

◆ JESUS CHRIST ◆
The Divine Son of God

JESUS: THE COMING ONE

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, “. . . I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2, 3). Immediately following His ascension, two angels (“men in white clothing”) appeared to His disciples and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

ERRORS CONCERNING THE SECOND COMING

Although the Second Coming is a certain fact, numerous errors have been taught in regard to this much-anticipated event. Every Christian should understand the Bible’s teachings about Jesus’ return so that he will not be confused by nonbiblical speculations.¹

“He Has Already Come”

An error vigorously opposed by Paul was that the day of the Lord had already come:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come (2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2).

People were not saying that the day of the Lord was “at hand” (KJV) or “just at hand” (ASV), but that it had already come at the time of the writing of 2 Thessalonians, in A.D. 51.

The inspired word describing the error literally means that the day of the Lord “has

stood in,” but it is translated more smoothly as “has come” (NASB; RSV). The same word is found in 1 Corinthians 3:22 and Romans 8:38, where it is translated “present.” Thus, in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, an accurate translation would be that some had said that the day of the Lord was present, that it had already become a reality.

First-century advocates of the present reality of the day of the Lord were unaware that that great day will entail a visible sighting of the Lord in the sky (Acts 1:9–11. They were also unaware of the apostasy that must precede the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, . . .” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

“He Is Coming Immediately”

A second error on the part of the Thessalonians in regard to the return of Christ was that it was imminent, overhanging, threatening. In refuting the “present reality” error, Paul spoke of what must come to pass before the Second Coming. So many events were involved that the day of the Lord could not have come in A.D. 51 (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12). A great apostasy certainly has evolved since A.D. 51, and that apostasy will last until the day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:8). Therefore, no one can say that the day of the Lord is coming in any given generation. That day will come as a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:1, 2); that is, it will be unexpected and sudden. For this reason, claims of the im-

minency of the Lord's return cannot be certified. In fact, when someone is teaching that the Lord's return is overhanging a certain generation, that may be solid reason for knowing that He will *not* come in that generation. Jesus said, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36); "For the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matthew 24:44).

"Paul Expected To Be Alive When He Returned"

A third error about Jesus' return is some people's idea that Paul expected to be alive when the Lord came. They have assumed this because Paul used the first person in 1 Thessalonians 4:15. By the same reasoning, one could conclude that Paul expected to be dead when the Lord comes, since he used the first person in describing those raised from the dead in 1 Corinthians 6:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:14.

Actually, Paul did not specifically discuss his personal situation. However, he spoke of an apostasy which would gradually develop. The apostasy would remain under restraint for an undetermined time period, until it reached its maximum power. Paul's awareness of this could mean that he did not expect to be living when the Lord arrived.

"The Lord's Coming Will Have Two Phases"

A fourth error in regard to the Second Coming is the claim on the part of some today that two future visible comings will occur, seven years apart. It is said that Jesus will come for His saints at His *parousia*,² raising the dead ones and translating the living ones, and then seven years later will appear again, with His saints, at His *epiphaneia*. According to this false doctrine, during the seven years between Jesus' comings the saints will live in a rapture³ of cloud glory while turmoil fills the earth in a vast tribulation. At the end of the seven years, the Lord is expected to return to the earth at His *epiphaneia* and usher in a millennium, at the end of which He will raise the wicked dead.

Support for this theory is sought in the original words. It is said that the Holy Spirit especially inspired the two words *parousia* and

epiphaneia to describe two phases of the Lord's second coming. However, the word *parousia* is used in connection with the coming of human beings (2 Corinthians 7:6), the arrival of the man of sin (2 Thessalonians 2:9), and the Lord's first coming at Bethlehem (2 Peter 1:16), as well as the Lord's second coming at the end of the world (1 Corinthians 15:23). One cannot, therefore, validly affirm that the word *parousia* was specially inspired to describe the alleged first phase of the Lord's second coming.

Similarly, the word *epiphaneia* is used to tell of the first coming of the Lord to Bethlehem (2 Timothy 1:10) as well as His second coming at the end of the world (1 Timothy 6:14). It is therefore inaccurate to assert that the word *epiphaneia* is a technical word inspired to describe the alleged second phase of the Lord's second coming.

In addition, at the *parousia*, the false theory has Jesus coming *for* His saints, when He actually will be coming *with* His saints (1 Thessalonians 3:13; 4:14). The saints (Gk.: *hagioi*, "holy ones") who will come with the Lord may be angels (2 Thessalonians 1:7; Jude 14), or they may be the spirits of dead Christians returning from Paradise to be reunited with their physical remains and then translated. Whether they are angels or the spirits of deceased children of God, there is no teaching that their coming is at a special *epiphaneia* different from the *parousia*.

The expression "the dead in Christ" in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 was not contrasted with the dead out of Christ, as is falsely theorized.

The word *parousia* (1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8) is a compound word meaning "being at the side." "Presence," then, is an accurate translation (Philippians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 10:10). If an arrival is necessary for being present, then a *parousia* means "arrival," or a "coming," or an "advent." Titus' coming to Paul is called a *parousia* (2 Corinthians 7:6). The arrival of the man of sin is called a *parousia* (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Both the advent of Jesus at Bethlehem (2 Peter 1:16) and His advent at the end of the world (1 Corinthians 15:23) are referred to as His *parousia*.

Rather, Paul was contrasting the dead in Christ with the living in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:15). In this context, Paul was only discussing Christians. He was saying that living Christians will not leave the earth to join the Lord before dead Christians do. First Thessalonians 4 ignores those who are out of Christ, whether living or dead.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SECOND COMING

A Prerequisite

A prerequisite of the Second Coming, affirmed Paul, was the growth of an already existent iniquity. This movement, under restraint at the time of Paul's writing, would grow to notable proportions but would be destroyed at the Lord's second coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1–12).

The mystery of iniquity, the man of sin, was already operating in Paul's day. Certainly, he was one of the antichrists mentioned in 1 John 2:18, some of whom had already arrived. The arrogant apostate of 2 Thessalonians 2 had numerous attributes of one opposed to Christ (an antichrist). He was the embodiment of sin, while Jesus was the embodiment of righteousness. He was the son of perishing, while Christ was the Prince of life (Acts 3:15). He opposed God, while Jesus submitted to the Father's will.

Both the man of sin and the Man of righteousness may be described as possessing mystery (2 Thessalonians 2:6–8; 1 Timothy 3:16), working miracles (2 Thessalonians 2:9; John 5:19, 20), and having a *parousia* (2 Thessalonians 2:8, 9). However, the man of sin cannot abide the brightness of the Lord's *parousia*; he will be slain.

Several identifications have been suggested for the man of sin; many have named Nero. Upon his death in A.D. 68, some refused to give up their idea that he was the son of lawlessness in Paul's prediction. There arose the "Nero Redivivus" myth, saying that he would revive and continue to persecute Christians. On the contrary, both Nero and another candidate, Caligula (who put an image of himself in the Jerusalem temple), are disqualified because they will not be in power when the Lord comes. The iniquity prophesied by Paul will remain until it is slain at the Lord's coming. Others who have

been named are likewise eliminated because they will not be in power when Jesus returns.

The identity of the agency that restrained the man of sin has also been variously stated. Some have considered Paul himself to be the restrainer. Others have included all the apostles. A few have interpreted the phrase in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 as a reference to efforts by the German Empire or the Roman Empire to hold back the rise of the papacy. After the demise of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476, Roman bishops indulged their hunger for power. In the second century Tertullian interpreted the restrainer this way: "What obstacle is there but the Roman state . . . ?"⁴ He also said,

There is also another and a greater necessity for our offering prayer in behalf of the emperors, . . . For we know that a mighty shock impending over the whole earth—in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes—is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire.⁵

After the unidentified restrainer was removed, the son of lawlessness was to have power. Apparently his power would last until the coming of Christ, when he would be slain (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

Unblamable Christians

Jesus' work on the day of the Lord will not be completely destructive. The pleasant aspect of His coming will be His reception of the holy ones, the redeemed of all ages. Paul wanted the Thessalonian Christians to be among the redeemed. He prayed that they would be sanctified "entirely," and then repeated his prayer: "May your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). He wanted his fellow Christians dedicated wholly to what is right; and he wanted them either to die that way, unblamable, or to be living that way when the Lord came.

Converts as Crowns

Paul looked forward to the Lord's coming, among other reasons, because then he would see the beloved Thessalonians, who were very dear to him. An anticipation which filled him with gladness was the knowledge that he would

be reunited with the people whom he had turned from idols to the true God. As a winner of an Olympic race received a garland of flowers, so Paul said that the Thessalonians would be his diadem of glory at the day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

The significance of 1 Thessalonians 2:19, with converts becoming crowns, appears to be based on the assumption that Paul would know who those converts were. Personal recognition beyond the grave is therefore a Bible idea. One's body does not survive, but the ability to remember does.

God's Wrath

Impossible to dissociate from the second coming of Christ, along with the joy and gladness to the redeemed, is the wrath of God upon the wicked and disobedient (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:6; 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9; 2:8). Church members were warned about fornication, being advised that the Lord is an avenger on all who practice such wickedness. Further, those people who live as if the Lord will not have a reckoning will awake to sudden destruction, as sudden as a woman's labor pains, and there will be no escape. Those refusing to obey the gospel will be visited with everlasting destruction.

The word "destruction" is not to be taken literally. If those sinners were actually destroyed, made extinct, their punishment could not be everlasting; it would cease. Consequently, the word "destruction" is, in 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10, equal to misery. Victims will be in permanent misery, but they will not be destroyed.

The common notion that "death" is to be

defined as separation has some truth in it. Actually, though, death is the absence of life. Victims of God's wrath will be separated from His face and will suffer eternal fire, which is agony enough to be called death ("the second death"; Revelation 20:14), but it is not literally death. The victims will still be alive. They (like those of Revelation 9:6) will undoubtedly seek death as a relief from hell's fire, but death will flee from them.

¹For a more in-depth study, see Owen Olbricht's lessons on "Jesus' Return" and "False Teachings About Jesus' Return," on pages 15 through 19 in the "Last Things" issue of *Truth for Today* (January 1998).

²Not to be confused with the two visible comings of the Lord—at His birth and at His second coming—are three non-visible "comings": (1) when the church was established (see Matthew 10:23; 16:28); (2) the destruction of Jerusalem (1 Peter 4:7; James 5:7; see Matthew 26:64); and (3) to every Christian (John 14:23; Philippians 4:5). The second visible coming of Jesus is generally called "the Second Coming." Besides being called His *parousia*, this future event is also called His *apokalupsis* ("revelation"; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10; 1 Peter 1:3–13); His *epiphaneia* ("appearing"; 1 Timothy 6:14); and *he hemera kuriou* ("the day of the Lord"; 2 Thessalonians 2:2). In other words, His *parousia*, His *apokalupsis*, and His *epiphaneia* are scheduled for *he hemera kuriou* (1 Corinthians 1:7, 8; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2, 8).

³One may describe going to be with the Lord as a rapture, but to Paul it was not of a seven-year duration, but "ever" with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

⁴Tertullian *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 24. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, rev. and arr. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957).

⁵Tertullian *Apology* 32.

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