

Scripture Truth



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Perilous times
"Who are You, Lord?"

Behold! The Bridegroom!
"Blessed are the pure in heart"
Abraham's questions and God's answers
Christ, God's appointed Centre of gathering

SCRIPTURE TRUTH

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Perilous times

In certain narrow but vital ways western Christians now live under a civil constitution more repressive than ever before in history. Not even the highly promiscuous Roman empire criminalised spoken dissent from conduct contrary to the creation order. But it is in modern Britain. Believers in many other countries suffer far greater threat of persecution than we in Britain. But the overthrowing of the Christian moral code that governed the country for 1500 years seriously impacts the lives of not a few believers, and already impacts most small children.

In such times Psalms 3 – 7 are very apposite. David's beleaguered position is well brought out in Psalm 3:1-2; and his faith in v.3, "But you, O LORD, are a shield for me, my glory and the one who lifts up my head" (NKJV). The result is peace: "I lay down and slept: I awoke, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people" (vv.5, 6). The last two verses describe David's victory over Absalom as if it had already happened. David certainly wasn't gloating here (2 Samuel 18:33); and nor should we over the prospect of judgment. But it is a great thing to anticipate the day when ungodliness will no longer rule the world (Psalm 3:7-8).

In Psalm 4, verse 1, David appeals to God as the God of his righteousness. He was being smeared as an imposter and a rebel, but God would vindicate him. And we may be having the experience of being treated as morally dodgy. But we are not to be bitter about it (v.4).

In Psalm 5 David found that when he came into the presence of God, there he found right and wrong to be unchanging. In Psalm 6 he recognises an element of chastening in his fugitive status, but the Lord heard the voice of his weeping (v.8). In Psalm 7 David looks forward to the day when "the LORD shall judge the peoples." He did not then know himself as he later did in Psalm 32; so v.8 means that these psalms also are Messianic: Christ alone could say Psalm 7:8. But we too must often remind ourselves that God will, probably soon, establish His righteousness in the earth, and praise Him for it.

T. Balderston

“Blessed are the pure in heart”

Yannick Ford

A valuable article on a vital subject in today's world.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). What can we learn from this one verse?

To start with, let's remind ourselves about the Beatitudes as a whole (Matthew 5:3-11). We need to appreciate that they apply to us right now, because they show that we live in an imperfect and wicked world. Otherwise the Lord Jesus would not have spoken about those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. But they also show us that we can be happy in spite of our circumstances. Each time the Lord Jesus says, “Blessed are ...”, in the Beatitudes, “blessed” can be translated as “happy”.

So how do we understand the sixth Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”? This may so much challenge us that we think we will never be able to be happy! But since the Lord pronounced this “happiness”, it must be capable of some measure of achievement.

We first need to think about what it means to be “pure in heart”. Then, we need to consider what it means to “see God”.

The Bible uses the word “heart” to speak about the centre of *ourselves* – the source of our thoughts, desires, and intentions. And there are many verses that show us very clearly that we are born into this world with anything but pure hearts. For example, look at Matthew 15:18-19, “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (NKJV). In the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 17:9, we read a terrible description of the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

God, on the other hand, is the God of perfect purity. Staying in the Old Testament, this time in Habakkuk 1:13, we read this about God: “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look at wickedness”. Here, then, is a problem – we have human hearts that are deceitful and desperately wicked, whereas our God is holy, and He cannot have anything to do with sin. The answer to this, as we know, is in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He suffered for our sins on the cross, and He gives us a new life. 1 Corinthians 1:30 tells us that “But of Him [that is, “of God”] you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and

sanctification and redemption”. The Lord Jesus is our righteousness and sanctification.

But what does it mean on a day-to-day basis to have a pure heart? In his *Notes* on Matthew 5:8, Albert Barnes says that those who are pure in heart are those whose minds, motives and principles are pure. People with pure hearts don't just have their external actions correct. Remember that whereas man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). It's always possible to appear to do the right thing, but to be impure inside.

A good illustration of this is when the Lord Jesus was asked about the rightness of paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22). The question was put by Pharisees together with members of the “Herod party”, in apparent sincerity and with all due respect. But Jesus knew that they had actually asked this question because it would put any teacher trying both to be popular with the Jewish population and stay on the right side of the Roman army of occupation on the horns of a dilemma. The Lord Jesus was not a politician, and shocked them with His straightforward reply, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” He saw through their hypocrisy, and exposed it. This was not a question asked out of a pure heart.

The situation we have just considered was one of downright hypocrisy. But there are plenty of other ways in which our hearts can be impure. As F.B.Meyer reminds us, our imagination can lead us into much impurity, although no-one else may know of it. One of the most helpful, practical tips I heard was a comment on the command in 1 Peter 1:13, “Gird up the loins of your mind”. In New-Testament times many people would have worn long, flowing clothes. If some active work needed to be done, the flowing garments would have to be gathered in and tucked in at the belt – hence “girding the loins” – so that the clothes didn't get in the way. In the same way, our thoughts can flow off in all sorts of directions, just like a flowing garment. The direction they are flowing in may not be pure or helpful. We need to gird up our minds – gather the thoughts in, and stop them flowing off in unhelpful directions. The *English Standard Version* translation says, “preparing your minds for action”, which is a good way of expressing it.

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and stop them flowing off in unhelpful directions.*

*Looking at Him
will be a constant aid to purity of heart.*

We can ask for God’s help to replace unhelpful thoughts with thoughts from the list in Philippians 4:8: “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.” A helpful point here is that the characteristics listed in the Beatitudes are the characteristics of our Lord Jesus Himself. If we want to see the best example of these characteristics, we can look at Him, and at His life. Looking at Him will be a constant aid to purity of heart.

The idea of keeping our thoughts and imagination pure is probably one of the most important ways of having a pure heart. In Proverbs 23:7, we read the following, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” This verse is actually about a deceitful miser, who invites you to eat, but really is not your friend at all. But in a general sense the comment, “as he thinks in his heart, so is he”, can be applied very widely. What we think about really does have an impact on what we are like as men and women, and whether we have a pure heart. If we answer to the Lord’s description of the human heart in Matthew 15:19 (see above) it will show in our lives. Looking at this from the other side, pure deeds have their origin out of a pure heart.



So we have considered what it means to have a pure heart. What about the reward that the Lord Jesus speaks of in this Beatitude – “They shall see God”? What does it mean to “see God”? We can try to answer that question by going forward in time, to when we will be with the Lord Jesus in heaven, and then working back to where we are now. In 1 John 3:2-3, we read the following:

“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 [that is, in the Lord Jesus] purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

We don’t yet know what we will be like when we are in heaven with the Lord Jesus, but we do know that we will be like Him, and that we will see Him. John then follows on with a very interesting application for us right now: “Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself.” When we are with the Lord Jesus, and finally free from all sin, we will be pure, just as He is pure. The thought of

being with Him, of seeing Him, and being like Him, should make us want to be pure now, just as He is pure. So 1 John 3:3 fits in very well with the Lord Jesus’ words that the pure in heart will see God.

We can’t see God now in a physical sense, of course. But when the Bible speaks of seeing something, it is occasionally possible to understand it in the sense of experiencing something. For example in John 3:36, “...he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” In this case, the person who refuses to believe in the Lord Jesus will not see life – that is, they will not experience eternal life, but will rather experience God’s wrath. Another example is in 1 Peter 3:10 (cp. Psalm 34:12-13), “For he who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit.” Here we read about how we can experience good days, by taking care about our speech.

It is probably not unreasonable, then, to understand the Lord’s words, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”, as meaning that those of a pure heart are the ones who can be in His presence, and enjoy His company both now and hereafter.

We have some other verses in the Bible that back this up. For example, in Hebrews 12:14, “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord”. Or, if we look in the Old Testament, in Psalm 24:3-5,

“Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.”

This is a fascinating set of verses, because it fits in exactly with the Lord’s words in the Beatitudes. It is the person with clean hands and a pure heart who can stand before God, and enjoy His presence.

To be comfortable in someone’s presence means that there must not be anything between you and that person. If there are unresolved conflicts, or guilty secrets, there will be distance, or reserve. I’m sure that many of us have experienced this kind of thing at some time or other. I remember when there was something I needed to own up to, to a friend of mine. I felt uncomfortable in his presence until I had done that.

If we have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and accepted His forgiveness for our sins, then we can never lose our salvation. The Bible is very clear on this – the Lord Jesus says in John 10:27-28, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand.”

That does not mean, however, that it doesn't matter if we sin. Our day-to-day relationship with our Heavenly Father, and with our Lord Jesus Christ, will be affected if there is something that has come in that is not consistent with what God desires. If we sin, we need to confess it to God, so that it doesn't interrupt our day-to-day fellowship with Him. This is spelt out in 1 John 1:5 – 2:2.

It is rather like the case when a child misbehaves. The misbehaviour has no bearing on the relationship of the child to his or her parents, and the parents still love their child in spite of the misbehaviour. But there will not necessarily be a happy atmosphere until things are cleared up! In the same way the Holy Spirit, who lives in all true believers, will not be able to encourage us by revealing the glories of Christ to us, but rather He will have to convict us of our sin and lead us to repentance (John 16:8).

If we are pure in heart, then there will not be these hindrances to our day-to-day fellowship with God. We will therefore be able to “see” God, in the sense of enjoying His presence. A word of the Lord in John 14:21 backs this up, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” Here the Lord Jesus is promising a special manifestation of Himself – an idea similar to “seeing God” – to the one who keeps His commandments. Therefore there is indeed a present reward for having a pure heart, and keeping in harmony with the Lord.

This is a real encouragement to us, because many of us, myself certainly, know how difficult it is to maintain a pure heart. Every day, there is so much that is within easy reach to defile us, and to lead us in ways that don't promote a pure heart. Our old nature, which the Bible calls “the flesh”, desires these impure things and does not aspire to a pure heart. As a result we have a battle within ourselves. But our Lord Jesus encourages us with the verse we have been studying, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). He knows the difficulties that we face, so He sets a present and a future reward before us to strengthen us.

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If we are pure in heart, then there will not be these hindrances to our day-to-day fellowship with God.

Beware!

George Stevens

*We should all read the lively checklist below
to see what we need to beware of!*

Beware of men!

It has recently been reported that Christians are persecuted far more than those of any other religion. This is good news in the sense that the Scriptures tell us if we live godly in Christ Jesus we will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). So thank the Lord, there are MANY GODLY CHRISTIANS in the world! Would that this could be said of Christians in this country!

It is where the lion (i.e., Satan: see 1 Peter 5:8) roars, that the church grows faithfully. Jesus said to his disciples, “But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles” (Matthew 10:17-18, KJV). So true Christians, conducting themselves blamelessly, can expect to be persecuted on the one hand, but that suffering proves on the other hand to be a witness to the Saviour of the world. Just like their Lord, they will be hated, despised and rejected here. They will bear His reproach (Hebrews 13:13). However, just like their Saviour, they will be exalted later by God.

Beware of leaven!

Jesus said to a crowd, “Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1). The Pharisees classed themselves as a strict religious movement who promoted the Law given by Moses. The word “Pharisee” means “separated”, and they saw themselves as special before God. They also thought of themselves as superior: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican” (Luke 18:11). So the Lord portrayed them in His parable.

In the same parable the nearby publican (i.e., tax collector) lifted up his eyes to heaven and, smiting his breast, prayed, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus went on to say that the publican was justified before God and that those who

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exalt themselves shall be abased. The “leaven of the Pharisees” was called “hypocrisy” by Christ. Why? Because they did not themselves practise the practical teaching they imposed on others. They were “two-faced”. They were zealous in placing burdens upon the people but didn’t endeavour to help them in a real way. That’s why Jesus said, “...They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matthew 23:4).

Embraced in this denunciation of “Pharisees” is the Lord’s denunciation of their more learned element, the scribes, who copied and explained the Scriptures.

“Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; which devour widows’ houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation” (Luke 20:46-47).

Unlike Ezra, the proto-typical scribe (Ezra 7:6), they did not practise what they preached but instead sought social prominence, and exploited the vulnerable. Their prayers were a sham (Matthew 23:14). They were sanctimonious! We Christians must not only profess Christ but, as the genuine article, live as He did. And take care, Christian teachers! Practise what you preach!

Beware of covetousness!

Many companies that run lotteries hook people into taking part by giving a proportion of their profits to charities. It gives people an excuse for their gambling if they feel that they are indirectly helping others. However, their gift could so easily be given directly to a charity of their choice and not to something they hope for a return from. The Lord loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). And He also said, “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

*“Godliness with contentment is great gain”.
Let’s pray that the Lord may preserve us from greed!*

The Greek word for “covetousness” may be translated as “avarice”, i.e., having a desire for wealth. Simply put, it is greed. Gambling, whether by taking part in raffles or in other ways, is therefore covetousness. The commandment in the Old Testament takes this further. In Exodus 20:17 coveting anything belonging to another is forbidden including their spouse, house, servant or anything else they possess. It is written, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). So let’s pray, dear Christian, that the Lord may preserve us from greed!

Beware of philosophy!

In Colossians 2:8 the apostle Paul states,

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”

Philosophy may be defined as, “The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence” – leaving God out! It is the love of human wisdom. Sadly, human wisdom leaves out God and leads to “vain deceit”, such as the acceptance of theories as fact even though evidence is minimal. It provides the ground of modernism in a church which has a form of Christianity but without the Christ of God and the salvation of the Bible. It is called by the apostle “the tradition of men” which displaces the revealed wisdom of God.

The Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). A Christian’s faith involves accepting the revelation given by God. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. His ways are higher than our ways. The world appreciates its own wisdom, but tends to deny God’s. Therefore, the true church is made up of people called out from the world as a “system opposed to God”, and from its influences. Jesus described His disciples as being in the world but not of it! (John 17:11,14) Philosophy is not “after Christ” (see quotation above). That is to say, it cannot lead a person to truth (truth being absolute). The Lord Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He is the “Wisdom” of Proverbs chapter 8.

The Christian is able to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5). And “the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full

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of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17). It is different to the wisdom of the natural man; indeed, it is in the Second Man, the Lord from heaven (Christ), that we find all the qualities of James 3:17! Oh, that we might appreciate Him more and seek to be like Him!

Beware of error!

Dear Christian, the apostle Peter warns us about false teachers within the pale of Christendom who taught perverse things and destructive heresies (2 Peter 2:1), and were materialists (2:3; cp. Philippians 3:19). As a result many professing Christians became corrupted by the world. Peter warns us that Christendom will be marked by such scoffers and materialists in the last days (the days in which we currently live). He therefore wrote to those who were faithful, “Ye, therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness” (2 Peter 3:17). So it is imperative for true Christians to hold fast to the teaching of the Scriptures and not be led astray by false teachers. The true believer will be like the Bereans of old who received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so (Acts 17:11). Unfortunately, very few Christians have this attitude of heart.

Some churches go as far as to say that much in the Bible is merely myth or legend. The same Bible, however, claims to be the very word of God (1 Peter 1:23). Other Christians cannot bear the scoffing that comes from spiteful people. And one of the worst enemies Christians have is materialism. Their hearts are more inclined to possessions in this world rather than their inheritance in the next. The true Christian knows he has an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven (1 Peter 1:4). Hopefully, you are a Christian whose objective is to hold fast to the revealed truth of God and conduct your life accordingly.

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Hopefully, you are a Christian whose objective is to hold fast to the revealed truth of God.

Beware of unbelief!

The apostle Paul had been preaching to those addressed as “men of Israel” in Acts 13. He had given them a brief history of their nation and showed how the prophets had predicted the coming of Christ, along with His death and resurrection. He concluded his sermon with the following:

“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man [i.e., Jesus] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you” (Acts 13:38-41).

This was a warning to those who reluctantly listened to God’s word. The verse in the Old Testament to which he refers is Habakkuk 1:5 which (in its context) indicated that the Chaldeans were soon to attack Israel. Nonetheless, the apostle applied this to his day. If the gospel was not received by them, then the nation of Israel would suffer judgment. This is the consequence of unbelief, which despises the word of God. Sadly, the Jews did refuse Christ, and, as Jesus Himself had predicted, the Romans besieged and took Jerusalem in AD 70 (Luke 19:43-44; 21:20-24). The city has been insecure ever since.

The world, in general, also refuses to believe God in relation to Christ. Knowing this would be the case “God has appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Today, people are concerned about “climate change”; but still fail to realise the great *governmental change* which will come when God intervenes in the way Paul described to the Athenians. Most of the book of Revelation describes God’s coming intervention, commencing with the “seal” judgments of chapter 6. I remember reading the book of Revelation as a teenager, and trembling at the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:16, 17).

But, once the world has been judged, all will be well with the physical climate, for under the future reign of Christ, the world shall blossom with its full beauty (Psalm 72:16, etc.), and the earth shall be filled with the glory of God (v.19).

Christians have a lot to beware of! Let’s make sure we do!

Abraham's questions and God's answers

Genesis 15

F.B.Hole

Genesis has often been called "the seed-plot of the Bible".

This series commenced in July 2017.

The first verse of Genesis 15 is intimately connected with the upshot of chapter 14. The *hand* of God had been with Abram His servant in granting him victory over Chedorlaomer, king of Elam; and the *eye* of God was upon Abram too. Abram had renounced his original home in Ur (11:31ff; cp. Acts 7:2,3); he had renounced the more fruitful parts of the land of promise in favour of Lot (Genesis 13:7-18); and, thirdly, he had renounced all reward or tribute from the sinful world, i.e., from the hands of the king of Sodom, whose subjects he had just rescued from being Chedorlaomer's booty (14:22-23). God had observed all this, and now, in a fresh vision, He presents Himself to Abram as his shield and his "exceeding great reward" (Genesis 15:1, KJV).

If Abram had not had some confidence that God would be his shield, he would hardly have undertaken to pursue the victorious Mesopotamian kings and rescue Lot with a mere handful of men. But that he should have God for his *reward* went far beyond this. When he left Ur, he may have looked upon the land of promise as his reward – though he never actually possessed it. Now God Himself is to be his reward, and this surely is "exceeding great". Brought, as we are, into the light of God revealed in Christ, we are better able to estimate the "greatness" than ever Abram could have done.

The greatness of it did, however, sufficiently dawn on Abram to make him feel acutely, by way of contrast, the poverty of his present position as a childless man whose only evident heir was a servant "born in his house." How could the everlasting God be "reward" to someone who had no hope of a posterity to carry on his name? Hence his seemingly rather selfish enquiry, "Lord God, what wilt Thou give me?" (15:2)

The answer to this was the word of promise which called forth Abram's simple acceptance of God's word in such distinctness and in such measure that he stands for all time as the pattern of faith. To his example Paul appeals in Romans 4 where he calls him, "the father of all them that believe" (v.11). God's word to this childless man was that he should have true seed as numerous as

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the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5); and the record is that, "he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (15:6).

As yet there was no sign of the promise of even a single child being born to Abram. But Abram simply took God at His word, and, in view of this, God accounted him to be righteous. As we saw in Genesis 3, it was when our first parents began to doubt the word of God, that sin entered the world, and mankind got out of right relations with God. Conversely when a man dismisses doubting and simply takes God at His word he is thereby put into right relations with God – he is accounted righteous.

This promise of the seed enfolded within it a far greater blessing than appeared at the moment, for in due course we shall find that the promise of the Saviour was wrapped up in it. But, for the moment, a numerous posterity was guaranteed, and coupled with that the lesser promise of the land was repeated, as we see in verse 7. As to this second part Abram's faith was not so robust, and he desired some confirmation, that he might know it with assurance. Have we not often found that we may accept the greater thing in faith, and yet be lacking in assurance as to some lesser thing? Abram was already in the land and yet possessed nothing of it, and the years were passing by. He felt he needed some extra assurance on this point.

God graciously condescended to answer this by making a solemn covenant, according to a rite that was common and accepted in those far-off days. In Jeremiah 34:18-19 we find an allusion to this kind of ceremony as ratifying a covenant. In the case before us the solemnity of the occasion seems to be underlined by the number and variety of the animals that were sacrificed. Abram was kept waiting however until sundown before anything happened. Then he fell into a deep sleep, accompanied by horror and darkness, God was drawing near to him: the covenant involved darkness as well as light.

*When a man simply takes God at His word
– he is accounted righteous.*

Verses 13-16 give the terms of the covenant. God foretold the centuries of affliction in Egypt for Abram's seed, and this was in keeping with the great darkness that had fallen upon him. But there was light also, for he had the assurance that he should end his days in peace, and that ultimately his seed should be delivered from their affliction by the judgment of their oppressors, and come back to the land of promise. Thus, in spite of long waiting and much trouble, the promise of the Land was made sure to his seed. The ratification of all this as a covenant happened when, after dark, a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the divided pieces of the sacrifice. In this twofold way did God manifest His presence. There was no thought of Abram passing between the pieces, as though he were pledging himself to anything. It was God pledging Himself to do as He had just said, and that in an unconditional way.

This manifestation of *God*, passing between the pieces as a "smoking furnace and a burning lamp", was as remarkable as His manifestation to Moses in the burning bush. In after days we find both Moses and Solomon speaking of Egypt as the "iron furnace" – see Deuteronomy 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51. How apposite, then, the manifestation afforded by this vision! God was as much in the furnace as in the flame of the lamp. It might be easy to discern Him in the bright shining of the flame, but not so easy in the smoking furnace. It was the guarantee, however, that He would be with Abram's seed when they were in the furnace, and then, when the hour struck, to lead them forth with Himself as a pillar of fire at their head.

Before we leave chapter 15, note two things. First, God was going to permit the Amorites (i.e., the peoples then inhabiting the land) to fill up the cup – of their iniquity – before He ejected and destroyed them (v.16). This is always the way He takes in His holy government; and it accounts for the longsuffering He extends to the guilty world in which we are living. He knows the full nature of man's evil from the outset, but He allows it to become fully developed, so that His judgment, when it falls in full severity, may be justified in the sight of all created intelligences.

Secondly, the full extent of the land pledged to the seed of Abram is given – "from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (15:18-21). The land we call Palestine is bounded on the East by the small river Jordan, and is only a very small part of the land they are ultimately to possess. Ten peoples are mentioned in the closing verses as then dwelling therein, All are to be dispossessed, and in the millennial age the true Israel will possess their promised land.

From *Scripture Truth* 36 (1948-1950), pp. 142-144, edited for style.

“Who are You, Lord?”

Paul’s conversion

J.N. Darby

In the martyrdom of Stephen [Acts 7] we see that man had reached the extreme end of his iniquity, not only crucifying the Lord, but also refusing the offer of grace, including the offer of His return in virtue of His own intercession on the cross [Acts 3:20; Luke 23:34]. There, [at the martyrdom], for the first time we find Saul [Acts 7:58]. But he is not content with this quiet hatred. “And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that, if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem” [Acts 9:1-2, KJV].

Of his own will Saul was the apostle of hatred against Christ, and of the persecution of God’s children. But the Lord allowed this in order to make him the witness to, and apostle of, the sovereign grace which opened his eyes, converted, and pardoned him [e.g. 1 Timothy 1:15-16]. [For it was] evidently sovereign grace that met the fury of this ardent enemy of truth and grace, one who sought, as he himself says, to destroy Christianity and banish the name of Christ from the face of the earth [Acts 26:9ff]. While he was occupied in this very purpose, the Lord stops him on his way, and reveals Himself to his soul – and also to his eyes, so that he might be an eye-witness of His glory. A light from heaven shone round about him – “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” [Acts 9:4]

Two very important truths are contained in this remarkable scene. Firstly, the Lord’s glory is revealed. Saul had not seen the Lord when present in the flesh. The twelve apostles had known Him in the days of His flesh, and had seen Him disappear in the cloud; they knew by faith that He was seated at the right hand of God. But they could not be eye-witnesses of His glory. It is at this point that Paul begins. He saw the Lord’s glory, but knew not who He was. One thing he was certain of – the glory and the voice of the Lord Himself had appeared to him. He asks therefore, “Who art thou, Lord?” [Acts 9:5; cp. 22:8; 26:15] Then the Lord replies, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” He was not a man of the earth, nor the Messiah gone up to heaven, but the Lord of glory recognising Himself still as Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth.

The starting-point of the doctrine is different [though it is] the same redemption, the same Saviour. The revelation given to the twelve is that the

*The Lord did not say, “Why persecutest thou My disciples?”
but, “Why persecutest thou me?”*

man Jesus is gone up to heaven – God has exalted Him – [whilst] the revelation given to Saul is that the Lord of glory is Jesus of Nazareth. It begins with heavenly glory; and [from that first revelation comes] the second, namely, that all Christians are united with Himself, members of His body. This doctrine is not unfolded; however the Lord did not say, “Why persecutest thou My disciples?” – as a doctor or a rabbi – but, “Why persecutest thou *me*?” And this is the Lord of glory – “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.”

These are the fundamental points in the history of Paul, the enemy of the Lord of glory but converted, pardoned, justified, necessary witness to sovereign grace. The gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ [cp. 2 Corinthians 4:6] is confided to him; then the truth of the union of Christians with Christ, glorious Head in heaven. Peter preached that God had glorified Him whom the Jews had crucified; he had invited the rebels to come to God by the sacrifice which He had perfected; and he had proclaimed that to those who repented Jesus would return [Acts 2:14-39; 3:12-23]. Saul preached that this salvation was for all men, and that God as Saviour could not limit Himself to the narrow bounds of Israel, but that He announced Himself to the whole creation under heaven; and then, that the assembly of God was united to Jesus – as His body.

[God desired] that there should be a single assembly [see too Peter’s report in Acts 11:1-18]. [But, more than that,] Paul was a witness that there was no difference, that all men were lost, all children of wrath; and that Jesus, by giving the Holy Ghost, had united all in one body – a truth which the Jews (and also the Christian Jews) always resisted, tormenting the apostle in his work. Peter himself dissimulated, so that all the Christian Jews in Antioch, led by his authority, sided with him [Galatians 2:11ff]. Not one of the apostles speaks in his epistles of the assembly, the body of Christ on earth, save only Paul. The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; the sovereign grace by which he (Paul) was the example to all those who should afterwards believe in Christ Jesus; and the whole in virtue of the cross – such was the gospel confided to Paul.

The bright light shone around Paul’s travelling companions on the road to Damascus, but they did not see the Lord [Acts 9:7; 22:9]. They heard a voice,

but not the words of Him who spoke. Paul alone was a witness as to whom he had seen and what he had heard. However his companions were able to testify to the vision, that it was a real thing, and not an invention of Paul for his own glory. The whole was confirmed by the mission of Ananias, to whom the Lord revealed what had happened, sending him to Saul to open his eyes – for the sudden light had blinded Saul – and to receive him into the Christian assembly by baptism and by the gift of the Holy Ghost.

For three days God had drawn Saul away from all communication with the outside world, in order that he might be entirely occupied with his soul, and with the state in which he found himself. His situation was without a parallel. Externally he was a man without spot, of irreproachable reputation according to the law [Philippians 3:6]. He had a good conscience: he believed it his duty to do much against the name of Jesus [Acts 26:9], and he did it. The authorities of the religion of the fathers encouraged and sent him. Conscience, legal justice, religion – all that formed his moral life – had made him the fierce enemy of the Lord of glory. His zeal had required that he should persecute also those in distant parts who believed. Thus occupied, he meets with the Lord whose name he was seeking to extirpate. He was therefore the head, the chief, of sinners – in ignorance, it is true, but nevertheless willingly. Where was that “good conscience” according to man now? Where his legal justice? Where his religion, of which the priests and religious authorities had for him previously been supreme? All these had led him to discover himself to be a fiery, zealous enemy of the Lord with whom, face to face, he now found himself as the object of His grace – at the very moment when he (Saul) was occupied so thoroughly in destroying His glory! What a revolution, what an overturning, in his heart! Who can tell what passed there during those three days?

Yet the Lord did not send Ananias to him till this internal moral work was completed. Old things have passed away, and now all things have become new in his soul, in the bottom of his thoughts [cp. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18]; all is of God who has revealed Himself in the glory of the face of Jesus Christ. Paul is no longer a Jew, although he may be one externally. But he has not become a Gentile. Joined to the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, he knows henceforth no man

*The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;
the sovereign grace by which he was converted
– such was the gospel confided to Paul.*

any more after the flesh. He knows the Lord, and he knows His people as united with Him: Gentiles and Jews indeed, alike lost sinners and children of wrath; but Paul knows the sovereign grace towards himself which has called him, has revealed the Son of God to him, and has given him eternal life even while he was engaged in destroying His name. All was grace, pure and sovereign grace, grace which went so far as to make of Christians one body with Christ in heaven, and to give them to know it. How marvellous the revelations we find unfolded in the epistles of the apostle! The gospel of the glory of Christ is easily understood when we realise how and when the apostle was converted.

[It is worthwhile underlining] that the Lord made use of Ananias, a converted Jew and hated by his countrymen, to convey to Paul the formal testimony of His grace, and receive him into the bosom of the assembly, [using this testimony], as we before said, that Paul might never more fear that the vision, having passed away, might have been mistaken. Here is a quiet man who had received a communication from the Lord, fully confirming what had happened to Saul. Moreover, Saul is made by another revelation to expect Ananias.

I should also like to call attention to the full liberty, and, one may say, the familiarity with which Ananias speaks to the Lord (with reverence and submission, of course); and, in the same way, the Lord with him [Acts 9:10ff]. When the Lord calls him, he replies immediately, “Here am I.” And the Lord, the risen and ascended Man who interests Himself in His own as friends whom He loves, speaks with an open heart to Ananias, shewing him not only the way, the house where Saul was to be found, but that which was necessary to identify him, namely, that Saul prayed and that he had seen Ananias coming to him to lay hands on him and restore his sight – just as one tells a servant what to say, or to a friend what is in the heart.

And we see in the answer of Ananias a perfect trust in this goodness of the Lord. He begins to reason with the Lord. He had heard that this man was come to bind those who called upon the name of the Lord. And the Lord does not

*Notice the full liberty with which Ananias
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reprove him. Of course he had to go and do what the Lord desired; but He explains the matter to him, and communicates to him His thoughts concerning Saul, that he was a chosen vessel to bear His name, and that He would shew him what things he should suffer for His name’s sake. To repeat, the Lord opens His heart to Ananias, as to a friend whom He treats with full confidence, speaks naturally, and confidingly tells all He feels to Ananias.

It is very important to remember that Jesus is always man. If He were not God, His humanity would have no value; but, being God, the fact that He interests Himself in us as a man, as men whom He is not ashamed to call His brethren, is infinitely precious. He can feel with us, take part in all our circumstances, trials, difficulties, and troubles. He loves us as the Father loved Him, a man and Son on the earth. His love has divine perfection, but He feels as a man, as a man on the earth, tempted in like manner as we are apart from sin. He is ever a man. He thinks of us as One who has passed through all these things, with divine love and human sympathy. Precious truth, unfathomable grace!

It is possible that He may not reveal Himself to us in visions, but His heart is not colder to us than to Ananias; His wisdom is not diminished; His willingness is not weakened to help us, neither is His arm shortened. The intimacy and the confidence of our hearts ought to be the same to tell Him everything; certain it is that His ear is open to listen to us.

Thus sent and encouraged, Ananias obeys, goes in perfect confidence towards him who not long before breathed out threatenings and slaughter against the Christians; and lays his hands on him, saying, “Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” [9:17]. Saul immediately receives his sight, and rises, is baptized, eats, and walks with the disciples at Damascus. Without delay he preaches Christ in the synagogues, declaring Him to be the Son of God. The subject of his preaching differs a little from that of Peter, and responds to the revelation of Christ which was made to him. Peter preached that God had exalted the Jesus whom they had rejected; Saul, that Christ was the Son of God [cp. Galatians 1:15].

From J.N. Darby, *Meditations on the Acts of the Apostles, translated from the Italian*; most of chapter 9. Reprinted in his *Collected Writings*, ed. W. Kelly, vol.25. Edited for length and clarity by T. Balderston. Square brackets indicate interpolations or significant rewordings.

Christ, God's appointed Centre of gathering

N. Anderson

Christ will be the Centre, whatever the circumstances, whatever the disposition towards Him of those involved. We repeat, He must always be the Centre. If we know who He is, we will not be amazed that this should be so. For “in Him all the fulness [of the Godhead] was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19, Darby Trans.) And “He is the Head . . . that in all things He might have the pre-eminence” (1:18, KJV).

The Holy Spirit delights to draw attention to Him in a variety of circumstances, emphasising to us that the central place is naturally His. When with the learned doctors of the law, He was “sitting in the midst of the teachers, both hearing them, and asking them questions.” Little wonder that “all that heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers”! (Luke 2:46-47)

And in the Pharisee's house – whatever Simon's intention in having Him there – “the woman in the city who was a sinner” marked Him out in the pre-eminence of His forgiving grace. Even when He was crucified betwixt two malefactors, and hatred would further degrade Him, we read that “they crucified Him, and two other with Him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst” (John 19:18).

Then, on that day of resurrection-power and triumph when the surprised disciples were gathered together, “came Jesus and stood in the midst” (John 20:19). Later, once awful declension had set in amongst those who professed His Name, we see Him walking – albeit in judicial character – “in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks” (Revelation 1:13). A far happier sight it was for John to behold, “...and, lo, in the midst of the throne ... a Lamb as it had been slain.” (Revelation 5:6).

*Christ will be the Centre,
whatever the disposition towards Him of those involved.
When with the learned doctors of the law,
He was “sitting in the midst of the teachers”.*

In that Lamb, the acknowledged Centre of the world to come, we recognise Jesus. The One who was once the Centre of shame and suffering upon the cross is here acclaimed, in the answering glory, as the Centre of God's universe of bliss! (Revelation 5:6-9) How ample is the testimony of the Holy Scriptures to the grand fact that Christ, once despised and rejected of men, is to fill the highest station and there to be acclaimed by all! Every knee must bow before Him, every tongue must yet confess Him to be Lord of all! (Philippians 2:9-11)

Time was, when the Lord presented Himself in lowly grace as Israel's long promised Messiah and His own people received Him not (John 1:11). How blessed, though, to learn from the inspired Word, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power!" (Psalm 110:3) Even as far back as Genesis 49:10 Jacob had prophesied, "Unto Him shall the gathering of the people be." Again, Isaiah plainly intimates that "In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, standing as a banner of the peoples: the nations shall seek it; and his resting-place shall be glory" (Isaiah 11:10, Darby Trans.). He is the appointed Heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2). He is Head over all things; all things in heaven and in earth shall be gathered together in one, in Him (Ephesians 1:10, 22).

The day is coming too – how soon we cannot tell – when all who form His assembly shall hear His voice calling them to join Him where He is in glory. In the powerful attraction of the love which then shall speak, all together (sleeping saints raised; living saints changed) shall leave this world and be gathered unto Him — the largest assembly meeting of all time!

Let us remember that He who stooped so low as to taste death for everything will, in consequence of having been lifted up at Calvary, draw all to Himself (Hebrews 2:9; John 12:32). He will then be the admired Centre of a universe in which the rights of God are established.

So for the future the outlook is certainly bright. Christ is to be publicly set forth in power and great glory. The universe which has witnessed His awful loneliness and suffering upon the cross of Calvary shall witness Him among the holy myriads (Jude 14; cp. Revelation 1:7). Israel will then hail Him with joy, and the Gentile nations will bow at His feet (Psalm 72:17-19).

Angels and men confess Him then,
when He in power shall come again.

But nearer than angels, nearer than Israel or the Gentiles, shall be the favoured, unique company – His assembly, "the fulness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). Every heart which loves Him surely cries,

*The true and outstanding feature of the Assembly,
is that He is owned
as the alone Centre of gathering.*

Lord Jesus come,
and take Thy rightful place
as Son of Man, of all the theme!
Come Lord, to reign o'er all supreme,
Lord Jesus, come!¹

But as we are considering this great and glorious prospect, let us also consider its present implications.

As we look upon the sphere of profession in this present world, are we not made sadly aware that its general condition is not indicative of His having His true place as the only Centre for the gathering of the assembly of God? That He is such, the Scriptures definitely teach. He took that place in the midst of His own on the day of His resurrection from amongst the dead, teaching us that this is His proper place. Hebrews 2:11-12 plainly declares, "For both He that sanctifies and those sanctified are all of one; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare Thy Name to my brethren, in the midst of the assembly will I sing praise unto Thee" (Darby Trans.). The true and outstanding feature of the Assembly, locally and everywhere, is that He is owned as the alone Centre of gathering.

As the apostle Paul took sad account of the divided state of the gathering in Corinth he besought the saints in these words, "Now I beseech you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (1 Corinthians 1:10, KJV) Christ is God's gathering Centre for the assembly now. The acknowledgement of His Name will search every heart and conscience, confirming what is of Himself, but condemning all that is contrary. Hence the apostle went on in 1 Corinthians 5 to instruct them that true dealing with evil must be exercised by them as gathered to His Name. What is due to His holy Name must be maintained amongst us.

Being gathered to His Name means that He is absent, and why? He has been rejected and crucified here. And we, being gathered to His Name, are identified

¹ Mrs A. Dent.

*Being gathered to His Name means that He is absent, and why? He has been rejected and crucified here.
And we, being gathered to His Name,
are identified with Him in His rejection.*

with Him in His rejection. Of necessity then we cannot allow amongst us the principles or practices of the world which has crucified Him.

His Name covers the whole truth of His Person. This being so, we will so treasure what Scripture teaches as to Him that we refuse those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11). We will guard against the intrusion of any denial of eternal relationships in the Godhead. We hold the truth of the incarnation of the Son and resolutely refuse the teaching that He became Son in incarnation. In gathering to His Name alone it must be to Him as Scripture presents Him. Indifference to Christ cannot be tolerated where His Name is owned.

May we be kept, then, from all that threatens the faith in our day! We may be shunned, looked upon with pity, but *He* was crucified! May we welcome the opportunity to bear His reproach. With it, thank God, there is the compensation of honouring the Son. Is it not well that He should be honoured by us now, where the contrariness and opposition is? There will be no contrariness and opposition when we are with Him in the Father's house on high!

“...Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Just like Himself! Spotless, ageless, blameless. Praise Him for evermore!

Edited for style from notes on the STEM Publishing website.

*Is it not well that He should be honoured by us now,
where the opposition is? There will be no contrariness
when we are with Him in the Father's house on high!*

Behold! The Bridegroom!

Are we “slumbering and sleeping”?

T. Balderston

The Lord told the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25: 1 – 13) as a way of instructing His disciples to “Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of man is coming” (25:13, NKJV).¹ The parable is part of the Lord’s so-called “Olivet discourse” and occurs in the section of the discourse that is sandwiched between His instruction regarding His glorious appearing to all mankind on the one hand (24:15-31), and the parable of the sheep and the goats (25:31-46), on the other. The start of the parable of the sheep and the goats clearly links it to the description of that glorious appearing: compare 25:31 with 24:30-31. However the “appearing” of 24:30-31 will be preceded by the unmissable “great tribulation” (24:21ff) and equally unmissable disturbances in the skies (24:29). It is therefore not the “coming” which the parable of the ten virgins is about, a coming that will happen suddenly, and without warning.

The “Olivet discourse” therefore tells of two comings: one without warning and for believers, and another, with plenty of warnings, for the world as a whole. If the disciples were confused that the Lord should speak of these two comings in this single discourse they would only have a few days to wait for clarification; for in the upper room He would shortly tell them about a special coming “to receive them to Himself” and bring them into His Father’s house, where many dwelling-places would be ready for them (John 14:3). Being received into the Father’s house will be the equivalent of the five prudent girls entering the house with the bridegroom, the door being shut behind them (Matthew 25:10). And now the parable itself. The ten girls had the duty of meeting a certain bridegroom and accompanying him to his house with lit torches (perhaps wicks fed by oil-soaked rags that would need frequently

¹ They also asked him concerning the destruction of the temple. The answer to this question in Matthew 24 probably comes in vv. 6-7, but there is a fuller answer in Luke 21:20-24. The oft-made claim that Matthew 24: 15-22 or Mark 13:14-23 refer to AD 70 is disproved by the fact that in AD 70 the “tribulation” *preceded* the idolatrous occupation of the temple, at which point it largely ceased.

drenching again with oil). The bridegroom did not arrive when expected (verse 5), and the ten girls dozed off as the time ticked by. They were awakened at last by the shout, “Behold the bridegroom!” Five of the girls, whose torches were going out, had failed to take the precaution of bringing bottles of oil with them to soak the rags.

The word “Behold!” (v.6) means, roughly, “Pay attention!”, or, “Mark this well!” It does not necessarily mean that the person who called out could actually see the bridegroom. From this some have concluded that the “midnight cry” could happen well before the Lord actually descends to the air. But this interpretation would contradict the Lord’s word that He will come suddenly – so suddenly that even watchful servants will not expect it (Luke 12:35-40). The critical point is that once the words, “Behold the bridegroom!” had gone forth, the girls without reserves of oil had no time to rectify their mistake.

On this basis I think that the cry represents the shout of command, the archangel’s voice, and the trump of God that accompany the Lord’s coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The parable echoes what the Lord had already said in Matthew 24:44, “The Son of man is coming in an hour you do not expect”, and, still earlier, in Luke 12:40, where it is a warning to the *watchful* servant (vv.36-38). It is therefore not merely that the drowsiness of the girls makes the bridegroom’s arrival *seem* sudden. Rather, suddenness is built into the bridegroom’s coming. This is the nub of the parable.

And when the Bridegroom comes there will be a class of people with lamps that cannot give light. The “midnight cry” that suddenly alerts them will leave them no time to put their carelessness right. There always have been, and always will be, people who claim to be believers (cp. Matthew 13:25ff) but who are inwardly dead towards God, possessing no true conviction of sin, or faith that Christ died for them. This is

*There always will be people
who claim to be believers,
but who are inwardly dead towards God.*

*The Authorised version translated Revelation 22:7, 12, 20
correctly: “Behold, I come quickly”.
The Lord’s coming for His saints will be sudden,
whenever it happens.*

not a matter of desiring a deeper and fuller sense of sin and firmness of faith, but of neither possessing these nor really caring. Whatever their record of church attendance, etc., they are not sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). For them there will be no second chance once the “midnight cry” has gone forth. This is the sombre warning of the parable.

The Authorised (King James) version translated Revelation 22:7, 12, 20 correctly: “Behold, I come quickly”. The common modern translation, “soon”, does not, in my view, represent the almost invariable use of this word both elsewhere in the New Testament and in the Septuagint.² The meaning of the word is “rapidly”, and it is fair to assign it this meaning throughout the book of Revelation as well. The Lord’s coming for His saints will be sudden, whenever it happens. The present tense in Revelation 22 conveys the sense of immediacy. The Lord speaks as if He has already started out: “I am coming rapidly [or, suddenly]”. The three reassurances in this chapter are given specifically to readers and hearers of the book (1:3), to reassure them that the Lord’s coming for them is not a long way off, not something that will only happen after the accomplishment of many dreadful events described in chapters 6 – 16. (The same point applies to the reassurance in Revelation 16:15). On the contrary, the Lord is always “coming quickly”; we always have to be watching (i.e., “be on the alert”) for Him, and be ready for Him (see too Mark 13:33-37; Luke 12:37-39; cp. Titus 2:13). It should be in our minds

² Outside Revelation, the word *tachu* bears the meaning “rapidly” or “immediately” in Matthew 5:25; 28:7, 8, Mk.16:8; John 11:29. Mark 9:39 is the only exception. It also means “quickly” in at least four-fifths of occurrences of the wider class of words connected with adjective *tachos* in the Septuagint, and is the invariant definition of this class of words in the standard classical Greek dictionary.

On the other hand, it could be overlooked that His coming might not be “today”. One day the Lord will come suddenly, to take each of His faithful people out of a work that never will be finished.

every day! Our life and labour will have a different character if this is so. It will make us less at home in this world. This is what the Lord said.

It might be objected that since the Lord foretold both the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and Peter’s martyrdom (Luke 21:20-24, John 21:18), the earliest Christians could not have been expecting Him “at any moment”. However the Lord did not say that those gathered in through the gospel preached from Pentecost would necessarily witness the destruction of the temple, and, given the slowness of communications, those who at any one time knew for sure that Peter had not yet been martyred would be a minority. So these are not true contradictions of what the Lord clearly said in Luke 12:35-40. Paul said in Philippians 4:5 that “the Lord is at hand”, and commentators I looked at were unanimous that this meant that His coming was imminent (cp. Romans 13:12; James 5:8). The prevalent idea that He will not come before there have been vast numbers of further conversions, and Christian institutions and interventions have transformed society in many lands, has no basis in Scripture.

The Scriptures also say that we should be *desiring* His coming (Luke 12:36; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Philippians 3:20; Revelation 22:20; Titus 2:13-14). All life needs *hope* to sustain it: but if the hope is above all for the Lord to come soon, it transfigures all the rest of life.

On the other hand, in the eagerness to emphasise that the Lord’s coming is “perhaps today” it could be overlooked that His coming might *not* be “today”. The Lord also told parables implying that His coming might be delayed (Luke 12:38; 19:11ff; cp. 2 Peter 3:9). The key point is that one day the Lord will come suddenly, and He will be expecting to take each of His faithful people out of a work that never will be finished. This fact frees believers to do the forward planning they need for their labours for

*Are we slumbering and sleeping,
or watching and working?*

Him, as long as they do not become so attached to their plans and projects as to regret the possibility of His coming to interrupt them. The immediate expectation of the Lord's coming should not be used to block necessary projects in the Lord's work!

Expectation of the Lord's coming has waxed and waned over the past two centuries. In 1888 Edward Dennett commented that "he [had] been forced to the conclusion that the prophetic books [were] losing their hold on the young believers... of the present day".³ However by 1913 attention to the prospect of the Lord's return was reviving,⁴ and when in about 1938 it was realised that Harry A. Ironside had some free days left at the end of a preaching tour of Britain, prophetic meetings were arranged, at only a fortnight's notice, that managed to fill the 2000 seats of Kingsway Hall, London, for four evenings.⁵ But since the later 1950s the hope of the Lord's coming has lost its power in the minds of British believers.

It would be easy, but rather facile, to conclude from the above evidence that believers are only concerned about the Lord's coming when economic and political prospects worsen. Be that as it may, we should always be people who are ready and waiting for their Lord (Luke 12:36), but always remembering, whilst looking for His coming, that He "gave himself for us, that he might redeem to himself his own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:13-14; cp. Luke 12:43).

This brings us back to "Behold! The Bridegroom!" Are we slumbering and sleeping, or watching and working?

³ E. Dennett, *Zechariah the Prophet* (London, Broom & Rouse, 1888), preface.

⁴ James Boyd, "The Second Coming of Christ," *Scripture Truth* 5 (1913), p. 15. Of interest as to this is also W. B. Westcott, "The revolt against authority" in the same volume, pp. 49ff.

⁵ F. W. Pitt, "Introduction", *Four Golden Hours at Kingsway Hall, London, with Dr H. A. Ironside* (London, Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), p. xiii.

Cheering Words Calendar 2020

The 2020 calendar may now be ordered from STP, with two pictures (one on either side of the calendar back):

Tarbert Harbour,
Argyll & Bute, Scotland

Northern Ireland
countryside sunrise



Tarbert Harbour, Argyll and Bute, Scotland

Photo © StockPhotoMarket

Cheering Words

MARCH

17

TUESDAY

Seek the Lord, and his strength; seek his face evermore. Remember his marvellous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth.
Psalm 105:4-5

Deep in unfathomable mines Of never-failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will.

Scripture Truth Publications, 31-33 Glover Street, Crewe, Cheshire CW1 3LD Tel: 01270 252274



Northern Ireland countryside sunrise

Photo © StockPhotoMarket

Cheering Words

FEBRUARY

11

TUESDAY

When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.
Proverbs 16:7-8

Nothing but Christ, as on we tread, The Gift unpriced, God's living Bread; With staff in hand and feet well shod, Nothing but Christ — the Christ of God.

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The Sudden Cry

One day all God's people shall suddenly hear
an imperious voice in the skies,
the sound of a trumpet, compelling and clear,
and a shout that bids dead to arise.

For the Lord shall a-sudden descend to the air
His dear ones to meet at heav'n's door:
the dead shall be raised incorruptible, fair,
the living be changed by His power.

Lord, make me to watch, work, and wait, as You said,
I desire Your return to be soon;
keep me daily alert for that cry overhead;
and keen to work on while there's none.