

The SCRIPTURE STANDARD

*Pleading for a complete return to Christianity
as it was in the beginning*

Vol. 64 No. 5

MAY, 1997

TILL HE COME

Matthew's gospel is the subject of study at the mid-week Bible Study of the Church at Motherwell just now, and Chapter 10 has been reached. In verse 23 of that chapter, Jesus, on sending out His apostles on a preaching tour of all the cities of Israel; taking the message of the Kingdom, gives them a sense of urgency and says, ". . . for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man be come." There is much controversy over the meaning of this verse, as we can imagine, and opinions vary over a wide scale. For instance, at one end of the scale, Thomson's Chain-reference Bible says that Christ's "Second Coming" is referred to, whereas, at the other end of the scale Prof. Barclay suggests (rather disappointingly) that Matthew exaggerated these words of Jesus in order to bring cheer to those undergoing persecution. Clearly Jesus refers to a "coming" of His in the months to come, which was quite separate and apart from His "Second Coming" and I offer a few comments on the subject for what they are worth.

In the religious world a great deal of nonsense is spoken concerning the "Second Coming" and one must try not to add to the confusion; given that there are some difficult passages. Some things can be said with certainty while others can only be held as one's own personal perception of the matter. For instance, Christ's "Second Coming" is very certain and it is equally certain that it has not yet come to pass: i.e. is still future. It is also very certain that Christ came into the world about 2,000 years ago (His first "coming") and so, between His first coming and His final coming, any other "comings" (such as the one mentioned above, in Matt. 10:23) must be slotted in to their proper place. Herein lie some difficulties. As with any other Bible subject we must tread warily, always aware that we might be missing the point and that there are, as always, *elements of mystery* involved. For example, how many Jews could have been expected to guess that Malachi's prophecy that "Elijah must first come" would be fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist? The Jews looked for a literal "coming" of a literal Elijah and would not expect John to come "in the spirit and power" of Elijah. Thus a need to tread carefully.

TERMINOLOGY

Objections to the words "Second Coming" are sometimes expressed because the term never appears in the N. T. In view of the fact that Jesus had several "comings" between His birth and ascension, it would certainly seem more accurate to talk of His "Final Coming" or His "Second Appearance" than "Second Coming." Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews says, (9:28) " So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many, and unto them that look for Him shall He APPEAR THE SECOND TIME without

sin unto salvation." Christ's first APPEARANCE (*Parousia*) was, of course, at His incarnation or birth. He certainly *existed* before that time, but had not *appeared* in the world until that time. Paul says that we are saved by God's own purpose "**which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but it is now manifest BY THE APPEARING of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.**" (2 Tim. 1:10). In short, Jesus' "coming" into the world was in bodily form (see Vine on *Parousia*) i.e. He "appeared" in bodily form. His final coming will also be an "appearing;" He will come in bodily form: He will come personally. He had several "comings" but not all of His comings involved appearance. Readers may feel that hairs are being split but there is a difference, and whereas the N.T. talks of "comings" and "appearances" it never refers to a "Second Coming" but does mention a "Second Appearance."

AN EARLY RETURN?

It is sometimes averred that the early Christians were expecting Christ to return in their own lifetime. At His ascension from Mount Olivet the angels said, ". . . **this same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven,**" and those listening probably presumed that since this statement was made personally to them, they would, personally see this (return) come to pass. There are also some passages of scripture, which, some think, are indicative of a general tendency to the 'early return' expectancy. For example, Paul says to the Philippians, "**Let your moderation be known unto all men, the Lord is at hand**" (4:5). The writer to the Hebrews says, "**For yet a little while and he that will come, will come, and will not tarry.**" (10:3). James says, "**Be ye also patient, stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh**" (5:8). John says, "**Behold, I come quickly, hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown**" (Rev. 3:11).

It may well be that many of the early disciples were looking for, and hoping for, an early return of Jesus, especially if they were undergoing great privations and persecution, and it also may well be that some of those verses applied to *one or other* of the "comings" to be mentioned in the next sub-heading.

Certainly the apostle Peter didn't encourage the idea of an early return (with reference to Christ's final return) and indeed remarks upon those who would scoff at the non-return of Christ. He says, ". . . **there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts. And saying, where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.**" Peter goes on to accuse such scoffers of being "wilfully ignorant" of the fact that whereas the "old world" was destroyed by a flood, "**the heavens and the earth WHICH ARE NOW are (by the same word of God) KEPT IN STORE, reserved UNTO FIRE (not a flood) against the day of Judgement and perdition of ungodly men.**"

"**BUT**" continues Peter, **BE NOT IGNORANT OF THIS ONE THING, that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise (to return) as some men count slackness but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance**" (2 Peter 3:4-9). And so, for those who might be wondering about the validity of the "early return" theory we have the above comments on the matter by an apostle of Christ. Peter certainly did not seem to subscribe to the idea.

SOME OF HIS VARIOUS COMINGS

The writer to the Hebrews (9:28) says that Christ would "**appear a second time**" and this implies a first appearance. Thus Christ' *first coming* was at His birth: or incarnation. This is mentioned in the same chapter, a few verses previously (9:24)

where the same writer, referring to the animal sacrifices of the old economy, says, "For then must He (Christ) have suffered since the foundation of the world; but now, once in the end of the world hath HE APPEARED to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (See also 2 Tim. 1:10).

Time and space allows only a very brief mention of some of His various "comings".

(1) Probably the next coming was when He began His ministry. Paul, when speaking in the synagogue at Perga said, that of David's seed. "God, according to the promise, raised unto Israel a Saviour; Jesus; when John had preached BEFORE HIS COMING the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel" (Acts 13:24). Jesus had, by this time, been in the world for nearly 30 years when John was preaching (and indeed was only six months younger than John) and yet John is here described as having preached *before* "THE COMING" of Jesus, and so this "coming" would appear to refer to the beginning of Christ's ministry. And John, himself, said "There COMETH (future tense) One mightier than I AFTER ME, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose" (Mark 1:7). Jesus and John were contemporaries and yet John talks of Him "coming" *after* John's ministry is over, and clearly talks of Christ's ministry as a "coming".

(2) The next "coming" would seem to be involved in the verse quoted at the very commencement of this article: i.e. Matt 10:23 where, when Jesus was sending out the 12 on their preaching mission, He said ". . . verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man BE COME." We don't know how long it took the 12 (and later the 70) to cover all the ground but obviously it was to be sometime in the future (many months). This "coming" could refer either to the destruction of Jerusalem, or the "coming" of the Kingdom of Heaven, for Jesus had said, "Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man COMING IN HIS KINGDOM" (Matt. 16:28) or as Mark renders it, ". . . till they have seen the Kingdom of God COME with power (9:1).

(3) Only six days after the statement just referred to, (Matt. 16:28) we have the transfiguration of Jesus, as He converses with Moses and Elijah on the holy mount, simultaneously with God's awesome voice from heaven declaring the Sonship of Christ. Christ, as Son of God, was thus made vastly pre-eminent over the O.T. lawgiver, Moses, and O.T. prophet Elijah. This momentous event was witnessed by three chosen witnesses, Peter, James and John, and Peter, later in life, made this comment on the profound transactions of that day. He said, "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables when we made it known unto you the POWER AND COMING of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. FOR He received from God the Father, honour and glory when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory. This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the holy mount." Bible students will find that most commentators link the "power and COMING" with the transfiguration.

(4) Another "coming" of the Lord was when Jesus made His formal entry into Jerusalem as King. Some 500 years previously Zechariah had prophesied, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion; shout O Daughter of Jerusalem: behold thy King COMETH unto thee; He is just and having salvation; lowly and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass" (9:9). Matthew (21:11) describes beautifully the fulfilment of this prophecy, when Jesus (who owned nothing whatsoever) had to "borrow" an ass on which to enter the city as King. Multitudes, in a fervour of high religious excitement, strawed the streets with their garments and with palm leaves,

shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is He that COMETH in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest." Mark adds that some also shouted, "Blessed be the Kingdom of our father David, that COMETH in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest" (10:10), and Luke tells us that the Pharisees called upon Jesus to rebuke those who were shouting, whereupon Jesus replied that if men held their peace the very stones would have to shout (19:40). Thus, near the end of His ministry, and after many previous visits to Jerusalem, Jesus "comes" to the city as King of Zion, in fulfilment of prophecy. He "came" in the name of the Lord.

(5) **Destruction of Jerusalem:** The destruction of Jerusalem (and obviously, the temple and Jewish religion) was predicted in the O.T. e.g. "Behold I will send Elijah before the "coming" of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." (Mal. 4:5; see also Zech. 14:5). Elijah's mission was to persuade Israel to set its house in order and to give them their very last chance of repentance. Elijah came, as we have seen, in the person of John the Baptist, and John, of course, came just prior to the destruction of the holy city. Matthew 24 (and parallel passages) describes and lists the signs which would presage the actual catastrophe. Interpretation of the chapter is complicated in that Jesus is answering two separate questions; i.e. "When shall these things be" and "What shall be the sign of Thy coming and of the end of the world." The bulk of the chapter, and certainly up to verse 28, refers to the destruction of the city. In verse 6 Jesus alludes to "wars and rumours of wars" and says, "But the end is not yet"; meaning, of course, the end of the Jewish economy; not the end of the world. At verse 14 He says that "this gospel shall be preached in all the world, and then shall the end come," and again, He means the end of Jerusalem: not the end of the world. After listing a great many of the conditions and events which would, step by step, lead up to the eventual holocaust in the city, Jesus warns of the abundance of false Christs which would flourish at the time. He says, "Wherefore, if they shall say unto you, Behold He is in the desert, go not forth; Behold He is in the secret chambers, believe it not. FOR as the lightning cometh out of the east and shineth even unto the west, so shall THE COMING of the Son of man be." This particular "coming" is in the context of the sacking of Jerusalem for surely Jesus' 'mention of the false Christ' being overshadowed by His own coming (as easily seen as lightning is) had reference to the end of the Jewish age, and not to the end of the world. Jesus would "come" in Judgement on the city and "there would be great tribulation." Indeed Jesus said (v.21) "For there shall be great tribulation such as was not from the beginning of the world to this time, nor ever shall be." And this was the fulfilment of Christ's sombre prophecy that "The blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world shall be required of this generation. From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple. Verily I say unto you, it shall be required of this generation." (Luke 11:50).

CHRIST'S FINAL COMING

We may often agonise on various passages of scripture as to which particular "coming" of Christ they refer; but there is one "coming" of which we can have no reservations or doubt, and that is Christ's final coming. Certain momentous events will occur simultaneously with Christ's final appearance which will make it impossible to ignore. Paul, (giving reassurance to those worried about dead relatives) says, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the COMING OF THE LORD, shall not precede them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven WITH A SHOUT; with THE VOICE OF THE ARCHANGEL; and with THE TRUMP OF GOD; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together

with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:16). The shout, the voice of the archangel and the trump of God will make His coming very audible: indeed it will be noisy enough to awaken the dead; viz. "All that are in the graves shall hear His voice and come forth." (John 5:28).

Not only will His coming be very audible, but very visible. "Behold, He cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him." Nor will Jesus come alone. "When the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and ALL THE HOLY ANGELS WITH HIM, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory" (Matt. 25:31). And so we learn that Jesus will come on *Judgement Day*. The *general resurrection* will also accompany Christ's return: viz. "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first." (1 Thess. 4:16).

All these things will happen, not over a long protracted period of months, but instantaneously: viz. "In A MOMENT, in the TWINKLING OF AN EYE, at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible." (1 Cor. 15:52). (Some suggest that the trump of God is figurative, but this is not so: see Ex. 19:19). Simultaneously, we shall all be changed. Paul says, "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall ALL BE CHANGED . . . In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible AND WE SHALL BE CHANGED. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:31). Jesus, Himself, said, "But when the Son of man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him. Then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory, AND BEFORE HIM SHALL BE GATHERED ALL NATIONS and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats, and He shall set the sheep on the right hand but the goats on the left."

These are some of the awesome events which will occur at Christ's return and which will be consummated in the destruction of our planet, as described by Peter, who says, "But the 'day of the Lord' will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with a fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." From all the above we can see that it will be very difficult to confuse the Final coming of Christ with anything else.

CONCLUSION

There is not much space left for a summary, but, as we have seen, there are some very interesting "comings" of the Lord subsequent to His first appearance, and we can see that the verse we started off with (Matt. 10:23) had its fulfilment in one of these comings, probably the destruction of Jerusalem. In John 14:18 Jesus, when promising to send the Comforter, said, "I will not leave you comfortless, I WILL COME TO YOU" (John 14:18), and this is another "coming" I did not have time to comment upon. And there are also references in the Revelation, where Jesus, in writing to the church at Pergamus, warned, "Repent, or else I WILL COME TO THEE QUICKLY"; and to the church at Philadelphia said, "Behold I COME QUICKLY"; and to the church at Ephesus said ". . . repent, and do the first works, or else I WILL COME TO THEE and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except ye repent." (2:5).

It seems, however, that all this is water under bridge and the only coming we can safely expect is the final coming of the Lord, a coming which, as Peter assures us, is

delayed only because God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Such is the wonderful grace of God.

EDITOR.