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WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN'S EXPECTATION?

by F. S. PARNHAM

THIS short New Testament study is designed to counter the view that the eschatological event variously called the "revelation" or the "epiphany" of our Lord is to be distinguished from an earlier secret coming, and that this secret coming, not the (later) manifestation in glory, is the Christian's expectation.

THIS is a topical question, becoming more so as the age draws to a close, a question, moreover, to which worldly wisdom has no answer. Nevertheless, we are not left without guidance. We acknowledge gratefully God's provision in the words of truth which the Holy Ghost teaches, so that we may *know* the things which are freely given to us (1 Cor. 2: 12-13) and thus are able to regard the future with assurance and peace of mind. Yet, when comparing spiritual things with spiritual, how carefully we need to read and understand the Scriptures lest, unwittingly, we distort the truth by adulteration or addition (cf. 2 Cor. 4: 2) and impart to the words a sense alien to the mind of the Lord. In no other field of Biblical interpretation is this fault so prevalent as it is when our Lord's Second Advent is being considered, but if we let the word of God speak to us as it is written many a difficulty will vanish. A few passages from the New Testament may serve to clarify what is often misunderstood.

In 1 Cor. 1: 7 the apostle Paul states that the saints at Corinth—some, if not all, his converts—were "waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", a highly commendable attitude of heart. Unhappily, the translation in the Authorized Version is not strictly in keeping with the original and the precision of the Greek word, which the Holy Spirit uses there, is lost by substituting the term "coming" in place of "revelation". The latter is a key word, as is obvious from other passages. It is true that "coming" and "revelation" both refer to the Second Advent but there is a distinction which should be preserved. It is, therefore, correct to say of the Corinthian believers, as it might well be true of other Christian gatherings, that they were waiting for the *revelation* of Jesus Christ.

If words are to convey any meaning we may ask: What is a revelation? It signifies an uncovering or manifestation. It pictures

an unveiling of things or persons hitherto withdrawn from view, bringing them to light and making them visible. It is the antithesis of that which is hidden or kept secret. Seemingly, then, this is the nature of our Lord's return and our expectation is consequently focused upon His glorious unveiling.

So important is this fact that it not only colours our outlook but conditions our blessing, since all our hopes are centred in Christ and flow from His saving power. There is no rest for weary pilgrims until "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels" (2 Thess. 1: 7). Similarly, our faith, tried and refined meantime, must wait for its reward "at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1: 7), when grace, its beneficent work complete, will ensure to us the "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1: 5), including the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8: 23). All this transpires "at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1: 13), not before. Furthermore, the good of the Second Advent is not confined to members of the human race but will transform the world around us, so that the whole creation—like the believers at Corinth—is said to be anxiously waiting for that great event, synchronizing with "the revelation (so the Greek) of the sons of God" (Rom. 8: 19). Nor is this thought absent from the exhortation of Romans 8: 18 where the apostle declares that "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us". What a precious encouragement is this! Recognizing, therefore, the stress that is laid upon a public manifestation or visible appearing—whether of our Lord's Second Coming or of our associated blessing—ought not the term "revelation", with all that it implies, to occupy a prominent and rightful place in our Scripture vocabulary?

There is a fitting parallel to this in the shape of another Pauline expression, usually rendered "appearance" in our Authorized Version, though it can be—and sometimes is—anglicized from the Greek as "epiphany". What is the basic meaning of this word, found only in the writings of St. Paul? As a compound derived from the verb "to shine" prefixed with an intensifying preposition it denotes that which is conspicuously bright in its shining. It conveys the thought of "shining out or upon", just as the sun and stars shed their bright beams upon the earth (cf. the negative in Acts 27: 20). Trench enlarges upon this and comments helpfully, suggesting that epiphanies (whether of the Old or New Testament) must be Theophanies as well and therefore can only be applied to the Son of God in His incarnation. And this is true of His first advent in humility or His return in

power and glory. Taken in its simplest of definitions it brings to light persons or things so that they become luminous and visible, and the following examples illustrate this. In 1 Timothy 6: 14 Paul enjoins his young friend to "keep this commandment . . . until the appearing (epiphany) of our Lord Jesus Christ". Evidently there is to be no diminishing of devotion to Christ until He comes back in manifest glory. This is followed up by the apostle when he writes from his prison-cell and urges his youthful collaborator to go on preaching the Word, reinforcing his exhortation with the fact of the Lord's return to judge and to take the kingdom at His epiphany or visible presence (2 Timothy 4: 1). Meantime, in verse 8 of the same chapter Paul's mind leaps across his intervening tribulation and dwells upon the prospect of the reward, viz. a crown of righteousness which the Lord will bestow upon His faithful servant and likewise upon all who have loved (and keep on loving) His epiphany or visible presence. In retrospect we notice 2 Timothy 1: 10 as recording our Lord's first advent "in the days of His flesh" when He was seen openly and publicly in His unique epiphany as the Saviour of sinners. His gracious presence then was not hidden from the gaze of all among whom He moved. He was truly "God manifest in flesh" (1 Timothy 3: 16), as was also testified by one who stood very close to the Saviour's heart of affection and made mention of this in his gospel and in his first epistle (John 1: 14; 1 John 1: 1).

Finally and conclusively, was it not said of the ascended Lord that He would come again in like manner? (Acts 1: 11). The manner of His going will characterize His return, bodily, visibly, with an unveiled presence that will satisfy the longing gaze of His waiting people. This, surely, is the believer's expectation, not a hope to be realized in the solitude of desert places or in the secrecy of some inner chamber (Matt. 24: 26) but openly, in the outshining of Shekinah glory.

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