

## The Coming and the Day of the Lord

2 Thessalonians 2: 1-8.

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(Lecture 1 of 'Our Hope' and 'The Prospects of the World.')

There are various points of view in which it has pleased the Spirit of God to present the coming or presence of the Lord Jesus, and this partly because truth requires it (for there are different aspects of that coming); partly because the Spirit of God must apply the truth morally — that is, according to the need of those addressed, and as the occasion of unfolding the glory of God. Now as this is true of the Bible in general, and of every other part of the truth, so it applies equally to the great theme that I have before me this afternoon.

First of all, we may read in the word of God of the coming of the Lord Jesus as a broad general expectation. I speak of His presence now, or of His return. We have it thus presented in various parts of the New Testament. So it was preached by the apostles; so it was looked for by those who believed. The Thessalonians themselves are an example of this application of the truth. They, on their conversion, did not merely confide in God through the knowledge of the gospel, but they "waited," as it is written, "for his Son from heaven," even for their deliverer from the wrath to come. This clearly is the most comprehensive aspect of the coming or presence of the Lord Jesus. It defines nothing that He was to do. Whether He was to make this earth His dwelling-place, and bless here below those who believe in Him, or whether He was to take them away from the earth to heaven, was not therein explained. There was the certain and, in itself, most influential fact, that the great object of faith is similarly the object of hope; that we have not merely a scene of blessedness to expect by and by, but the return of the same Person who "died for our sins according to the scriptures," and who was raised again from the dead according to the scriptures — the one to put away our evil, the other to bring in the full exhibition of the blessedness that is the portion of faith, showing it above all in His own glorious person. They looked for Him to come back again, and establish us who wait for Him in the same blessedness in which He stands Himself risen from the dead. Such is the distinct expectation presented in the word of God. It is the counsel of God. It is worthy of His Son, and of the atonement wrought by His Son. Impossible to say more! Other passages may expand, and we may apply, the blessed truth; but to rise higher than that which was worthy of God and His own Son in the deepest work of His love is impossible.

Now the Thessalonians were led by the Spirit of God into this hope from their conversion. Clearly, therefore, it is not some recondite truth that a Christian can afford to do without, nor is it a matter of slow growth, or that needs deep research. I grant you that, being a divine truth, no state or time will ever exhaust it. This is true of all revelation. The word savours of the God who has given it. Hence it is open to the simplest, and it rises above the deepest; and indeed there is nothing that more characterizes divinely revealed truth than this twofold aspect of it. It is the same in the highest degree with the persons of the Godhead; it is no less true of the incarnation, and of redemption. So it is with the hope.

Thus the Thessalonians are a beautiful sample of comparatively young believers who were led into the truth by divine teaching: not at all so as not to require more truth, but at the same time really taught of God, making it their own, and using it as all truth is meant to be used — practically; used for themselves in their relations with God — for themselves in their relations one with another, and, indeed, as to all men — the absorbing object of hope for the affections when the soul has been truly

brought to God.

Indeed, this reminds me to say a word, my friends, to you who are here — I have no doubt very many children of God; but, it may be, not a few that have their doubts. To you, then, I would say with all love, to all who want this assurance, that not to have such a conviction is to lose after all an immense part of the blessing; and, therefore, if you do not know yourselves to be children of God, if you have not peace by faith in Christ Jesus, as far as your enjoyment is concerned, you may be even more miserably off than before your conversion. You cannot now enjoy the world as before; nor can you enter with your old natural zest into pleasures as you are. Nay, what ought you to enjoy? How can it be with the sad consciousness of a want so grave? How take your ease where God's word so solemnly admonishes of the danger of slighting your real need? And the more thoroughly painful to those who do know the truth, because the blessing is so real, and so near to every one of them; and therefore I do most strongly exhort any who have not this known rest for their souls to look to God now, that they may find it in the Lord Jesus; nay, if it be His will, even by a few words of His grace, that you may taste it now. For let me tell you in the Lord's name, that He has done and suffered what justifies God in blessing you, not merely according to your thoughts, but according to His own. And God's blessing in the gospel is to bring you completely out of your own condition, as a ground on which to stand before God, and to plant you in another, even Christ. Your condition is that of the first man, Adam; the man that fell having left God and abandoned the place of blessing in which he was put. But the Second man is come, and He it is who has triumphed; and the Holy Ghost is sent down from heaven now, not merely to dwell in the church, or to work in the way of spiritual gift, but to call out souls according to the riches of the grace of God, through the name of Jesus; and, therefore, the whole point of faith is this, that you call on the name of the Lord, abandoning all that you are, and confessing what you have done. This is repentance and the call of faith. Repentance is when a soul pronounces judgment upon itself, according to the truth and character of God. It is a soul turning to God in the name of the Lord Jesus, and not merely receiving by faith the blessing which God can afford now to give to the very full through His Son, but also, and in consequence of this distrusting nature, judging self, assured that what we are is altogether unfit for the presence of God.

Now the whole practical life of a Christian is the working out of these two things. On the one hand there is the judgment of self day by day, and, consequently, readiness to confess our failures, more particularly anything that is positively against the Lord, and, of course, against man too; but there is on the other the hearty acknowledgment of the Lord Jesus by faith, with the blessing into which He brings. The whole course, therefore, of Christian experience is just the power of the Holy Ghost bringing the truth and grace of Christ to comfort us and to judge self — the life of the Second to set aside the first man. Bad teaching may have obscured all this; but, certainly, if you have indeed received the Lord Jesus, believing in His name, this is your portion, however feebly you may know it; and this is what you ought to be living in and not merely be learning, though surely to learn if you have ill known it. But if you rest on Him, then comes the blessed hope, — the same Jesus who came into this world, and in His death and resurrection displayed what God is toward me and you, after having displayed what man ought to be toward God in all His life — the same Jesus who died on the cross to put away the body of sin, and to show in His resurrection an altogether new estate for believing man before God — the same Jesus is coming back again.

But then what is He going to do? Here it is that the presence of the Lord Jesus branches out into at; least two great parts. He is coming. But it is evident that the broad teaching of the Bible (taking in now the Old Testament as well as the New — and we ought to take in both), the general truth of the coming of the Lord Jesus is this: He is going to establish that blessed time for which saints and

prophets ever waited, since man fell into sin. God has not absolutely consigned this world to His enemy; He does not mean to allow Satan even an appearance of triumph long. I admit to you that, all through, Satan has seemed to gain nothing but victory; but he never does really. He may ruin himself, and has done so; he may ruin others, too, but God will manifestly triumph; as He has already done in perfection to the eye of faith through and in His Son. Jesus *has* won the victory, and this by suffering and blood and death. Consequently He has made it not merely to be a question of God's mercy saving souls, though of course this remains true; but, besides, it is made the highest righteousness on God's part to save souls. It is no strain of the divine prerogative, but what God owes the Lord Jesus. The Son of God spent Himself for God the Father, who, now and for evermore, will repay this wondrous debt, which, singularly blessed to say, He owes to Him who is the Son of His love, but also the Son of Man as such. Therein lies the reason why man is destined to such a wonderful place, as it explains also why God passes angels by. It is not but that angels, in their own primary estate and personal qualities, may be superior to man. Assuredly they "excel in strength." Man, of the dust, is at best but a weak creature. But he is destined to reign with Christ, because the Son of God was pleased to become a man, and has accomplished redemption for him.

Therefore the incarnation is of all moment (besides being the very essence and substance of the orthodox faith), and, in order to our having part with Him to God's glory, Christ's death and resurrection. For man being fallen and guilty, Jesus, while the only holy and perfect man, nevertheless must suffer the consequences of all the ruin of man — must know the forsaking and judgment that came upon Him from God in the cross. Accordingly, having now risen above it, He is Himself gone — our life, righteousness, and peace — into the heavenly glory, but waits to come back again. All Christians professedly own this. All the creeds of Christendom acknowledge it — in general terms at least; and so far it is quite right. But then we shall find that the word of God, as must be the case, is always wiser, richer, and more profound than any forms of truth that ever were or can be drawn up by man — I care not who or what they are. Who will deny that God is incomparably better than man, or His word better than all the dogmas that have been founded upon it, or drawn from it?

The precious word of God I have in my hand shows us then, first, the grand but general expectation that He will come (or return, as we now say) to put down evil, and to establish good. Accordingly He will have a kingdom, not alone in an invisible way by the power of the Holy Ghost, but when He personally and visibly reigns over the earth I do not say living on the earth — this is going beyond scripture — yet none the less taking the earth in a most manifest manner under His direct power and government, and consequently meeting and accomplishing all the yearnings and expectations that were founded on Old Testament scripture; for the New in no way neutralizes the Old, but rather confirms it, while it also brings in "better things," and the mystery hid from ages and from generations. The Lord will thus, in the most complete manner, accomplish the hope for which His saints and people were waiting from of old. Christianity, whilst it ushers in new and heavenly things after a new sort, seals the truth of the old and earthly things according to prophecy.

But is this all that scripture tells us? By no means. We do find it in the New Testament. Thus, when the apostle Peter preached to the Jews (Acts 3), he told them to "repent and be converted, that their sins might be blotted out." What had been the consequence? "Times of refreshing should come from the presence of the Lord." And how? By a fresh outpouring of the Spirit? No, but by sending Jesus Christ, and so fulfilling the prophecy. It is the more striking, because, if ever there was a blessed season of spiritual power here below, it was then; and then was the time, if it was simply to be a spiritual reign to be brought in by preaching and like means, to have held it out. But what they had then was only a sample of what was coming by and by. Now such is not the expectation that Peter presses,

although it is true that the Holy Ghost will be poured out a second time. Then will be the latter rain, as Pentecost the former; but such is not the stated way, nor was it then the moment or suited occasion for re-affirming that truth. What the apostle sets out is, that God will send Jesus Christ, who has been already fore-appointed. But alas! we find the Jews, instead of receiving the truth, immediately after reject this witness of it. When the enmity to the testimony of Jesus of Nazareth, risen and exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour to Israel, drew out Jewish hatred to the full, they displayed it in killing Stephen, another blessed witness of it. Thereon God brings out a remarkable change in His dealings — a turning-point in His ways. For the blessing, instead of now being found in Jerusalem, or presented to it only, flows away from it in strong tide. The church was scattered everywhere, and its members carried with them the seeds of eternal life. The apostle of the Gentiles in due course was called. Philip meanwhile is used in Samaria, in a way altogether unprecedented outside the favoured people, though God would not give the full distinctive blessing of the Holy Ghost in an independent way. The apostles Peter and John are sent down in order to link up the work, and make it practically one. There is no countenance given to human independency in the things of God.

We find, thenceforward, that the current of the blessing sets in towards the Gentiles — to the way that is desert, to the Ethiopian stranger, to Azotus. Still more conspicuously, the apostle Paul brings out in due time among the Gentiles the distinctive features of Christianity and the church. With this goes a most important difference in the way in which the presence of the Lord is presented. As long as it was a question of Israel, the prominent thought was the Lord Jesus coming, and in divine grace restoring and exalting the very people that crucified Him. And then will all the nations of the earth be blest; for they cannot as a whole know this, till Israel becomes by divine mercy the first of nations. Such is God's order.

Thus the rejection of the truth and of the grace of God by the Jews led to the call of the apostle of the Gentiles, and to that remarkable development of the truth of God, which we now know in what is commonly called Christianity. And this, as remarked, gives a very important modification to the truth we are now considering. For what is the essential outward peculiarity of Christianity as such? Is it not a Saviour absent on high, rather than a king governing His own people Israel, and others — the Gentiles — blest under His benignant sway? It is not the power of God putting down Satan manifestly in the world, and the earth yielding her increase, but the Holy Ghost giving victory over evil by faith, and saints separated from the world. All those expectations belonged to the hopes of Israel, and will be accomplished when Israel re-appears in the scene by and by. Christianity, I repeat, in no wise sets aside such a prospect, but rather seals its truth, however postponed for the present. At the same time it shows us what is altogether different, namely, the King rejected instead of being received by His people; and the messengers of the King, instead of finding homage when He went up to heaven, themselves likewise rejected. The proffered blessing was thus completely discarded by Israel for the time; and, during their interval of eclipse, the Gentiles became the direct object of God's testimony, and the channel of privilege in what is called Christianity. You see it yourselves. You know what the condition of Israel is, and the extraordinary fact that the people who have the Hebrew scriptures least of all understand their own best boon. They have an older history than any in the earth can really prove, — I do not say can *boast* of, — for of what will not man boast? and so much the more, because he has no sound foundation for it. But the Jews have a legitimate and most ancient history, and this, too, divinely guaranteed and proved. And, more than this, they have a future — a most sure and glorious future; but their future will be found, where they least look for it, under the shelter of His wings whom they foully scorned and crucified — even of Jehovah Messiah, the God of Israel.

During the time, then, of Israel's refusal of the Anointed One, Jesus is not only rejected by them,

but He is exalted in heaven where He takes a new place. Never do you read in scripture, that when born of a woman and under the law He was born Head of the church; never do you hear God saying in His word that when Jesus lived and laboured on earth He was saluted even as priest. Never is it written there that He died Head of the church. Not so; but when He was raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand, then and there He was given by God Head to the church. The epistle to the Ephesians furnishes the positive demonstration of this truth, the epistle to the Colossians just the same; and I need hardly say there is no scripture that has even the appearance of contradicting it. All contrary thoughts are mere human speculation, or the rubbish of tradition, or that dry heap of mummies, — scientific theology. With all evidence scripture proves that a new state of things came in with the descent of the Holy Ghost, consequent upon the death and resurrection of Christ, and His heavenly place of exaltation, where He is now in glory. For the Holy Ghost is personally sent down, as I need not insist, in a manner altogether unexampled; and Christianity exhibits, not only the gospel of God's grace, but the unfolding of these two great truths: — first, Christ Head of the church at the right hand of God; and, secondly, the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven baptizing Jews and Gentiles that believe into that one body, the church. Never is there a trace of such a body before; never so much as a promise that any should be united as members to Christ. If one had talked about members of His body, even when He was here below, the thing would have been unintelligible. Nobody contemplated such a relationship. Not only no one thought of it, but God Himself did not reveal it. It was the mystery that was hidden from ages and generations. Now it is revealed.

As this has an immense bearing on all other truth, giving additional force to what had been known before, while it opens out vast tracts wholly unknown, so the hope of the Church is affected in the most intimate manner by so great a change, — Christ not received by Israel, and reigning over them and the Gentiles here below, but exalted to the right hand of God in heaven, and there made Head of a new thing. Hence the apostle Paul brings out, according to the Holy Ghost, the capital truth that, instead of the old people of God waiting for Christ to come and bless them and so all nations (Psalm 67) upon the earth, Christ will receive the Church to Himself above, so that, in the day when He appears and accomplishes the old hopes, He will be glorified in His saints and admired in all that believed, risen from the dead or changed into His own glorious likeness. Thus there will be no incongruous mixture of those risen and changed with men in earthly bodies. There will be the two immense, and at the same time simultaneous, scenes of blessing, — the earth with Jews and nations blessed under His reign, and the heavenly places filled with those that are then in a condition suited to heaven; for "as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly." But that same Jesus who is the Head of heavenly glory will reign over all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues; and therefore Israel, who were promised the first earthly place, will have it in the mercy and faithfulness of God, — a people truly converted and prepared to receive the Lord "in that day."

It is plain that all would be confusion if these two purposes of God were both in operation at the same time. Supposing, for instance, a Jew converted now, if God were forming both an earthly and a heavenly people together, might he not say with reason, "These two callings perplex me sorely; I do not know which to choose. On the whole it seems to me that a heavenly place would be better than an earthly. At the same time an earthly place is what all my fathers have been waiting for; and so I am not exactly sure which I ought to close with." But in the wise goodness of God there is no such confusion; for now that the earthly calling is vanished, it is a question of heaven or hell. But, more than this, such a direction would introduce the utmost doctrinal ambiguity, because the manner in which God calls the heavenly people to walk is on a different footing from that of such as are called with an earthly calling. You can understand it from your own households. You do not teach your children to do exactly what you tell your servants to do — at least I hope not. You do not put them under the same regime There is

not only a difference of relationship, but a different line of conduct suited to each relationship. And let me lay it down as a weighty truth, which you will find verified in scripture and indeed in morality, that all our duties flow from our relationships. Consequently the first question is to find what is my relationship, because then I have to act accordingly. Precisely in this way it is that the earthly people, having rejected Christ and the blessing, have forfeited all for the time; and so true is this, that the Jews, notwithstanding all their wit and intelligence, — and they are behind no nation in these, and indeed in other great qualities, — yet afford the melancholy spectacle of being of all peoples within Christendom the most ignorant of their own sacred books. There is no Christian so ignorant of the Bible as the Jew; and this is not confined to illiterate Jews of our day or any other. I am not speaking of such alone. Take the best of Abraham's seed, and you will find the ignorance of scripture most remarkable in the very chief rabbins themselves. There are none more grossly in the dark as to the divine truth than their most celebrated writers. This shows us that blindness has passed upon them, and is a practical comment on the word of the Lord.

But now we poor Gentiles are brought in. There is then an evident change; and I refer to this in support of what I have been already saying, as far as it goes. The apostle Paul brings out with admirable fulness and precision, not only the call of the Gentiles, but the formation of those that belong to Christ into the church of God. It is not simply a people who have the gospel preached to them, or who confess His name and are baptized, but really united to Him as members of His body by the Holy Ghost who is given to this end. These are waiting for the Lord Jesus, but not to govern them on the earth; for this is not their relationship to Christ. They await Him to take them out of the earth to be with Himself in heaven. It is not denied that they will reign with Christ over the earth; but I say that their own proper home — the home of their hearts, and the sphere in which they will have their brightest glory — will be with Christ in heavenly places. Such is the teaching e.g. of Ephesians 1.

But this clears the way at once. Also, let me remark, that it is a very important point practically for all Christians; for there is nothing more common, for instance, than to speak of Christ as if He were the king of the church: even our fine and commonest hymns say so, — as "my Prophet, Priest, and King." Do I doubt that he was an excellent man who wrote it? I have not a word to say against him, but very much to urge against the thought. We must not consecrate grave errors under the shelter of the best of names: least of all does the time allow it now. It is a moment when everything is shaking, — when a great deal that is good is put in question by the bad, but (I am thankful to God) a great deal that is bad by the good. It is therefore a time when no soul can afford to treat slightly the truth of God. His children will soon require it all; they will need firm support for their feet. I repeat, then, that the relation of king is true for Israel, but is not true for the Christian or for the church. Christ is the *Lord* of the Christian — the absolute Lord of all He has bought. Therefore it is not in the smallest degree to weaken subjection to Christ; for, contrariwise, the relationship of a father with his child is a closer one than that of a king with his subject. Again, take the relationship of a husband and wife: what can be so intimate as this? Such is the relationship of Christ and the church; and, therefore, to take the old notion of Christ being the King of the church is just unwittingly to be Judaized; it is to be drawn aside by a notion. It is that which is perfectly true for an Israelite, and so will be accomplished by and by; for Christ will not in the same way espouse them. In a vague general way Jehovah will be their Husband. It is used in this way in the Old Testament; but in no sense will it be true of them that they are "members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." He who says so is merely imagining vain things. He has no scripture for it.

The word of God brings in, then, this near and blessed relationship, and along with this a hope suited to it. The hope is, that He who is our Head and our Bridegroom will come for His Bride, and

receive those who are so closely united to Himself. Thus when He does come, it is not to reign over them as His people in their place, but to take them as His bride (and you can see, I may assume, that it is suitable, and must be so) to His place. Surely, when we think who Christ is, and what the home of Christ is in the Father's house, we can understand that more is due to the Son of God, than merely to beautify this poor world, or to banish the elements of evil out of it. That is all true, and will be for His people on earth; but He has got a home of love He has known before the earth was founded, and into the Father's house He will not be ashamed to bring those He is not ashamed even now to call His brethren.

Accordingly, the Lord Himself presents this very hope in John 14. It is not, therefore, an absolutely new thing; though there is a modification of it in the teaching of Paul. You will find, accordingly, in the two earlier gospels that He presents things in connection with the earth, and consequently with the Jews as well as the nations. Luke 12 brings in heaven morally. But in the gospel of John the Lord leaves out all about Jerusalem and Israel, and presents exclusively this blessed hope to the Christian — that, as surely as He went away to heaven, He is coming again from heaven, and will gather us to be with Himself there.

The apostle Paul brings out this precious hope in the first epistle to the Thessalonians. The occasion for it was this: these Christians were waiting for Christ with such simplicity, that they, in fact, fondly imagined that no Christian was ever to die. They were so filled with Christ's return, that they believed that the Lord might come while they themselves were living. It was quite right to be always waiting — quite wrong to suppose that no one could die. Accordingly the enemy took advantage of death having made an inroad among the Thessalonians; and inasmuch as they were totally unprepared for it, they were quite cast down. Instead of having peaceful confidence in the Lord's love, they sorrowed overmuch, fearing that those who died would miss some blessing when the Lord Jesus returned. We are not to suppose that they fancied that such would be lost; but they did conceive that not to be upon earth waiting for Christ at His return would involve those who died in a great and irreparable loss. Not so, says the Spirit of God by the apostle. The Lord Jesus Christ, when He returns, will first of all raise those that are sleeping. "The dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord." That is, there will be a barely appreciable interval between the dead saints raised and the living saints caught up. Both shall be translated to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall be for ever with Him. Now, clearly this put an end to the notion that the saints who meanwhile fall asleep were to suffer particularly through their death.

But more than that. The apostle continues, and shows that when the Lord Jesus appears in glory, He will bring along with Him those saints that have slept by Him — not their spirits only, but themselves (body, soul, and spirit) glorified, of course. The way in which the dead saints, as well as those that may be till then alive, can thus come with Him is this: He is coming in person, first of all, to change them into His likeness. Whether asleep in death or still alive, they will be caught up to be with the Lord; so that when He comes in judgment of the habitable world (*i.e.* in His day) they will accompany Him in glory. In this we find the two great parts of the presence of the Lord Jesus. That is to say, He will first come *for* the saints, and in the second place He will come *with* them. Both are called "*the coming, or presence, of the Lord.*" They are the two main aspects — if one may so say — of Christ's coming: the first, to gather the heavenly saints to Himself; the second, to bring them with Him when He appears in glory. It is the second part of the coming of Christ that connects itself with Old Testament hopes (as, for instance, with Zech. 14: "The Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee"). Clearly, therefore, as we now know, they must have been raised and taken up to be with Christ

above; and, as we also know for certain, we who are alive on the earth waiting for Jesus cannot be changed and caught up with the raised ones, to be with the Lord above, unless He Himself have come to this end.

Therefore His coming must be in the first place *for* the saints — raising the dead, changing the living; and then there is, further, His coming with them all. But this does not determine the length of interval between the two. One cannot see in 1 Thess. 4 and 5 any sufficient reason why all this might not be practically at the same hour, as far as that scripture is concerned. We are dependent, therefore, upon other testimony. Let no soul receive anything without divine warrant for it. I beseech all my brethren and sisters that are here to beware of haste on a subject so important: God will surely give sufficient light, even for the simplest. Never be hurried into a conviction; never give up what you have — if, indeed, you have received it as the truth of God — until positive ground of scripture be shown to the contrary. On the other hand, holding fast whatever you know to be the truth, always have a mind open to receive more.

Again, the Second Epistle was written not to give the Thessalonians comfort about the dead saints, disabusing their minds of their needless sorrow, but to dispel a delusion brought in by false teachers about the living — themselves included. The first does not seem to have been a question of wrong teaching, but of their own erroneous notions — a hasty inference from what was most true and right. But in the second case the enemy was at work. The truth that had been blessed to their souls was being undermined by the confusion and false assertions of unscrupulous Judaizing teachers. Such were ordinarily the persons who ruined the church. Satan had used these Judaizers to shake and alarm their souls by confounding the *coming* of the Lord with His *day*. From these they seemed to have imbibed the apprehension, as they were at that time suffering grievous persecution (which had already caused anxiety to the apostle's mind about them — 1 Thess. 3), that these persecutions might be the predicted tribulation, and that this tribulation was, in some sense, "the day of the Lord." Thus everything was jumbled together in their thoughts. There were three errors joined in one. That is to say, they confounded the presence of the Lord with His day, and His day with the tribulation, and their actual troubles with that future tribulation. It is evident that all was a sea of confusion in their souls.

First of all then, the Spirit of God explains to them the moral character of that day. In the first chapter of our epistle He shows them that the Lord will certainly appear with angels of His might in flaming fire; but that the day of the Lord is to deal judicially with the enemies, and in no wise to let persecution fall on His own saints. It is now that the faithful are called to suffer persecution as a privilege, and be prepared for it, as he had previously intimated in his former letter; but the day of the Lord will be precisely the time when there will be no persecution more for the people of God. For, in fact, that day will display two facts — the saints of God in perfect rest and joy and blessedness with Christ; and their enemies under retributive dealings from God, who will lay His hand heavily upon them, bringing in death and destruction. No doubt a graduated scale will not be wanting, suitable to different measures of guilt; for God in judgment does not fail to take into consideration all circumstances. Even in His judgment of the living this will be in measure true; absolutely so in the judgment of the dead at the end of all.

This, then, clearly set aside a good deal that the false teachers had sought to infuse; but, in the second chapter, the portion I have read deals with the error in a very direct and full manner, besides giving us, as God's explanations always do, positive truth independently of the error that is dispelled.

First, the apostle beseeches his brethren "by the coming of the Lord Jesus." Here it is my conviction that our common authorized version is perfectly correct. I am aware that there are not a few

scholars who will have it that it means "*concerning*," or "in regard to the coming." There is not the slightest doubt that the word (ὕπερ) will bear this; but there is no necessity for it everywhere — here rather the contrary. For there is an element in the matter, which those who so reason do not appear to have taken properly into consideration. It is manifest that you cannot decide on the construction of a phrase by looking at a single word; you must look at its bearings, and weigh all that is connected with it. Now in this case the apostle beseeches them. He is beseeching *by*. Now, it is a regular usage, in the language that the Holy Ghost employed in the New Testament, to apply this very word in the sense "*by*," or "on account of," where it goes with a phrase of entreaty. No doubt, if there were not a connection of prayer or beseeching, the preposition would quite well bear the meaning of "*in respect to*," or "*in behalf of*." Such a meaning is as common as it is legitimate; but not so with a verb of entreaty. The English version is therefore, in my judgment, perfectly justified, while the proposed change is otherwise inadmissible. "We beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto him." Mark the forcibly expressed connection. The gathering together of the saints from the earth, which clearly takes in both the living and the dead (these raised, those changed) is dependent on the presence of the Lord Jesus. They are associated facts in the mind of the Spirit, who thereby entreats the brethren, by the apostle, "that ye be not soon shaken in mind or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as by us, as that the day of the Lord is *present*." Here one is obliged to differ from the authorized version. For this I am sorry; but at the same time it is inevitable for the truth's sake.

\* Not only is there no need to insert "*by*" in italics, but it seems to me an injury to the force of one article for the two clauses. "Our gathering together unto Him" is intended to be set forth as consequent on the "presence of our Lord Jesus Christ," both forming one combined idea.

There are two points erroneously given: one in the common Greek text, the other in the common English Bible. "The day of Christ" is not the right reading in this place. All scholars, let them be who they may, Romanists, Lutherans, Calvinists, high, broad, or low church, in short, every competent person, no matter where he may be, acknowledges the truth of what has just been affirmed, which I state thus strongly that no one present may imagine that I insist on any word as a better reading, for which there is not the most satisfactory evidence. It is "the day of the Lord" in the best MSS., etc. Now the "day of the Lord," although closely connected with the "day of Christ," is not absolutely the same. Not that I propose to discuss such nice distinctions now, because this would involve details: I confine myself to notorious fact. "The day of the Lord" means the time when the Lord will deal judicially with this world, with nations, with living men, with the earth. The Thessalonians were misled into the strange idea — strange at least to our minds — of confounding the trouble they were then enduring with "that day." Of course, those who taught them so must have held a kind of spiritual day of the Lord; that is, they could not have meant that the Lord was personally to appear in order to bring in that day, but that the then time of great and sore trouble for the people of God might be justly called "the day of the Lord." This partial preparatory application of the phrase is common in the Old Testament, but it is not so used in the New Testament, which only employs it in its full and final sense.

Carefully observe, however, that what they taught was *not* that it was "at hand," or soon coming, but that it was really come. Such is the unequivocal meaning of the word (ἔνεστηκε). It occurs in the same form in about half a dozen places of the New Testament. I think it may be proved to a plain English reader that what I am stating now is certainly correct. Thus, in Romans 8: 38, "*things present*" (ἔνεστώτα) is the same word. What makes it more striking is that "things to come" (μέλλοντα) is used also, and another word. Now if the former meant "things *at hand*," there could be no contrast; but this there is very decidedly between "*things present*" and "*things to come*." In short, who could set over

against each other "things at hand" and "things to come," if the former word signified pretty much the same thing as the latter? In 1 Corinthians 3: 22, the same contrast occurs. In 1 Corinthians 7: 26, "for the *present*\* necessity" is the same word: a necessity "at hand" is not the sense, but one already existing. So again with Hebrews 9: 9, we have the same word, meaning the time then *present*, and certainly not a future season. In Gal. 1: 4 we read of "this *present* evil world" or age. The world to come will not be evil but blessed. The present age, and the present age only, is evil. It is abundantly plain that in these cases the word not only means "actually there," but it can mean nothing else. The meaning "*at hand*," or just coming, would destroy the sense in all these occurrences of the word. I do not recollect any other in the New Testament. I have named five instances, and this in 2 Thess. 2: 2 makes six.

\* Dean Alford says, "Instant, *already begun*; for this is the meaning of ἐνεστῶσαν, not *imminent*, shortly to come." But is this sound English? He means what I do, but his expression seems faulty. "*Instant*" would be generally considered as substantially like "*imminent*," rather than as "present."

Another form of the verb appears in 2 Timothy 3: 1, where it is said that in the last days perilous times shall come. But even here, though future, not perfect, it does not mean "shall be at hand," but *actually there*. The reason why I do not dwell on this last is that the tense is not the same. The same force is found, as far as I know, in every occurrence of the word in other books, as the Apocrypha and the profane authors. I have gone into the matter the more because it used to be alleged, and may be still repeated, that in three or four cases in classic Greek the word has the sense of "*at hand*." But I have examined those instances carefully, and am prepared to show that there the word does not require, and I think will not even bear, the meaning "at hand" any more than in the New Testament. But it ought to be clear that the word of God does not demand such search into a few stray passages in Greek orators or comedians, even if doubtful, for the purpose of deciding its own meaning. The uniform sense in every other place of scripture ought to prevail, and must, I think, in an unbiassed judgment. Thus, then, as there cannot be a doubt that the true text is "the day of the Lord," so "is present" is the true translation of the last word.

But observe the importance of this. The apostle entreats them by the presence of the Lord, which was full of blessedness, as it was their gathering to be with Him and bound up with it, not to be alarmed about the day of the Lord as if it could be now come, as was pretended by some. Such is the genuine meaning and drift of his appeal to their hearts. You, who know that you are going to be caught up to the Lord Jesus at His presence, do not you be harassed by the false cry that the day of the Lord is come. It is all a mistake. The day of the Lord is not present yet. And as this is a motive drawn from their own hope and knowledge of His love against receiving that egregious error, so he strengthens it by a reason drawn from the state of the world and of the Christian testimony. They ought not to expect that day till there come the falling away. Such is the strict force — *the* apostasy; "a falling away" is feeble. "The apostasy" is the word. By this he means the public abandonment of Christian truth in the earth, and no doubt of more than Christian truth, but this peculiarly. Yet I doubt not that at the same time, when Christendom will abandon the Christian faith, the Jews also will fall into the dreadful snares predicted for the last days.

I admit that to men at large all this is unpalatable. Those who indulge in hopeful visions of the progress of society do not like to hear of the apostasy, unless it can be fastened on some dark corner of Europe apart from themselves, where this only or the like can be treated as the apostasy. They care not to weigh seriously the warning of God which limits it to no quarter of Christendom, whatever locality may be its central seat. But be not deceived. Do not heed those fair promises of men. My friends, as surely as God has written here of that which is before Christendom, the apostasy is coming, and

rapidly. What means the fact that in our own day we see such an unexampled increase of atheistic teaching, and this not among the openly profane but in church and chapel-goers? Why, you can hardly take up a modern history, say of Greece, but you are flooded with infidelity. If you dip into a modern book of geology, incredulity fills its pages — the denial of active divine intervention. The anatomy of man is tainted with the poison, which infects also the natural history of beasts. These men industriously use every opportunity for spreading their denial, I might even say, of common conscience about God. Everything now is taking the form of rationalism or positivism, at any rate amongst those who pretend to be the party of progress. It is the same with metaphysics and ethics, as with the men of material science. And the most distressing symptom is not that you have a crack-brained philosopher in France teaching his fellows to look, at and worship God in a mother, a wife, and a child, but sensible and clever men in this practical age accepting his atheism. One can understand his formal worship of humanity, and his wretched trinity of man; but at the same time, while one can see the madman in every word and thought of the kind, the gravest sign to me is, that in a sober practical country like England, and among men of disciplined minds, who can scarcely ignore the Bible and might at the least have profited by the wicked folly of M. Comte to steer clear of it, this is, I believe, the popular philosophy of young England. Such is the tendency at the universities of the favourite books even on logic and political economy. Those who used to be famous for their sound Anglicanism and old-fashioned conservatism are now publishers of this self-sufficient demoralizing trash. Hence, works of this sort, with poetry to match, are found on the tables of almost all educated England, — particularly, I am sorry to say, among the higher classes, though the poison trickles down to the bottom of the garment, through all the artisan classes of this and other countries.

No wonder the leaders of infidelity clap their hands at their successes high and low; *they* at least know very well what must be the result of the indifference and infatuation of those who might be expected to stand in the gap. They know well that youths cannot have atheism insinuated in text-books on logic, etc., without reaping by-and-by a whirlwind from that which is sown there. They know well that in every quarter men are drinking from sources different from and opposed to revelation, and they do not exaggerate the results. Nor is it confined to collegians or speculative men; it ramifies gradually all classes, and especially the shrewd hard-reasoning sons of toil in the north. Nay, it is found increasingly amongst those whose profession it is to preach the truth. I do not mean that these are open infidels: perhaps it might be safer for others and more honest in themselves if they were. I do not mean to say that they are prepared to go all lengths with their guides; but there can be no doubt that a great deal of value, admiration, and study is bestowed on the chief perverters of the public mind as "thinkers" by a growing mass of Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist divines. It has long been so with Romanists. No doubt there is very much more that Satan aims at bringing in; but the issue of what is even now at work will be what is here called "the apostasy."

Nor will this be all; there is another step — that the man of sin will be revealed. For just as God had a man of righteousness in the Lord Jesus Christ, so Satan will have a man of sin. Thus there is, first, the systematic abandonment, not perhaps of Christian forms, but of revealed and professed Christian truth: then will arrive a personal expression of man's will without God who puts himself at the head of it. There will not be wanting a man to lead the evil when the right moment comes. This is the true meaning and place of the man of sin; the Holy Spirit furnishes here a picture of him spiritually considered. If you want to see him politically, you must look at Daniel 11: 36, where the king that does according to his own will is the self-same personage here described religiously, if one may so speak of Antichrist. Daniel naturally treats the king in connection with the Jews, with the land of Palestine, which is clearly to be his habitat, and with the kings of the north and of the south and their conflicts. The apostle looks at the same person in connection with corrupted Christendom giving up the truth; and

accordingly his description is of this sort: he "opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

I am aware that many of the old divines, some of them excellent men withal, used to apply all this to the Pope. I have not the slightest sympathy with the Pope, or anything in principle or practice that belongs to his system; at the same time I dare not be so false to the word of God as to allow such exaggerations. Not so: even the apostasy will be a more thorough and deadly departure from revelation, and will engulf Protestants and Papists alike. Does Popery, bad as it is, so deny fundamental truth, that a man who is trained in or even perverted into it cannot be saved? This I do not believe. Popery denies neither the Trinity nor mediation. I believe Christians have been found within its borders. So far from accepting the notion that the Pope is the antichrist, I believe that there have been Christian men in all grades of its priesthood, secular and regular, probably, among the Popes. At the same time I acknowledge that of all circles whence a soul can be saved, there is none to my own mind so horribly offensive to the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ. That a man may there be converted and live and die is to me simply a proof of the immense mercy of God, not at all of anything good in the Popish system. But while thus stating candidly and explicitly my firm belief as to this, I say again that in 2 Thess. 2 looms a future system of yet more fatal evil. Finally a man takes the place of God, and is worshipped as such (not as the servant of His servants, or the vicar of Christ).

Thus the first overture of Satan is his last triumph apparently. "*Apparently*," I say; for it is never anything more on Satan's part; it is the last seeming triumph of the enemy before the Lord comes in judgment. What man was tempted by in the garden of Eden was to become as God, knowing good and evil. What Satan seems to gain in this worst development of the latter day will be the more openly taking and allowed the place of God; and so much the more because the law had run its course, and ought to have been respected; the gospel will have run its course, and ought to have been glorified. But if souls are not won by the grace of God, the worse they become by His testimonies rejected or depraved. The more you hear the truth and are in the midst of its profession, so much the more you show your own impenitent heart, if you do not bow to the God who surrounds you with such a blessing. Therefore the apostasy and the man of sin are not after Judaism only but Christianity, according to the analogy of His past dealings and the ways of men, no less than the plain word of God which unveils the end of this age.

This last is the ground which I take as decisive. It is according to His solemn declarations, that when His fullest testimony is definitively abandoned, there will follow the most awful time of evil and judgment of the earth. The unbelief and ingratitude of the world for the blessings of Christianity will have for its result God sending them strong delusion. Did they not bide with the truth, and despise His grace? Did they not go back to tradition, and philosophy, and, in principle to heathenism — in fine, on to the apostasy and the man of sin? Perhaps this may sound to some strange and strong. But the word of God is wiser than men. And, after all, why should you wonder? At the present time University folk, and many more men of intellect, are going wild about Plato and Aristotle, or their modern successors. What were those of old? Idolaters, indeed, but also Pantheists or Atheists. Tutors or parents may plead that it is only their philosophy that is sought after. Depend upon it, the connection between these things is far more intimate than people imagine.

Again, observe the revived tendency to the love of religious show in building, music, and ritual, with the most egregious pretensions on the part of the hierophants. I need not tell you that there is a vast deal of all this in London, and that a powerful impetus has been given to it quite lately. I do not speak of Popery, because at least some Protestants shame the Papists, going far beyond them in the

absurdity of their doings in green and gold, in posture and imposture. But what I affirm is, that all these are indications of what is coming. Little premonitions they may be, in some eyes, but of unparalleled evil I assuredly count them. Even if positivism, for instance, were restricted for the present to those who are accepted as thinkers, be assured the hour is not distant — in the present immediate circulation of thought — when their blasphemous materialism will percolate by degrees through the lower strata of society. When this arrives, the final plans of Satan will follow rapidly — a dreadful day for Christendom, and not for England only. Yet what country has been such a breakwater against error as the favoured land in which we live? The upshot will be not superstition, nor idolatry alone, but the antichrist. How bitterly will the despisers of prophecy be disappointed! The devil, after all, is wiser than they, for he is using the most opposite parties to bring about that which none of them suspect — the apostasy and the man of sin.

In order that this should come, the restraint must have been removed. Hence the apostle refers them to this: "When I was yet with you, I told you these things; and now ye know what withholdeth." The predicted issue has been postponed and hindered by a mighty obstacle. It might have been, I suppose, soon after Christ went to heaven; for there was no lack of Judaism and Gentile philosophy, not to speak of evil and unbelief, in the world then. Why was it that their evil did not carry the day against Christians then? Because the power of the Holy Ghost hindered it. The Holy Ghost came down from heaven, and idolatry became at last ashamed to show its face, slinking behind imperial power and philosophic special pleading, but at length into holes and corners among the rude and gross, till the empire formally gave it up. It was thus overthrown in its high places; and the consequence is that Christianity has nominally prevailed in all the more civilized countries of the earth from that time to this. When the result which I have alluded to comes to pass, God will pour a spirit of judicial blindness over Christendom, just as He did on Israel, and of old on Egypt. A heart waxed fat characterized the Jew at the first coming of Christ. This will be yet more awfully renewed in Christendom before His second coming, and this simultaneously with the removal of the great restraint that God opposes to the uprising of the long working mystery of lawlessness. It will then manifestly reign without a check in the world. This is what the apostle mentions here, and in very remarkable terms "Now ye know," says he, "what withholdeth." Purposely, it appears to me, the Spirit of God did not explain; not through fear of the emperor certainly (whom it could in no serious way disturb), but with perfect wisdom, because the withholding power might not bear exactly the same form at one time as another. The ancient fathers in general conceived that the great let or hindrance alluded to was the Roman empire. Hence the early Christians used to pray for the empire with especial earnestness, because they believed that as long as it lasted, there could not be the apostasy, or the man of sin (i.e., antichrist). I believe they were substantially right, although, like many others, their view was narrow and incomplete.

When the Roman empire fell, I dare not insinuate that the apostasy came; nor do I believe, for the reasons already given, that it can be intelligently sustained that the antichrist rose up. Yet the Pope no doubt did gradually claim ecumenical rights as a bishop in a wholly unscriptural and grossly ambitious manner. Only I deny that this is what the antichrist means. The Roman empire was, we know, broken up, and this gave occasion for the vaulting ambition of the Papacy with abominable idolatry and the cruellest persecution. But we are approaching times of radical change and farspread convulsion in the earth. Of this no thoughtful man has the slightest doubt; but it will not yet be the removal of the hindrance. This will remain, both while the church is here and as long as there is government sanctioned by God; for this last also I believe to be kept up by the Spirit. It is not true that the Holy Ghost only works in the salvation of souls, or in the church. There is a controlling power exercised by the Spirit of God. There is a providential maintenance of government in the world. As long as this lasts, the apostasy cannot be — certainly not the revelation of the man of sin. The person may be there, but

he cannot come out in Satan's unchecked power; but directly God is pleased to let go all divinely-sanctioned government, as well as the manifestation of His grace in the church, then the coast will be clear for the enemy to do his worst. Satan will immediately embrace his long-coveted opportunity: then will be the manifestation of the man of sin. So it is said here, "The mystery of iniquity [lawlessness] doth already work." It was working from the days of the apostles. "Only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way."

It is thus evident that there is a person who restrains, as well as a restraining power or system. I am not aware of any other to which this so admirably applies as to the Spirit of God. It must be remembered that the Holy Ghost is both a person and a power. You may speak of the Spirit of God figuratively, referring to His energy, operation, or character of action; or you may speak of Him as a Divine person. Here the apostle speaks of both a restraint and a restrainer: of what else could he adopt both these ways of speech? The Spirit of God, then, appears to me to be a far larger and truer way of putting the matter — not necessarily Himself acting in the church, but also as controlling in the world. Take it, then, as including His presence in the church and His power in the world, which acts up to a given epoch as a restraint upon the devil. Then, when the term of fresh striving, or rather of restraining, is exhausted, the church is taken out of the scene, and soon after government falls directly into Satan's hands. God is pleased to allow a mighty convulsion to take place; and as great political revolutions are apt to end in reaction, and a popular chief to seize the throne, so it will be in that day. The beast is said to emerge out of what is called the sea (Rev. 13); that is to say, an imperial power rises out of the political confusion. The proofs time will not permit me to state now; but this I cannot doubt to be the prospect before the West in prophecy.

This entirely falls in with the statement of the apostle here. "Then," says he, "shall that wicked one be revealed." I quite agree with those who take the word "wicked" as altogether too feeble. It should be "that *lawless* one." I grant you that all lawlessness must be wickedness; but all wickedness does not exactly take the shape of lawlessness. An unfaithful person might act ill in his ways, but still own a real authority above him. Lawlessness supposes not only evil but the entire rejection of all superior authority. It is the worst public form of wickedness, especially in those who used and were bound to own law. "Then shall that lawless one be revealed." We saw "the mystery of lawlessness" before. There is a link between the two, and a contrast: the lawlessness that wrought secretly is headed up in the openly lawless one, directly the letting power ceases, the letter being gone. "And then shall that lawless one be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus shall reveal with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with" — what? His presence? Certainly. Yet this is not what is said, but "the brightness" — or the *manifestation* — "of His presence." Why say the shining forth of it, if His presence is necessarily seen by every eye? Where would be the accuracy of saying the manifestation of His presence, if it were, in its own nature and character, a manifest thing?

This points to what is so very important in the first verse of this chapter, where we have the presence or coming of the Lord. In the eighth verse we have not this, but the *manifestation* of it. Can you not understand that the Lord is to present Himself, without being seen by the world, making Himself visible simply to those for whom He comes, and whom He gathers to Himself? In due time, having sent out fresh testimony, but finally allowed the worst evil to ripen up into the last fearful head, He comes in judgment with His saints. This evidently falls in with what I have already shown to be the two parts of the coming of Christ. And the reason for the interval it will be observed, lies here. First, as long as the church is on earth, with the Holy Ghost acting in personal presence and power, there cannot be full development either in the apostasy or in the manifestation of the man of sin. This consequently is one obvious reason why the Lord — as it seems to me necessarily — gathers His own to be with

Himself before the evil of man and of Satan rises to such a climax that He must come and judge it.

But there is another reason involved in what has been already said. The Lord has signified His purpose to have another witness. There is to be the preparation of an earthly people for Him, when the heavenly people are taken away to be with Himself. The Spirit of God — though not in personal presence as now — will not fail to seal for God a certain number from all Israel. He will also, I apprehend, deal with the consciences of countless Gentiles. (Rev. 7) If it were not so, the sad issue would be that, when the Lord Jesus comes in judgment of evil at the end of this age, there would be a universal waste, a wilderness scene, without a single soul to welcome its Lord — without even a nucleus for the millennial earth. But no; He will prepare a people for His appearing. He will not merely spare the dark and distant parts of the earth, but, as always, a remnant elsewhere; and so it is, then, that God will quicken, bless, and use a remnant of Jews. Some of them will carry the gospel of the kingdom to all nations. When the Lord Jesus gathers to Himself the heavenly saints, according to the first verse of this chapter — when He brings them to His Father's house, during the interval before they return with Him in glory, the earth's lawlessness will rise up to denial of God and direct worship of man. The Spirit of God in the midst of that wicked state will work, not in the way of communion and present blessing, but of prophecy or anticipated good to individual souls. The testimony, though true, is feeble; there may not be such power as to shut out the workings of Satan. It will be once more man's hour, and the power of darkness. But there will be a preparation for what is coming.

It may be well to say that I do not think the moment of the removal of the church will be that of the instant manifestation of the lawless one. Though generally true, I believe there will be an interval between the two; and it is especially in this interval — the early days after the Lord has taken His own to be with Himself — that He touches the hearts of not a few before the evil one has yet fully brought out his plans. There will be, in fact, a new testimony, suited of course to that time; and there will be extraordinary witnesses raised up and preserved, so that the devil may not be able to put them down till their hour is come. You see the two witnesses in Revelation 11. They are sustained of God to the hurt of their enemies. After an allotted time they fall, but not till their work is done. Do you suppose that the work is vain? Do you imagine that no souls will receive the testimony of the two witnesses? I cannot agree with you. The Lord will use and apply it — will surely bring individuals to the knowledge of Himself, — feebly, perhaps, but suitably to the work He is going to accomplish. And thus, when the Lord Jesus returns in His glory — when it is not only His presence, but the manifestation of His presence, — then every eye shall see Him, and not only those that look for Him. These will have been caught up already; but when He appears with the clouds of heaven, and His saints with Him, then every eye shall see Him; and He will destroy the lawless one. He will cast the beast and the false prophet into the lake of fire. There will be a judgment of the living or quick that must fall according to divine wisdom on man. There will be a gathering of the nations to be judged in their natural bodies and circumstances (I am not speaking of the final judgment of the dead raised up), and the millennium will take its course after all the process of judging those caught in open rebellion has been finished. This is the general scheme of the word of God on this solemn topic.

I shall not add more today, hoping, if the Lord will, on the appointed day, to address such as may be here on the elders in heaven I shall hope then to give some proofs as to the intermediate state of things, which I could hardly be expected to do fully in a single discourse.