

The Second Advent Of Christ By Dr. Wilbur M. Smith

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Contents:

Contents:	1
Introduction	1
Greek Words In The NT for Christ's Return	3
Accompanying Phenomena	4
The Witness of the Creeds	6
The Sequence of Events	7
The Resurrection of Believers.....	8
The Subjection of Earthly Powers to the Returning Christ.....	9
The Righteous Reign of Christ.....	10
The Last Judgment	10
When Will Christ Return?.....	12
The Blessed Hope.....	14
Some Ethical Implications of the Second Advent.....	16

Introduction

The idea of the return to this earth of the founder of a world religion is utterly contrary to the thinking of Western man in a day when even the idea of a life to come is repudiated. Any discussion of it therefore requires careful examination of the documents in which it is initially set forth. Yet before investigating the literary data, we should remind ourselves of the basic points involved in the very phrase "the Second Advent of Christ."

These words refer, of course, to the same Lord Jesus Christ who once appeared on this earth in the most crucial and far-reaching event in human history. For it was in this advent that Jesus lived the one perfect and absolutely holy life among men. It was in this advent that he made possible the remission of sins and the reconciliation to God of those who were his enemies and the enemies of his Father. It was in his First Advent that, by his resurrection, he gave man a hope that does not fade away but will be consummated in our own resurrection and inheritance in glory. It is through Jesus Christ in his First Advent that we come to know the truth of God as Father. It was because of his advent and ministry that the Church of Christ, which is his body, was made possible. Even the unbelieving world bears constant testimony to the profound importance of the First Advent: it uses a chronology based upon Christ's entrance into history.

Professor A. M. Fairbairn has not exaggerated the case in saying:

The greatest problem in the field of history centers in the Person and Life of Christ. Who He was, what He was, and how and why He came to be it, are questions that have not lost, and will not lose, their interest for us and for mankind. The problems that center in Jesus have this peculiarity; they are not individual but general-concern not a person but the world. . . . No other life has done such work, no other person been made to bear such transcendent and mysterious meaning. . . . He is the permanent object of human faith, the preeminent subject of human thought [*Studies in the Life of Christ*, 1880, pp. 1, 2].

The concept of the Second Advent is wholly divorced from any thought of a second Saviour or

another prophet. It is Christ who is preeminent in both advents, one the inevitable consummation of the other.

In the second place-and this too is axiomatic, but nevertheless important-the Second Advent is exclusively concerned with this earth on which the human race exists. It is not a second appearance of an incarnate life ending in a redeeming death on some other planet, but refers exclusively to a coming back to this same earth on which our redemption was wrought out in the first half of the first century of our era. The word *advent*, of course, implies a coming *to*, and this has for a necessary corollary a coming *from*. Christ was received up into heaven at the time of his ascension, and he will at his Second Advent return from heaven (see Acts 1:11 and 1 Thess. 4:16).

There are similarities between the Second Advent and the First, and there are also contrasts. The angel said to the apostles at the time of our Lord's ascension, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which was taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). This implies that the return of our Lord will be personal, involving his own visible presence. It is not to be understood merely as an eschatological movement, or merely as a time of judgment or consummation. It is not something directed from heaven to marshal the forces of evil for a final conflict, though this will indeed take place. It is the literal, visible, personal return to this earth of Jesus of Nazareth.

On the other hand, while the First Advent was, we might say, local, the Second will have immediate worldwide effects. Not only will the inhabitants of Jerusalem "look unto [him] whom they have pierced" (Zech. 12:10), but, as St. John informs us, "every eye shall see him, even they which pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth shall mourn because of him" (Rev. 1:7). This can only be the meaning of such a statement as: "For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in his day" (Luke 17:24). Francis Pieper is not wrong, then, in saying that Christ's coming will be so sudden that "Europe will not be able to flash the word of his coming to America" (*Christian Dogmatics*, 1953, III, 516, n. 30). Our Lord in his First Advent came in weakness; he will return in power. He came in humility; he will return in glory. He came to die, making atonement for sin; he will come the second time to judge the world and to rule.

It is hardly necessary to add that no such thing as a third coming of Christ, or a series of comings, is hinted at in Scripture. There are only two advents-one past, the other future. The consummation of the program of God for the redemption of mankind involving the end of history and the beginning of eternity, the victory of righteousness and the judgment of unrepentant sinners, will be brought to pass in this one single future event. The Second Advent of Christ will never be followed by the advent of some other messenger of God, for there is no other God and no other Son of God. It is given unto all men once to die, and after that comes judgment. Christ once died for all; after this will come his final judgment of the world, at a time appointed by God.

Some say that the Bible does not speak of a Second Advent, but that is incorrect. Not only did our Lord himself say, "I will come *again*, and receive you unto myself" (John 14:3), but we are told, with a specific chronological reference, that "unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time" (Heb. 9:28).

Greek Words In The NT for Christ's Return

Before turning to the great events that will take place at our Lord's return, let us look at the Greek words used in the New Testament for the idea of the return. First of all, there is the word *parousia*, which means basically "presence" and is so translated in such a phrase as "his bodily presence" (2 Cor. 10:10). This word is often used to refer to the coming of some person to visit a church or Christian community, as in St. Paul's phrase, "my coming to you again" (Phil. 1:26). St. Peter uses it when speaking of the first coming of our Lord (2 Pet. 1:16). This is the word frequently found in the comprehensive statements of St. Paul about the Second Advent (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23). It was this word that came to the lips of the inquiring disciples when they privately asked our Lord, "What shall be the sign of thy coming?" (Matt. 24:3). *Parousia* often appears in the Latin version as *adventus*, from which, of course, our word "advent" derives (see the Latin text of such verses as Matt. 24:3 and 2 Pet. 1:16). This word *parousia*, which does not appear in the pastoral epistles, is used by St. Paul in one passage to refer to the coming of Anti-Christ (2 Thess. 2:9) but generally refers, as we have seen, to the Second Coming of our Lord, as in Second Thessalonians 2:1, 8. And St. James, in one of his rare passages concerning our Lord, also uses it, twice admonishing us to be patient in waiting for the coming of the Lord (5:7, 8). St. John uses the word in exhorting us that, if we abide in Christ, we will "not be ashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28). *Parousia* has been carried over directly into the English language, so that in scholarly literature the Second Advent is often called "the Parousia."

Another word that occasionally appears in passages about the Second Advent is *epiphaneia*, meaning "appearance." This occurs in the New Testament only in references to Christ's appearances on this earth. Arndt and Gingrich say that "as a religious technical term it means a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity, either in the form of a personal appearance or by some deed of power by which its presence is made known." Trench says this word "was already in heathen use, constantly employed to set forth those gracious appearances of the higher powers in aid of men. If God is to be immediately known of men, he must in some shape or another appear to them, to those among whom He has chosen for this honor. Epiphanies must be Theophanies as well (Gen. 18:1; Josh. 5:13-15; Judg. 13:3)." The word is used in the Old Testament to denote God's making his face to shine upon his people. In the New Testament it is sometimes used of Christ's First Advent (as in 2 Tim. 1:10 and, in verbal form, Titus 2:11 and 3:4) but more often refers to the Second Advent (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13). Like *parousia*, *epiphaneia* has been brought over into the English language, so that we speak of the Epiphany. And in the Latin text it too is translated *adventus*.

A third word is *apokalypsis*, the "revelation" of something that was hidden. It is most commonly used in reference to the Second Advent by the Apostle Peter (1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13), and in its verbal form (2 Thess. 1:7). *Apokalypsis* also has been brought over into the English language, not in reference to our Lord's advent but, in the form "apocalypse," as a name for the last book of the New Testament. Milligan helpfully remarks that "the substantive in the New Testament is applied exclusively to communications that proceed from God or Christ, or to the divine unveiling of truths that have been previously hidden." "Thus the whole of salvation history in both Old Testament and New Testament stands in the morning light of the revelation which will culminate in the Parousia" (Oepke in Kittel, III, 585).

Another word is used extensively by our Lord in his Olivet discourse in reference to the Second Advent: *erchomai*, "to come" or "to arrive." It sometimes refers to the coming of false christs (Matt. 24:5), but generally to the return of Christ, whether in parabolic teaching or in direct assertion (see, for example, Matt. 24:30, 39, 42, 44; 24:6, 13, 19, 31, and parallel passages in Mark and Luke). This is the word used by St. Paul when he says that by partaking of the Lord's Supper, "ye do show the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26). As with the other words we have been considering, this one may refer to such a simple matter as the journey of a man from one city to another, as Paul's sailing from Paphos to Perga,

or, much later, Iconium (Acts 13:13, 51). And like the other three words, *erchomai* is sometimes used in reference to the First Advent of our Lord (1 Tim. 1:15; 1 John 4:2). It is the word used in the last reference to the Second Advent in the New Testament Scriptures, where our Lord announced to the Apostle John, "Behold, I come quickly" (Rev. 22:7). And it is used in the original Greek text of the Apostles' Creed in the declaration that "Christ shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

To sum up our study of these particular words: All four are sometimes applied to the movements of men from one place to another. They are used to refer to the First Advent and also to the Second Advent. No one word in the New Testament refers exclusively to the Second Advent, nor is any one of these four we have looked at, when transposed into the English language, used exclusively for the Second Advent. Efforts to distinguish various periods of the Second Advent by these separate words have not proved satisfactory.

Accompanying Phenomena

Although a great deal of attention has necessarily been given to the actual *consequences* of the stupendous event of the return of Christ, seldom do we find a satisfying treatment of the phenomena that our Lord and the apostles informed us will attend the return. We may well begin with our Lord's own words in the great Olivet discourse: "They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet" (Matt. 24:30, 31; see also Mark 13:26, 27; Luke 21:27). In somewhat similar language, our Lord declared to the high priest on the day of his trial, "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62).

Clouds often accompany divine manifestations. At the time of the giving of the Decalogue, we are told that "it came to pass on the third day in the morning that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud" (Exod. 19:16). At the time of the giving of the second table of laws, when Moses went up into the mount, "the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD" (Exod. 34:5). When the tabernacle was finished, "a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34, 35). Even in these descriptions of events so long ago, we find three terms later used by our Lord in reference to his Second Advent—clouds, glory, and trumpet. At Christ's transfiguration, "behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him" (Matt. 17:5; cf. 2 Pet. 1:17). At his ascension, "a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9).

Our present age of aerial transportation helps us understand what it means for our Lord to come upon the clouds. And what other aerial phenomena will be directly related to such an event? Will he come riding on a planet, or in a rainstorm or snowstorm? His coming might be as lightning strikes, from the east to the west, but he is not to come on a streak of lightning. And so penetrating will be his glorious person that he will be seen through the clouds, which will be, as it were, his footstool. There is no ground for abandoning a literal interpretation here, or for saying, as does Paul Minear, that "to insist on this sort of literalness would destroy faith in the invisible." This is exactly the point. Christ's parousia will involve not invisible things but visible ones. The reference to clouds is repeated in the classic statement of the Apostle Paul that all who are in

Christ "will be caught up . . . in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17). So also the word of the Apocalypse, "Behold, he comes with clouds, and every eye shall see him" (Rev. 1:7).

In the affirmation that he would come with power, or, as Mark's Gospel reads, "with great power" (Mark 13:26), the Second Advent is set in striking contrast to the First. He first came as a helpless Babe, and the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. He was even "crucified through weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4). His entire incarnate life was lived under the laws of the Roman Empire. He subjected himself to the verdicts of the rulers of this earth. But when he comes the second time, to subdue all the powers of this world, human and satanic, he will exercise omnipotent power in every realm of this world in which we live, and reign with undisputed authority.

One expression our Lord uses in describing the phenomena accompanying his return deserves a whole volume of interpretation. It is that he will come with "great glory." Sometimes this is expressed as his glory (Matt. 25:31 and Luke 9:26). At other times, he speaks of this accompanying glory as that of his Father (Matt. 16:27; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). Bernard Ramm, in his fine treatment of this subject of glory, gives us as good a definition as this inexhaustible word permits:

The glory of God is the excellence, beauty, majesty, power and perfection of his total being. It is the completeness, the wholeness, and therefore the utter desirability of God. It is the appeal, the fascinating power, the attraction which he exerts over men. The man so affected by the glory of God returns glory to him by praise and adoration. Thus glory is not only a totality-character of God but something which the creature returns to the Creator [*Them He Glorified*, 1963, p. 22].

This idea, like that of the clouds, goes back to that overwhelming manifestation of God at the time when his Presence entered into the holy of holies. In the Old Testament the glory of God is basically related to the concept of kingship—first, as a summary of the magnificence attending an Oriental king, and then in reference to God himself, who is called "the King of glory" (Ps. 24:71-0). How appropriate the word is when ascribed to the coming of the King of kings! Even at the beginning of Christ's ministry, St. John said that they beheld his glory, "glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). Our Lord could even speak of the glory he had with the Father before the world was (John 17:24). The body in which he was raised was a body of glory (Phil. 3:21). At the time of his ascension he was taken up into glory (1 Tim. 3:16). And his statement that he would come in "great glory" is, of course, the origin of the assertion of the Apostle Paul that believers are to be found "looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

That our Lord will be accompanied by angels at his return does not need elaboration. Early in his ministry he referred to the time when he would come "in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26). His statement is echoed by St. Paul, who speaks (2 Thess. 1:7) of the time when "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels."

In the definitive passage in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, another group of phenomena are particularly emphasized. "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" (1 Thess. 4:16). The word translated "shout" is frequently used in classical Greek of a command in battle. "It is not stated by whom the shout in the present instance is uttered, perhaps by an archangel, more probably by the Lord himself, as the principal subject of the whole sentence" (George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 1908, p. 60). An archangel is mentioned only one other time in the New Testament, in Jude 9, and here again the idea is only an enlargement of our Lord's own words that in his return he will be accompanied by angels. Trumpets are often heard in times when God is revealing himself in some unusual manner. This was true, for example, at the giving of the law (Exod. 19:16). Trumpets are also mentioned in descriptions of great prophetic events, as in Isaiah 27:13 and Zechariah 9:14.

The Witness of the Creeds

From the earliest formulation of creeds down through the great credal statements of the Reformation, the return of Christ has been a basic theme. It is briefly summarized in the Apostles' Creed in the words, "He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The larger Nicene Creed declares that "He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end." The Athanasian Creed is even more detailed: "He sits at the right hand of the Father from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead, at whose advent all men are to rise again with their bodies and render an account of their own deeds."

J. N. D. Kelly, the leading authority of our day on the early creeds of the Church, has reminded us that during the second century "the theory that the returned Christ would reign on earth for a thousand years came to find increasing support among Christian teachers" (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 1958, p. 465). Elsewhere Kelly has said that "though the thought of His exaltation and lordship was no doubt present, it was the promise of His coming again to judge the living and the dead which loomed largest and most impressive in the catechumen's consciousness" (*Early Christian Creeds*, 1950, p. 125).

The fourth of the profoundly influential Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England reads as follows: "Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again His body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature; wherewith He ascended into heaven and sitteth until He return to judge all men at the last day." In the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 52 is: "What comfort is it to thee that Christ shall come again to judge the living and the dead?" And the answer is: "That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same person, who before offered Himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven; who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory."

Although the Westminster Confession of Faith does contain elaborate statements about the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, these epochal events are not specifically said to be brought about by the Second Advent of our Lord, though that is implied. But at the conclusion there is a final exhortation in which the Second Advent is announced: "So will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come, and may be ever prepared to

say 'Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.' " The Larger Catechism (Question 56) is more specific regarding the Second Advent: "Christ is to be exalted in His coming again to judge the world in that He, who was unjustly judged and condemned by wicked men, shall come again at the last day in great power, and in the full manifestation of His own glory and of His Father's with all His holy angels, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, to judge the world in righteousness."

What a boon it would be to the entire Church of Christ if the great truths of these confessions were enunciated and expounded once again from the thousands of pulpits in Christian lands! How seldom, one fears, do millions of Christians give thought to what their own Church testifies concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

The Sequence of Events

To discuss the two advents of our Lord even briefly brings one to the very difficult question of what is to occur when the Lord returns and in what order the events will take place. One of the most distinguished Dutch theologians of the nineteenth century, J. J. Van Oosterzee, rightly said:

All that the Gospel tells us of the premundane glory of the Son and of the majesty of His earthly appearing is but little in comparison with that which it proclaims to us of His glory in the day of the future. But how difficult at the same time to enter upon a field in which, more than in any other, one is only too easily lost in arbitrary conjectures, and is so soon inclined to decide that which Scripture has left undecided; to calculate that which it indicates as one day to be effected or to doubt that which does not in every respect harmonize with . . . the present view of the world. . . . We regard it as impossible *before* the day of fulfillment to determine with infallible certainty what in the promises of Scripture concerning the things of the future is *mere* imagery and what is *more* than imagery. But the more do we esteem it our solemn duty to add nothing to, and also to take nothing from, that which is here told us concerning the secrets of the coming age [*The Person and Work of the Redeemer*, n.d., pp. 44951].

No student can be expected to construct a chronology, even of just the main prophetic events to be introduced by the return of our Lord, that will satisfy all believers. One aspect over which opinions vary widely is the millennium. Many in the Church, true believers, reject the whole concept of a millennium and the rule of Christ on this earth. Other Christians who do believe in a millennium are divided into two groups—those who look for the Church to bring it about, and those who consider a millennial era possible only when Christ returns. Of those holding the latter view, some believe Christ may come at any time, others that the Church must go through some period of tribulation, and still others that the Church at the end of the age must go through all the tribulation, after which the Lord will return. Some give no place at all to a future existence of Israel on this earth; others believe that the unfulfilled Old Testament promises to Israel are still valid. And there are some who become dogmatic in insisting upon two future comings of Christ—one for believers and one for the world. Many readers will disagree with some aspects of the following discussion.

Before we consider, with provoking brevity, the major events connected with our Lord's return, let us recall six passages in the New Testament that set forth a series of future events, a kind of a

calendar of prophecy. This is fundamentally true of the Olivet discourse, which speaks of three eras: before the tribulation, during the tribulation, and after the tribulation. Then there are the two summaries of prophetic events in the classic statement of Paul about the resurrection, 1st Cor 15:20-28 and 51-54. 1st Thess 4:15-17 is the well-known summary of events relating to the rapture of believers at the time of the Second Advent, and 2nd Thess 2:3-12 unfolds a series of future events in relation to the doom of Antichrist. Finally, on almost the last page of the Scripture (Rev. 20:1-12), we have a series of eight events to follow after the battle of Armageddon, extending to the last judgment. Every event that will occur as a result of the return of our Lord must be assigned its chronological place within the framework of these six passages.

The Resurrection of Believers

Hardly any student of the New Testament would deny that the first event to take place at the coming of the Lord will be the resurrection of believers, clearly set forth by St. Paul in these words: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will be no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:14-17).

The words of George Milligan about this passage are apt:

The resurrection of *all* men does not here come into view. All that the Apostle desires to emphasize, in answer to the Thessalonians' fears, is that the resurrection of "the dead in Christ" will be the first act in the great drama of the Parousia, to be followed by the rapture of the living saints [*St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 1908, p. 60].

To my mind, the resurrection of our bodies involves just about the greatest exercise of divine power of any event in the history of the universe, greater even than creation. It is the hope set forth by St. Paul and St. Peter in passages we have already considered (1 Cor. 6:14, 15, 23, ff.; 1 Pet. 1:3, 4). Like so many other prophetic themes found in the New Testament epistles, this one derives from the earlier utterances of our Lord (John 5:25-29; 6:39, 40, 44).

In the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, Paul sets forth four truths regarding the body Christians will have in glory: It will be identical with the earthly body (though care must be taken in defining *identical*); it will have the qualities of incorruptibility, beauty, and power; it will be a spiritual body, in contrast to our present natural bodies; it will be like the body of the Lord Jesus. There will be a similarity between the bodies we now have and those of the resurrection. We shall be with him in our resurrection bodies, and we shall recognize one another. The body that suffered death because of sin will be raised from the dead. Here a mystery arises. Around what will this resurrection body be built? If the stalk of wheat comes from a living germ buried in the ground, is there some hidden germ of our own being around which Christ will build our resurrection bodies? This was the view of William Milligan set forth in *Resurrection of the Dead* (Edinburgh, 1894).

At the judgment of believers there will be a reckoning according to what they have done on earth as followers of the Lord Jesus. St. Paul refers to this when he says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10; see also Eph. 6:8). It is then that "of the Lord [we] shall receive the reward of the inheritance" (Col. 3:24). "When the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away" (1 Pet. 5:4; consider also the profound parabolic teachings of our Lord, e.g., Matt. 16:27; 25:19).

The Subjection of Earthly Powers to the Returning Christ.

The New Testament presents different aspects of the Lord's return in power. One of these is, of course, his coming down from heaven to confront the federations of kings determined to make war against the Lamb, and their overwhelming defeat in the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:11-21). It may well be that this confrontation of the rebellious earthly powers by the Lord of glory is referred to in First Corinthians 15:24-28, a passage too often ignored in discussions of the Second Advent: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he has put all things under his feet. But when he says all things are put under him, it is evident that he who put all things under him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all."

What a new world there will be when the wicked powers are all subdued unto Christ! Paul's eloquent words give us some conception of the vast consequences that will follow the return of our Lord in power. Something of what this means is seen also in Second Thessalonians 2:8-11, here quoted in the vivid Phillips translation: "When that happens the lawless man will be plainly seen-though the truth of the Lord Jesus spells his doom, and the radiance of the coming of the Lord Jesus will be his utter destruction. The lawless man is produced by the spirit of evil and armed with all the force, wonders and signs that falsehood can devise. To those involved in this dying world he will come with evil's undiluted power to deceive, for they have refused to love the truth which could have saved them. God sends upon them, therefore, the full force of evil's delusion, so that they put their faith in an utter fraud and meet the inevitable judgment of all who have refused to believe the truth and who have made evil their playfellow."

With the overthrow of these ruling powers will begin the righteous reign of Christ upon this earth, to which the Old Testament prophets continually pointed and of which the New Testament also speaks.

Since the return of Christ will have such vast consequences, it is simply impossible to identify it with the fall of Jerusalem, as some have done. This event was rather the slaughter and enslavement of a million Jews and the destruction of the holy city. And Christ was not there. The Apostle John, writing his epistles twenty years *after* the destruction of Jerusalem, was still looking for the coming of the Lord. Nor is the return of Christ to be identified with the coming of the Holy Spirit, for Christ said that if *he* did not go away, the Holy Spirit would not come. Neither is the Second Coming to be interpreted as the appearance of a universal church, or an increase of worldwide culture, or the spread of democracy.

Immediately after the battle of Armageddon will apparently come the doom of the beast and the false

prophet, who will be "cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Rev. 19:20). It is at this period that there must take place the destruction of the man of sin, Antichrist himself, who "opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God . . . whom the Lord Jesus shall consume with the breath of his mouth, and destroy with the brightness of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:4, 8).

The Righteous Reign of Christ

Whether we believe in a literal millennium or not, we cannot deny that both the Old and the New Testament clearly set forth a time when Christ himself will reign upon this earth, when righteousness will prevail, when the enemies of Christ will be subdued, when all rule and authority and power will be subjected to Christ. This will culminate in the deliverance of creation from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). This is no doubt the period to which our Lord himself refers when he speaks of the time "in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory" (Matt. 19:28). Here the Greek word translated "regeneration," which is similar to the one used of individual regeneration (1 Cor. 4:16; Col. 3:10), is defined by Thayer as "that signal and glorious change of all things in heaven and earth for the better, that restoration of the primal and perfect condition of things which existed before the fall of our first parents." I have always believed that this period of peace, of righteousness, of abounding joy, of deliverance from crime, fear, and the violence of nature, is that of which the angel spoke to Mary when he said that the one to be born of her "shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:32, 33; see also Isa. 9:7; 16:5; Jer. 33:17; 23:5; Amos 9:11; Zech. 12:8, 9).

The Last Judgment

It is most significant, though sometimes tragically forgotten, that both Christ himself and the Apostles relate the Second Advent to the Judgment, at one period of this event or another. Early in his ministry Christ, speaking of those cities of Judea and Galilee that refused to hearken to his message, prophesied that their punishment "in the day of judgment" would be greater than that which awaited Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15; 12:41, 42; 11:22-24). This theme often reappears in our Lord's eschatological parables, (e.g., Matt. 21:40; 25:19). There is involved in this final judgment "the harvest [at] the end of the world" (Matt. 13:39), at which time the angel will sever the wicked from the just (Matt. 13:49, 50).

Both St. Peter and St. John refer to "the day of judgment" (1 Pet. 2:9; 1 John 4:17), and St. Jude, to "the judgment of the great day" (v. 6). This, of course, is that time of which St. Paul so frequently speaks, "the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ" (Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Tim. 4:1). The Apostle pointed to this coming and inevitable day in his great address to the Athenian philosophers, when he said that "God has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). This last great judgment is unfolded before us in apocalyptic terms-and properly so-at the end of the canonical Scriptures, where the Judge is seen sitting on a great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15).

One word that Paul attaches to the judgment of which he speaks in the Athenian address has for some reason been almost wholly ignored in modern theological works, though it is constantly identified with judgment in both Old and New Testaments. That word is *righteousness*. Again and again the Psalms declare that God "will judge the world in righteousness." In fact, one whole section of the 119th Psalm [vs. 137-142] is devoted to the righteousness of God in judgment. It begins: "Righteous are you, O LORD, and upright are your judgments. Your testimonies, which you have commanded, are righteous and very faithful. My zeal has consumed me, because my enemies have forgotten your words. Your word is very pure; therefore your servant loves it. I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts. Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is truth." So too the prophets frequently declare that it is "the LORD of hosts who judges righteously, who tries the heart and the mind."

Since God has appointed Christ the Judge of all mankind, and since this judgment, like all divine judgments, must proceed according to righteousness, how harmoniously perfect is the revelation of Christ in the New Testament as "Jesus Christ the righteous," or, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "the righteous Judge." He came to "fulfill all righteousness" and "is made unto us the very righteousness of God," and in his holy death he displays for all eternity the righteousness of God. In the midst of the bold judgments of the Book of Revelation, John says that he heard the angel of the waters saying, "You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because you have judged these things" (16:5).

Throughout the Word of God there is one unified testimony to the truth that the judgment of the souls of men at the throne of Christ is *final*. It is determined by what a man does on this earth. All the Scriptures testify that for each man there will be only one period of trial. Judgment does not occur when a man dies; all the wicked are awaiting judgment. Contrary to the unscriptural doctrine of purgatory, nothing one generation can do will result in any alteration in the conditions of the souls of any of the dead of any preceding generation.

There is an absolute finality to the return of Christ and the accompanying events. Our Lord frequently used the words "end of the world" (Matt. 13:49; 28:20). Over and over again he spoke of "the last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48). In the Olivet discourse we find the clause "then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14). Sometimes the biblical writers use a simple phrase: "the day" (Rom. 2:16), "the great day" (Jude 6), "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:2; 1 Cor. 1:8), or, as we have seen, "the day of judgment." No doubt, some of these phrases are to be identified with specific eras in the vast consequences of the Second Advent, but with all of them there is the note of finality. All things are summed up in Christ. He is the beginning and also the end, the first and the last. The destiny of the human race and the future of the whole universe are determined by their relation to the glorious victories of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In these troubled decades, scores of writers are attempting to foresee what may be ahead for our world-economically, politically, scientifically. Even some contemporary histories of European civilization conclude with chapters suggesting what is ahead. But very few of these writers even hint at the most important of all such future events for the human race, the Second Advent of Christ, which will bring this historical era to a close. What secular man sees on the horizon is, after all, only a human guess. But the Christian looks with absolute certainty for the return of his Saviour, Jesus Christ, because that event was announced by the Teacher who came from God, was reaffirmed by the apostles, is a major theme of divine revelation, and has always been

believed by the universal Church. Ultimately and inevitably, because Christ is the only begotten Son of God, the Redeemer and Judge of mankind, all things must be summed up in him.

When Will Christ Return?

In his prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives, Christ clearly declared in reference to his return that "of that day and that hour knows no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36). Later in the discourse he repeated his warning several times. Yet despite these and similar warnings, some men in every age of the Church have foolishly attempted to construct chronological schemes for the sequence of future events, with dates attached. These schemes are invariably futile and only confirm the impossibility of deriving any such conclusion from the data of the Scripture.

On the other hand, there *are* such things as signs of the times. Christ, after enumerating numerous phenomena that would occur between his First and Second Advents and especially toward the end of this age, exhorted his disciples and the generations that would follow them: "Ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors" (Matt. 24:33). To be sure, many distinguished servants of God through the ages have felt convinced that they themselves were living at the end of the age. This belief was expressed as early as the fourth century, by Lactantius. In the Middle Ages there was a great literature known as "The Fifteen Signs Before Doom's Day." Martin Luther, commenting on Luke 21:25-36, went into great detail about his own conviction that he was at the end of that age. And there have been and are more modern writers of the same persuasion. Their error does not, however, prevent us from considering some of the phenomena that the New Testament says will mark the end of the age, and from looking at present events and movements to see whether they seem to be setting the stage for the return of Christ.

Confining ourselves for the moment to the Olivet discourse, we note that one phenomenon marking the end of the age will be lawlessness (Matt. 24:12), culminating in the appearance of the Lawless One (2 Thess. 2:7, 8). Despite the advanced state of our culture, our age seems to be the most lawless one the world has known—at least, for the last four centuries. In St. Luke's account of the Olivet discourse, one sentence in particular seems to be a vivid description of what we now see happening around the world: "And on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth" (Luke 21:25, 26). Our Lord, who taught a Gospel of peace and love, nevertheless predicted that down through the ages there would be "wars and rumors of wars . . . for nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:6, 7). It is estimated that more than *one hundred million* people have been killed in wars on this planet in the last sixty years. Our century has seen the first two wars that could accurately be called world wars, and during the last forty years there has hardly been a day when the front pages of our newspapers have not carried something about war somewhere on earth.

Christ spoke also of false prophets and false messiahs. In my opinion we have not yet had a great manifestation of this fearful deception, though there are already many false cults. Yet in a day when unbelief seems to be increasing throughout Christendom, these words of our Lord seem particularly applicable: "When the Son of man comes, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

There are those who do not believe there is any particular future for Israel; yet one cannot ignore our Lord's words that "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). Since the passage seems clearly to declare that the day will come when Jerusalem will not be trodden down by the Gentiles, a corollary would seem to be that the city would return to the custody of the Jews-and this has now happened.

In Christ's comparison of conditions on earth during the days of Noah with conditions that will prevail at the end of this age (Matt. 24:37-39), the emphasis is not on immorality, unbelief, drunkenness, or anarchy, but on a secular civilization without God. This is the way our contemporary civilization is drifting.

The Book of Revelation, though it does not give precise details, in several passages predicts not only a number of groups of united nations but ultimately one great worldwide sovereignty, with evil forces in authority, called "the kingdom of this world" (Rev. 11:15, RSV). As the kings of the earth go out to make war "against the Lamb," they "have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast" (Rev. 17:13).

Happily there is a prediction in the Olivet discourse pointing to victories for the Gospel: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10). Let us not forget that this "gospel of the kingdom" is exactly what St. Paul was preaching at the end of his ministry (Acts 28:31). Christ's words do not even hint that the nations will all be converted but affirm that they will all have a witness in their midst. Think of the great number of agencies that have arisen to help make this possible-the great outburst of missionary activity since Carey, the vast translation work of the Bible societies, the tremendous outreach of religious radio and recordings. Oscar Cullmann speaks of the relation of missionary activity to faith in the Second Advent. "The missionary work of the Church," he says, "is the eschatological foretaste of the kingdom of God, and the biblical hope of the 'end' constitutes the keenest incentive to action" (quoted in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, 1961, p. 43).

In this discussion of conditions in our times, this comment by a well-known secular historian is significant:

The new age bears another and more ominous gift for the historian, one that has not been conspicuous in historical writings since the works of the Christian fathers. This gift is the element of the catastrophic. The Church fathers, with their apocalyptic historiography, understood the dramatic advantage possessed by the storyteller who can keep his audience sitting on the edge of eternity. The modern secular historian, after submitting to a long cycle of historicism, has at last had this dramatic advantage restored. The restoration, to be sure, arrived under scientific rather than apocalyptic auspices. But the dramatic potentials were scarcely diminished by placing in human hands at one and the same time the Promethean fire as well as the divine prerogative of putting an end to the whole drama of human history [C. Vann Woodward in the *American Historical Review*, LXVI, No. 1 (October, 1960), p. 19; see also the profound discussion in Toynbee's monumental *Study of History*, IX, 119, 289, 343-49].

We do not know, of course, exactly when Christ will return. Yet unless I, along with many other Bible students, misinterpret the prophetic Scriptures after years of studying them, it seems certain that the

drift of the world in our desperate age is nothing less than the setting of the stage for the climax of human history, determined by and concluded through the Second Advent of Christ. Emil Brunner has said:

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find any expectation that in the course of the centuries mankind will become Christian, so that the opposition between the world and the Church would be overcome in historical time. But the contrary is true: the Christian community or Church will be a minority until the end, and therefore the battle between the dark powers and the powers of Christ goes on until the day of judgment. If there is any truth in the apocalyptic pictures which we find in the New Testament, we have to say even more. The apocalyptic visions are unanimous in depicting the end of time, the last phase of human history before the coming of the day of Christ, as a time of uttermost tension between light and darkness, the Church and the world, Christ and the Devil [*The Scandal of Christianity*, 1950, p. 110].

Perhaps God will yet arrest these profound, seemingly irresistible movements toward an abyss and grant us a world revival. But if this is not to happen, then we seem to be near the end.

The Blessed Hope

Down through the ages the Church has always referred to the Second Advent of the Lord as the great *hope* of all believers. St. Paul speaks of it as "that blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). Indeed, the Second Advent of our Lord is involved in all the important New Testament passages referring to the Christian's hope. Sometimes it is called "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), sometimes "the hope of eternal life" (Titus 1:2 and 3:7), sometimes "the hope of righteousness" (Gal. 5:5). St. Paul speaks of "the hope which is laid up for you in heaven" (Col. 1:5). In the well-known passage at the beginning of his First Epistle, St. Peter reminds us that God, according to his great mercy, "has begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you . . . salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:35). Then he exhorts his readers to "be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13). It is significant that in the writings of the Apostle Paul alone, the noun "hope" appears twenty-eight times, and in verbal form twenty-one times.

Hope in itself takes in three main ideas. In the first place, it must have reference only to things yet to come; we may rejoice in the past, or regret it, but we cannot hope for anything that has already taken place. Second, we speak of hoping only for something that is desirable, something we should like to have or like to see take place. Finally, any hope worth talking about must refer to something within the realm of possibility. You and I do not hope to be millionaires, even though we might like to be. None of us hopes to live hundreds of years. Our Lord's return is gloriously desirable; it is the ultimate perfection of every holy longing. And it is a reality for us—not just a desirable possibility, not a dream or fantasy, but something guaranteed by promises centered in Christ. Emil Brunner begins his volume *Eternal Hope* with these words:

What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation, take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath; despair supervenes, spelling the paralysis of intellectual and

spiritual powers by a feeling of the senselessness and purposelessness of existence. As the fate of the human organism is dependent on the supply of oxygen, so the fate of humanity is dependent on its supply of hope.

It is scarcely necessary to prove that Western humanity of today, at least in Europe, has entered a phase when it is feeling an acute and distressing need of breath through the disappearance of hope. Everyone is becoming aware of this, to a greater or less degree, and if anyone is not aware of it he can find the proof of it in contemporary literature and philosophy [*Eternal Hope*, 1954, p. 7].

St. Peter speaks of this hope as a *living* hope. How many of our human hopes have had to die! But the biblical hope is a living hope, because it centers in the living Christ and thus can never be extinguished. In this hope are involved the resurrection of the body, beholding of the Lord in his glory, fellowship with believers of all ages, and everything else attending inexhaustible experience of eternal life-life in Christ. Moreover, this hope transcends the individual. It is a hope that will be consummated in the new heavens and a new earth "wherein dwells righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13). Christians have a right, then, to hope for a final state of this earth, when, following judgment, crime and sin and shame and death itself will be put away because of the righteous Son of God, and there will not even be a whisper against God or his Son.

A corollary of the hope of the Christian is the hopelessness of the unbeliever. The hope of a reign of righteousness is at the same time the announcement of the doom and destruction of the enemies of God, including the nations that rebel against him. The hope of Marxism is a communistic world brought about by human effort. The hope of the Christian is a righteous world brought about by the omnipotence of the Redeemer. Ultimately our hope is not in democracy, the United Nations, peace treaties, culture, or science, but in the coming of the Lord Jesus. How tragically futile was the statement made by Woodrow Wilson before the United States Senate in 1919: the League of Nations is the only hope of mankind."

The words of British scholar J. E. Fison are even more apposite today than when they were written thirteen years ago: "The time is short. The rival eschatology of Karl Marx is in the field. It is high time that the Christian Church awoke to the situation and either honestly abandoned hope or else proclaimed the Gospel of the Advent of hope" (*The Christian Hope*, 1954, p. 28). And the leading authority on Marxism in American, Dr. Bertrand D. Wolfe, has strongly reaffirmed this thought:

In an age prepared for by nearly two thousand years of Christianity with its millennial expectations, when the faith of millions has grown dim and the altar seems vacant of its image, Marxism has arisen to offer a fresh, antireligious religion, a new faith, passionate and demanding, a new vision of the Last Things, a new Apocalypse, and a new Paradise. Like the Apocalypse of the Bible, the Revolution is a day of judgment when the mighty shall be humbled and those of low degree exalted. It is the beginning of a Millennium (the very word is the same), a new thousand-year reign of historyless history [*Marxism*, 1965, p. 369].

Some Ethical Implications of the Second Advent

Of the many passages in the New Testament referring to the Second Advent, there is hardly one that does not in itself or in its context insist upon the influence such a hope ought to have on our inner spiritual life, on the mood of our souls, the joy of our hearts. Sometimes the exhortation is very simple, as when in the Olivet discourse our Lord said, "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matt. 24:44). By being ready, of course, he meant living so as not to be ashamed at his coming. These words were echoed by St. Paul, who reminded the Philippians that their citizenship was in heaven, "from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). Our mood as we wait for the Lord to come should be one of patience, as St. Paul and St. James remind us. "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ" (2 Thess. 3:5). "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See [how] the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (Jas. 5:7, 8).

This waiting, however, is not to be a time of idleness. The parables of the pounds and the talents, as well as other parables, vividly set forth the obligation to labor for the Lord until he shall return from the far country into which he has gone. The command of the nobleman was, "Trade with these till I come" (Luke 19:13, RSV). Moreover, there is hardly a stronger passage exhorting Christians to be constant in work than that which concludes Paul's magnificent resurrection chapter: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Not only are we to be diligent in the Lord's work, while we patiently wait for him, but we must "live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12, 13; the same language is found in First Thessalonians 5:8). The conduct believers are to have while they wait for the Lord's return is summed up in a word often used by St. Paul that has almost escaped the attention of our contemporary age: unblameable. One passage will be sufficient: "To the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess. 3:13).

The similar words of the Apostle John written at the end of that century are well known: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2,3).

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