



CONDUCTED BY
L. CHANNING

Send your questions
direct to L. Channing,
9 Ripon Street,
Aylesbury, Bucks.

Q. What Scripture is there which would justify building a doctrine or set of doctrines around the phrase, 'THE Second Coming,' a phrase nowhere found in the Bible?

A. This question is an excellent one, and the point it makes needs to be emphasised. Too many, slipping into loose denominational thinking, talk of 'THE Second Coming of Christ,' a phrase which, as the questioner rightly points out, does not occur in the Scriptures. The question can be answered in two parts.

(1) Concerning the phrase 'The Second Coming.' In the Old Testament outpourings of divine power were often referred to as 'comings' of the Lord. See 2 Sam 22:10-12; Isa. 19:1; Jer. 50:31 as examples. It was natural, therefore, for the writers of the New Testament, and the Lord Himself, to use the same Hebrew idiom in connection with the outpourings of divine power in their day. Hence, we find a number of 'comings' of the Lord spoken of in the New Testament. Failure to distinguish between them often leads to much confusion. Our Lord's incarnation was a 'coming' (2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 9:26). The Lord spoke of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as His 'coming' (John 14:18). The establishment of His kingdom was a 'coming' (Mark 9:1). The destruction of Jerusalem was a 'coming' (Zech. 14; Mal. 4; Matt. 3:10-12; 24:1-34; Acts 2:19-20; Phil. 4:5). Then

there is the Lord's Final Coming (1 Thes. 4:16-18). The figurative language used to describe the destruction of Jerusalem is so much like that describing the final coming of the Lord that many confuse the two. The one is the type of the other.

When the New Testament writers spoke of the Lord's final coming they did not use the phrase 'THE Second Coming,' but, more often than not, the word 'appearing,' (see 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1 and 8; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1-7); or expressions that denoted *visible* presence (see Phil. 3:20), as used in connection with the first coming (see John 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 9:26). It is in harmony with scripture therefore, to speak of the *final* return, appearance, or coming of the Lord, but not of 'THE Second Coming.'

(2) Doctrines based on the phrase. Having used an unscriptural phrase which fails to take note of the several 'comings' of the Lord in the New Testament, many completely confuse the various 'comings,' and proceed to build up a whole system of 'signs' preceding the Lord's final return. But the Lord distinctly warns us that, in contrast to His coming in the destruction of Jerusalem (see Matt. 24:32-33), His final return will be completely unheralded (see Matt. 24:36 to 25:30); 1 Thes. 5:1-11). The only doctrines we can base upon the final return of the Lord (other than the general exhortation to live as in daily expectancy of that return) are those the Scriptures plainly indicate, concerning the events that are to take place *at* His coming. These are the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:22-23; 1 Thes. 4:16); the changing of the living (1 Cor. 16:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:17); the judgment (John 5:28-29; Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16); and the final destruction of the heavens and the earth (2 Pet. 3:7-13).

Q. What scriptural grounds are there for the statement that the early Christians were mistaken in expecting an early return of the Lord from heaven?

A. The simple answer to the question is that the early Christians did not expect the final return of the Lord at that time, neither were they taught to expect it. The Thessalonians misunderstood Paul's first letter to them. The 'early return' theory, rests on a misuse and misunderstanding of certain passages in the New Testament. For instance, 1 Thes. 4:17 is appealed to, because Paul used the expression 'we' in this verse. It is therefore argued that Paul thought that the Lord would finally return in his lifetime. But the word 'we' used here, is merely a rhetorical expression.

James 5:7-9 is another passage used to support the theory. But here again the various 'comings' of the Lord are confused. This refers not to the final coming of the Lord, but to His coming in judgment (see verse 6): namely, the destruction of Jerusalem, the time of which was certainly very near when James wrote. 1 John 2:18 is another passage appealed to. But this is by no means conclusive, for it is mainly based on an assumption that the epistle was written about A.D. 90. However, the evidence for this is vague, and mostly tradition, and is rejected by many eminent authorities. It is much more likely that the epistle was written about A.D. 68-69 and that this passage refers again to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is confirmed by comparing the verse with Matt. 24:11-13, 23-25.

The issue is not simply that in view of the fact that the Lord said that no man would know the hour or the day of His final return, the early Christians did not know, but that *inspired Apostles taught error*, misleading the church into an expectation of an early final return of the Lord. In actual fact just the reverse is the case. Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians was written with the express purpose of correcting the mistaken impression his first letter had made, and to show that the final return of the Lord was *not imminent* (see 2 Thes. 2:1-6; and note chapter 3:5, R.V.).