The language used can only correspond with the firm persuasion that we may, and with the desire that we should, be alive when the Lord Jesus shall descend.

But this is not the whole. After comforting the Thessalonians, and exhorting them to "comfort one another with these words," he proceeds to say, "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you." They had need to be instructed on the points just handled — the resurrection of the sleeping saints and their translation with those who are alive, to meet the Lord in the air — these were new truths, of which they had till now been ignorant. But of the times and the seasons there was no need to write to them. Why? "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." Here we enter upon another subject. The descent of the Lord Jesus into the air, and the translation of the Church to meet him there, is one thing. The day of the Lord, and its coming upon the ungodly as a thief in the night, is another thing. The one is all brightness and joy; the other is all gloom, and darkness, and terror. The Thessalonians had to receive a new, fresh revelation through the apostle, to acquaint them with the former: with the latter they were already acquainted by means, doubtless, of the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as by the ministry among them of the apostle and his companions. "The day of the Lord" is a phrase of frequent occurrence in the Old Testament, and always refers, we believe we may say with confidence, to the execution of judgment on the earth. In its full sense, it doubtless implies the yet future day of the Lord's actual presence to execute judgment on the wicked, and to establish by power His own rule over the earth. It may be used in some instances of remarkable interpositions of God in judgment, where the Lord's actual presence is

not included in the meaning of the phrase. Still, in such instances we have types and specimens of what "the day of the Lord" is, in its full, absolute sense. And wherever it occurs, it will be found connected with judgment. "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." (Isa. 2: 12.) "Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come." (Joel 1: 15.) "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." (Joel 2: 1, 2.) "Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?" (Amos 5: 20.) "The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Zeph. 1: 14, 15.) "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch." (Mal. 4: 1.) "The great and dreadful day of the Lord." (Mal. 5: 5.) Such is the force of this expression in the Old Testament. In the New, it is of like import. "For as the lightning that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven; so shall also the Son of man be in his day." (Luke 17: 24.) Noah and the flood, Lot and the burning of Sodom, are referred to; and it is said, "Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed." (Verse 30.)

Peter, on the day of Pentecost, speaks of "that great and notable day of the Lord." Our Lord Himself warned His hearers to "take heed lest that day should come upon them unawares." "For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth." (Luke 21: 35.) We need not give further evidence as to the meaning of the phrase "the day of the Lord." In all these passages, as in the one in 1 Thess. 5, it points to the execution of sudden and overwhelming judgments on the wicked, introductory to the establishment by power of Christ's earthly kingdom. How marked the contrast between the descent of the Lord Jesus into the air, which is presented to the Thessalonian saints as the consummation of all their hopes, and this "day of the Lord," which is to come "as a thief in the night," on the whole world of the ungodly. True, they are but different stages of the one great event, the coming of the Lord; but in their character how distinct! In the one case the Lord descends into the air; in the other His judgments fall on the earth. In the one case the Lord comes to gather His saints; in the other to smite His foes. And the saints are instructed as to the one, that they may know assuredly that they are exempt from the terrors of the other. "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." Already, in our hopes and destinies, and in the spirit of our minds, children of the day, ere the day actually bursts on the sleeping world, drunken with its carnal joys, we shall have been caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and we shall be with Him when His appearing affrights and overwhelms His foes. Such is the doctrine of this first epistle. May it be written indelibly on our hearts, and exert there all its consolatory and sanctifying power.

Between their reception of the first and the second epistle, the deceiver had been at work. Either by leading them to misconstrue the first epistle, or by means of another forged epistle, he had succeeded in perplexing them, as though this "day of the Lord" had actually arrived. The persecutions under which they laboured had evidently continued, and become fiercer and hotter,

and they had begun to confound these troubles with "the day of the Lord," as though it had really come. No wonder that they should be troubled by such a thought, when they had once entertained it. To be still in unchanged bodies, not having met the Lord in the air, and their departed brethren still in the grave, while, as they supposed, the terrors of the day of the Lord actually surrounded them, it is no marvel that they were shaken and troubled. All the apostle's arguments in the second epistle are directed against this mistake. In the first chapter, he shows them the difference between their present troubles and persecutions, and those overwhelming troubles which are to characterize "the day of the Lord." Now it is the saints who are in trouble; then it will be the world. Now the saints suffer at the world's hands; then the world will be punished by the Lord's hand. "So that we ourselves," he says, "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 with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day." Thus does he fortify their souls against the terror and distraction sought to be inflicted upon them. Why be distracted as though "the day" had come? You now have trouble, and the world has rest. When "the day" comes, the world will have tribulation, and you shall have rest. The day will not come till the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven, and then it is to be glorified in His saints — in you — and to take vengeance on His adversaries.

In 2 Thess. 2 he expressly refers to the delusion sought to be practised upon them. "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by 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 Christ is present." We render this word "present." and not "at hand," and for this reason: the word is *enesteken*, it occurs in the New Testament seven times, and five times it is rendered "present." Romans 8: 38, "nor things *present*." 1 Cor. 3: 22, "or things *present*." In these instances it is the more remarkable for being used in contrast with "*mellonta*," or "things to come." 1 Cor. 7: 26, "the *present* distress." Gal. 1: 4, "this *present* evil world." Heb. 9: 9, "a figure for the time then *present*." In 2 Tim. 3: 1, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times *shall come*," the meaning is obvious to all. It is not that when the last days have arrived, perilous times shall afterwards come; but that in the last days there shall be perilous times, that is, they shall be *present*. When the last days are present, the perilous times are also *present*. Such being the evident meaning of the word six times out of the seven that it occurs in the New Testament, why translate it otherwise in the seventh? especially when in this, its own proper and only sense, it so entirely harmonizes with the whole doctrine of both epistles? It is on this passage, mistranslated thus, that so many found their arguments for the inevitable delay of the Lord's coming. They say that the apostle reproves the idea that the Lord's coming was at hand. The answer is, No, it is not of the Lord's *coming*, but of *His day*, that he writes; and it is not the idea even of "the day" being "*at hand*" that he rebukes, but the idea that it was "*present*" — that it *had actually come*. And he guards them against this delusion in two ways. He beseeches them "by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to him," not

to be shaken or troubled, as though the day were present. The coming of Jesus, and our gathering together to Him in the air, is the Church's portion: the day comes upon the world. He beseeches them by the one not to be distracted about the other. The day cannot burst with its terrors on the world till the saints have been gathered to the Lord Jesus in the air. Then he further shows that "the day" cannot come till there come a falling away first, (literally, the apostacy,) and that man of sin be revealed — that wicked, whom the Lord shall consume with the breath of His mouth, and destroy with the brightness of His coming. It is on the man of sin that the judgments of the day of Christ first fall. It is by the epiphany of His coming, or presence, that the man of sin is destroyed. Clearly, then, "the day" cannot come till the man of sin has come. But the apostle does not say that CHRIST cannot come till then. He distinguishes between "the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ," and "the brightness (*epiphaneia*) of his coming (*parousia*)." It is His *parousia* that gathers the saints in the air. It is the *epiphaneia* of His *parousia* that destroys the man of sin. The day commences with the *epiphaneia* of Christ's coming — that is, with His appearing to the world. The day therefore comes not till the man of sin has come. But we have no warrant to say this of the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him. That may be any day, any hour. Nothing that has been considered presents any necessary obstacle to that. May our hearts be ready for it! "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Amen.