

*NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE SECOND
COMING OF CHRIST.*

VI. ITS SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE.

THE practical agreement of the various and very different writers of the New Testament is, apart from any special infallibility or authority of Holy Scripture, complete historical proof that the Founder of Christianity left upon the minds of His immediate followers a firm conviction that in visible bodily form He will return from heaven to earth to close the present order of things, to raise the dead, to judge all men, and to bring in the everlasting glory. Now it is in the last degree unlikely that in this important matter all the early followers of Christ, the men who won for Him the homage of all future generations and through whose agency He became the Saviour of the world, were in serious error touching the teaching of their Master. The unlikeliness of this alternative compels us to believe that the unanimous conviction of His followers was a correct re-echo of the actual teaching of Christ. We therefore ask, What bearing has this teaching, now traced to His lips, upon the spiritual life of our own day? Is it to us merely a matter of antiquarian interest, or is it, or may it be, amid the progress of modern thought, helpful to the spiritual life of the servants of Christ?

It may be at once admitted that the doctrine before us cannot occupy in our thought the place it filled in the minds of the first generation of Christians. Indeed, it does not occupy in the longer and later and more mature epistles of Paul the position it holds in his two earliest letters. In the systematic exposition of the Gospel given in the Epistle to the Romans, it receives only slight mention, and has no place in the main argument. So also in the sublime Epistle to

the Ephesians. In the Fourth Gospel, which contains the fullest development in the New Testament of the doctrine of the Son of God, it is not conspicuous. Important as it is, the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ cannot be placed on a level, as a fundamental doctrine of the Gospel, with the superhuman dignity of Christ, His resurrection from the dead, the pardon of sins through faith in Him and through His death for the sins of men, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to be, in the servants of Christ, the inward source of a new life. It is, however, an integral part, in the second rank of importance, of the Gospel of Christ.

That the doctrine before us pertains to the future, warns us to interpret with utmost caution the teaching which we have traced to the lips of Christ. The fulfilment, in Christ and Christianity, of the ancient prophecies given to Israel differs greatly both from the expectations roused and from the letter of the prophecies. Doubtless it will be so in the Second Coming of Christ. All we can expect with confidence is that, in the latter as in the former, the realisation will, in all real worth, surpass the letter of the promise. Touching the return of Christ, we expect such a fulfilment as might be most suitably foretold to men in the form we find in the New Testament.

In our search for the reality underlying this teaching, we may learn something from 2 Thessalonians i. 7, and 1 Corinthians i. 7, where the return for which His followers were waiting is described as "the revelation (or unveiling) of the Lord Jesus." In other words, the veil which now hides from mortal view the eternal realities will in that day be raised or rent. In this rent veil we have a definite conception of the coming of Christ. It will be a bursting in, upon the visible universe, of the great Invisible beyond and above it, in order that the Invisible may transform and glorify the visible.

This expectation of a bursting in of the Unseen implies,

and is the strongest conceivable expression of, a conviction that behind and beyond and above the visible universe is a greater world unseen. Upon this conviction rests the Christian hope and all religious life.

On every side we see a universe of apparently unlimited extent. And it seems to be as durable as it is firm and broad. Indeed the planets in their orbits and the so-called fixed stars in their scarcely-perceptible movements seem to be a visible embodiment of eternity itself. In contrast to the solid earth on which we tread, with firm but passing steps, and the starry heavens above our heads, we seem to be butterflies of a summer or like leaves of the forest opening in the bright green springtime only to pass away in the decay of autumn.

To assert, as is implied in the New Testament teaching about the Second Coming of Christ, that an hour will strike in which the visible universe, whose age reaches back through unnumbered millenniums, will pass away, is to assert the existence of a world greater and older and more durable than the solid earth, on which so many generations of men have lived and died, and all that belongs to it; and of forces or a force controlling the natural forces which seem to control irresistibly all human life. In other words, a belief in the Second Coming of Christ is the strongest possible contradiction to the Materialism which asserts or suggests that the things which are seen and the forces observed operating in them are the only matters certainly known to man.

The teaching of Christ that the visible universe will not abide for ever has received remarkable confirmation in our own day from Natural Science. All modern research teaches that the material universe is tending towards a state in which life will be impossible, that the forces of nature are carrying it irresistibly forward to the silence of death. In this, as in other respects, the life of an individual is an epitome of the life of the race and of the world.

Beyond that silence and quiescence, Natural Science can see nothing. Herbert Spencer timidly suggests¹ that possibly the forces which are destroying the universe will, by some reverse action, bring it back to life. But, for this suggestion, he has no proof or presumption to bring. It is a mere hope for which Science finds no foundation, suggested as a disguise to hide the eternal night which is all that Natural Science can foretell.

Christ taught, not only that the present universe is passing away, but that, just as it has its source in an Unseen greater than itself, by which it is controlled, so it will be succeeded by another world far greater than that which we see around us, and destined to abide for ever. He taught that the solid earth beneath us is but a temporary platform for the passing drama of man's probation, and that when the drama is over the platform erected for it will be removed, to give place for the abiding reality for which that drama is the preparation. This teaching is the only explanation of the present material universe, apparently so durable yet manifestly doomed to pass away; and of human life upon it, apparently so transitory and yet of so much greater value than its material environment.

We now see that the Second Coming of Christ, as taught by Himself, is the strongest possible assertion that the material and visible, though apparently so important and so stable, are actually subordinate and transitory; and that the spiritual, apparently so intangible and transitory, is the enduring and the real. In no other form could this great truth, which underlies all religion and all the highest morality, have been so clearly and so forcefully stated as in the teaching which in these papers we have traced to the lips of the Great Teacher who has remoulded for good the thought and life of man.

The return of Christ depicted in the New Testament will

¹ *First Principles*, pp. 529ff.

be a complete and abiding victory and dominion of mind over matter. In this life, matter fetters mind in a thousand ways. The necessities of bodily life compel us to spend time in more or less degrading toil. Physical causes produce pain, and thus hinder mental effort. The intelligence of man is held down in its upward flight by its material environment. Now St. Paul teaches expressly, in 1 Corinthians xv. 35, 44, that the risen servants of Christ will have bodies. This can only mean that at His return their disembodied spirits will again clothe themselves in material forms. But, whereas their present bodies are "psychical,"¹ which I understand to mean that they are governed by the laws of animal life, their risen bodies will be "spiritual," *i.e.* controlled altogether by the intelligent spirit within. At present the nobler element in man is fettered, and in large measure controlled, by the lower. The teaching of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians xv. 44-46 asserts that this inversion is only transitory and preparatory, and that in the great consummation the element which is essentially higher will rule and that which is lower will receive its highest possible dignity by becoming the submissive organ of that which is greater than itself.

Still more conspicuously will the coming of Christ be the absolute and eternal victory of good over evil. In the present order of things, not unfrequently evil seems to trample under foot the good. The wicked flourish, and for a long time. The righteous suffer, and sometimes lose life itself because they are good and others around are bad. But the majesty of the Moral Sense of Man, which speaks with an authority we cannot gainsay, assures us that this triumph cannot last. Indeed the moral incongruity of this occasional triumph demands a conspicuous and universally recognised vindication of the majesty of Right. All this prepares us to expect an exact and eternal retribution for all actions

¹ A.V and R.V. "natural."

good and bad. Moreover, so closely interwoven is human action with its material environment, nearer and more remote, and the imperfection of present retribution is so closely related to its present imperfect environment, that we wonder not that the perfect retribution will be accompanied by a new and perfect material environment. Only in a New Earth and Heaven, and in bodies raised from the dead to die no more, will every one receive according as his work has been.

The resurrection of the body will be the complete and permanent realisation of the creative purpose of God. He made man spirit and body, in order that the spirit might rule the body and make it the organ of the spirit's self-manifestation, and in order that thus both spirit and body might attain their highest well-being. This purpose and this order were disturbed and for a time frustrated by sin. The body threw off the yoke of the Spirit within; and, the original purpose being inverted, both spirit and body sank into discord and bondage. But, that He might restore the order thus disturbed, the Eternal Son, Himself the Archetype of all created intelligence, entered into human flesh and became Man. In those who receive Him, He at once rescues the spirit, in some measure, from bondage to its material environment, nearer and more remote. But the rescue is only partial. Christ will come again to redeem even the bodies of His people, and, as St. Paul believed,¹ their further material environment, from the bondage of decay. He will thus, by restoring the normal relation of spirit to body and of man to his entire material environment, achieve the purpose for which man and the universe were created.

This victory of mind over matter and of good over evil, and this accomplishment of the creative purpose of God, can be brought about only by some such event as a resur-

¹ See Romans viii. 19-23.

rection of the dead and a renovation of the material universe. It cannot be accomplished by the hand of death. For death sunders that which God created to be closely interwoven. It is a victory of matter over mind, of evil over good. Lips which spoke for Christ are silent in the grave, silent in some cases because they spoke so bravely and so well. The fugitive spirits of His servants have been driven naked from the bodies and from the world in which they once served Him. This cannot be for ever. The fugitives must return and claim their own. The world must receive back those whom it once disowned. And all this can be done only by some such dissolution and renovation of nature and resurrection of the dead as is described in the New Testament.

The relation between our present and future bodies, and between the material universe around us now and that new order of things which will abide for ever, is beyond our conception, and need not trouble us. For in our present bodies is a constant flux of particles, which however does not destroy or weaken their continuity. It matters not whether the risen and glorified bodies will, or will not, contain a single particle present in the bodies laid in the grave. The essential point is that the spirits driven forth by death from the material forms in which they lived and served God and from the visible universe will survive that universe and will robe themselves again in glorified material forms. At the same time, a wide and deep analogy seems to suggest a real, though to us utterly inconceivable, continuity or relation between the present battlefield and the scene of the final triumph, and between the bodies once devoted on earth to the service of Christ and those on whose brows will rest the unfading crown.

The hope of a bodily resurrection and of a new earth and heaven gives dignity and worth to matter. For it implies that matter, be it what it may, is not a passing, but an abiding, companion of mind. And this abiding union is suggested

irresistibly by the very intimate relation now existing. It is meet, as is suggested in Philippians iii. 21, that the bodies which have been obedient organs of the spirit should share its redemption and glory. But in what sense or measure this is possible, we know not.

That this victory of mind over matter, of good over evil, and this complete realisation of the purpose for which man was created, are connected with Christ, and with His bodily return to earth, need not surprise us. For the incarnation of the Creator Son gave to matter a new and infinite dignity. Moreover, in that sacred human body evil achieved its most terrible victory over good, and matter inflicted on mind its deepest humiliation. In some measure that victory was reversed at the resurrection of Christ. He then triumphantly rescued from the grave the body which had been the victim of death's triumph. But the triumph of Christ was incomplete. The Creator had entered, in human form, a revolted province in order to bring it back to His peaceful and blessed sway. Without having done this, He returned from a world which had rejected Him. But He took with Him into the unseen world a handful of human dust; and placed it upon the throne of heaven. He thus severed that which was designed to be one; and took from the material universe its most highly honoured part.

Earth claims back that handful of dust; or rather the handful of dust claims the world of which once it was a part. The separation cannot be abiding. He who, after being driven from earth by man's deepest sin, returned into the body once nailed to the cross will return again, bringing back the handful of dust from heaven to earth, in order that its touch may raise earth to heaven.

Since the dead servants of Christ were on earth, and now are in His nearer presence, vitally united to Him, we wonder not that their departed spirits will accompany their returning Lord. And, since they were created body and

spirit, we wonder not that they, like their Lord ages ago, will robe themselves again in material forms. And since, both as Creator and Redeemer, Christ claims the homage and obedience of all His rational creatures, we wonder not that at His return He will sit in judgment on all men living and dead.

Thus in Christ and by His return from heaven to earth will be accomplished fully the purpose for which the world and man were created. The orderly accomplishment was disturbed by sin; and this disturbance could be removed only by the suffering and death of the Incarnate Son, Himself the Agent of creation. A pledge of the accomplishment was given in the resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of the Crucified. His return to earth will bring the full realisation of the entire purpose of God.

Touching the present condition of the departed servants of Christ, the New Testament does not say much. But every reference to them implies or suggests a state of consciousness and rest in the presence of Christ, a presence so near that, compared with it, their intercourse with Him on earth was absence. So 2 Corinthians v. 6, 8: "Absent from the body . . . at home with the Lord." Also Philippians i. 23, Luke xxiii. 43, Revelation vi. 11.

The long waiting of the departed for their full reward need not perplex us. To the Unseen we cannot apply notions of time and delay derived from the present life. Suffice for us that the righteous dead are already resting with Christ from the toil and conflict of earth; and that in His good time they and we together shall enter the glory which in that day will be revealed.

For that day we wait. Not the death of the body, which is a penalty of sin and a victory of the powers of darkness, but the return of Christ in bodily form to reign over His faithful ones, their own bodies rescued from death and the grave, is the aim and goal of our exultant hope. For that

return His early followers eagerly waited. And their eager hope suggested that perhaps they might hear His voice and see His face without passing under the dark shadow of death. That eager expectation was not fulfilled. And we cannot share it. But, long as the time seems, that day will come. Had we witnessed the creation of matter, and known the long ages predestined to elapse before rational man would stand on the earth, our expectation would have wearied at the long delay. But those long ages rolled by ; and for thousands of years our planet has teemed with rational life. So will pass by whatever ages remain before our Lord's return. Many reasons suggest that, though not close at hand, it cannot be very long delayed. Doubtless we shall lay us down for our last sleep. But in our sleep we shall dream of Him and be with Him. And when the morning dawns we shall wake up in the splendour of the rising Sun.

YES, I COME QUICKLY.

AMEN. COME, LORD JESUS.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

[Since writing the above, my attention has been called to *The Great Day of the Lord*, by Rev. Alex. Brown, of which a second edition has just appeared. The writer assumes, in deference to certain passages in the New Testament, that the return of Christ there foretold took place in the first century ; and supposes that all was fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem. His argument is based chiefly on the Book of Revelation, to which he devotes 254 out of 399 pages. The teaching of St. Paul occupies, except sundry casual references, only 44 pages.

On page 257 we read :—" To sum the whole into a sentence—with the fall of Jerusalem, the then existing age was ended, the dead were judged, the saints were raised to heaven, and a new dispensation of a world-wide order insti-

tuted, of which Christ is everlasting King, and ever present with His people, whether living here or dead beyond." On page 266, as an exposition of John vi. 39, we read:—"The last day' is easily interpreted. It is the last day of the age, the Judaic age then running, and was a popular phrase for the time when the higher Messianic privileges would be given to the people of God." In reference to Matthew xxv. 31, he says, on page 319:—"The judgment scene must take its beginning in the period immediately succeeding the downfall of Jerusalem."

As an example of his exegesis, I quote from page 220, in reference to 1 Thessalonians iv. 15-17:—"Ἄμα (together) may express the idea of *place* as well as of *time*, and in the New Testament most frequently carries the idea of *identity* of *quality*, and might well be translated 'likewise.' The word is radically identical with the Sanscrit *samâ*, Latin *simul*, Gothic *sama*, English *same*. In this light, it is seen that Paul instructs the Thessalonians only to this effect, that they, though not dead at the second coming, will afterwards be caught up in similar manner to the dead, to meet them and be for ever in their blessed society." The above is an example of the loose exegesis and smattering of scholarship which meet us throughout the book. I notice with surprise that a work so unsatisfactory has received from the press no small commendation.

I cannot close this series of papers without a tribute of honour to a veteran theologian, whom God still spares to us, Dr. David Brown of Aberdeen. His work on *The Second Advent* has long been, and still is, in my opinion, the best on the subject. It is worthy of careful study.]