

We are living in times of intense international unrest which are accompanied by the most dramatic decline in public morality in the western world since the Protestant Reformation. The escalation of the war between Israel and Hamas, especially, has led some to question whether the Second Coming of Christ is drawing very close, perhaps even imminent. I heard one comment from a preacher that such is the nature of our times that he believed this world has perhaps only twelve years, at the most, left. I heard of another comment that we should not pray for revival, that day is over – because we are in the final apostasy leading to the return of Christ. It strikes me that such comments are in the realm of speculation and are not in any way based upon the Scriptures of Truth. I also believe that the entertaining of such speculations will have a detrimental effect upon our duty to serve God today and forward the great commission in our sinful Satan enslaved world.

This kind of fallacy is nothing new within Christianity. Christians have faced international upheavals in the world, in the past, which must have seemed like the end of the world. The fall in Jerusalem in 70 AD, with 1,000,000 Jews slain and the remainder scattered throughout the Roman Empire was a social cataclysm, the end of an age. More than 300 years of bitter and violent persecutions of Christians must have appeared like the rise of Antichrist and the end of time, for those who experienced it. For others the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent revivals which swept

through the English speaking world, and elsewhere, over a period of almost 400 years felt like the dawn of the millennium, a new age of light replacing the Dark Ages. Some have therefore interpreted the collapse of public morality in the west during the 20th and 21st Centuries as being indicative of the final apostasy. For some the Great War with its catastrophic loss of life was a herald of the world's demise. For others the rise of Hitler was the emergence of the antichrist.

We have this tendency to interpret current events in a speculative rather than a forensic way. We are not to interpret events – we are rather to interpret scripture, never jumping to conclusions, being patient with the facts and never losing sight of the vision of the Church. The 2nd Coming does give us a vision, a very necessary and important vision, which we must never lose sight of, if the Church is to remain faithful to the end.

This is the burden of this study.

**MISREPRESENTING THE
CIRCUMSTANCES
PRECEDING THE**

SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

Paul's letters to the assembly of believers at Thessalonica have much to say about the 2nd Coming of our Lord, and how Christians ought to view this great event; the climax of all events, the crescendo of the orchestra which plays out the notes of God's symphony – called world history. Subsequent to the 1st Epistle being received, some misunderstood Paul, thinking that the return of Christ was almost upon them. It was this misrepresenting of the return of Christ which caused the Thessalonians to slip into dangerous error. Paul, inspired by the Holy Ghost, set himself the task of counteracting this misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

2nd Thessalonians 2:1-2

WHAT THEN ARE THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH HERALD THE RETURN OF CHRIST?

The phrases “wars and rumours of wars” is quoted often as are the “earthquakes in divers places”. These belong

to the Olivet Discourse which is most problematic where prophetic reasoning is concerned (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). This is due to the fact that this discourse is as much about preparing Christians for the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD as it is about the 2nd Coming itself. I do not deny that there will be earthquakes and wars – these are indicative of a broken world, a world that will become increasingly broken because of the curse as the centuries roll by. Natural disasters, likewise, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions will become more commonplace. We ought therefore to be careful about prophecy which appears to use a world of bloodshed as being indicative of the end of time – the world has always been a place of violence and battle as well as disasters in the natural world.

There are I believe three signs of the return of Christ that we should look for.

One is the rise of Antichrist, something which Paul indicated to the Thessalonians:

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is

worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

2nd Thessalonians 2:3-4

The church differs as to who the Antichrist is; to some he is a system not a person, to some this system is the Papacy to others it is the power of wickedness at work in the nations of the world, while to others the person is a world leader who comes promising prosperity and peace but who persecutes both Jew and Christian. But the Antichrist is most definitely a sign that the clock is ticking down towards the end of time. Those who believe in a personal antichrist talk about seven years with the last 3 and a half years of this period being “the great tribulation”. Those who believe in a system will see the time frame in a longer less defined period.

My personal opinion is that the Antichrist emerged after the fall of the Roman Empire, with the Papacy being the one sitting in God’s temple (the church) professing himself to be God. No movement in history has persecuted God’s faithful people more, apart from perhaps – the Roman Empire after which the Roman Catholic Church is named; there must be a certain significance in that.

Another indicator of the coming of our Saviour, I believe is the conversion of the Jewish people, something which Paul highlighted in Romans 11:

For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

Romans 11:25-27

To pray and labour for the conversion of the Jew is a most noble cause, perhaps the most noble of all missionary enterprises. Israel today, which is more secular than Jewish, is a godless state fighting for survival, without faith in Christ, their Messiah. Our hearts break for them, as they do for the children of Gaza at this turbulent moment in their history – BUT only the Gospel can bring peace.

The third important sign of the Second Advent is the spread of the Gospel into all the world:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

Matthew 24:14

What does this mean? Obviously it has reference to the Great Commission and our responsibility to declare the

Gospel to all the ends of the world. Does this prophetic utterance by Christ mean that all the world at some point will have received the Gospel before the 2nd Coming? Or does it mean that the power of the Gospel will be felt in every nation simultaneously before the end of time? It seems to me, and this my personal view, that there is little point in this promise if it does not signify the most enormous and seismic experience. Is the Lord really teaching that because Turkey or Syria (for example) had the Gospel in the 1st Century – their opportunity is gone forever as they slumber under the darkness of Islam. This promise to preach the Gospel has been forever fulfilled, therefore, we are not to expect any further dramatic work of the Spirit among these people. That to me would be the most extraordinary limitation of Christ's words. The only interpretation that makes sense is that all nations will together experience a most stupendous and unprecedented work of grace before the return of Christ. This ties in with the promises of the Old Testament, especially the words of Habakkuk and Isaiah:

For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk 2:14

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse,

and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of

counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:1-9

For me the promise of the Gospel spreading with power and revival spirit into the whole earth is an incentive to give to and pray for missionary work and to seek God for revival blessing.

MISREADING THE CURIOUS PUZZLE OF THE SECOND COMING

I believe that a form of eschatology (doctrine of the end times), which puts any kind of time frame on the Lord's appearance is a misreading of Scripture. The Lord, when He does come, will do so suddenly and without warning. The term thief in the night has more to do with the fear created by the thief than the suddenness of His arrival. That's why the Lord will not appear as a thief to the Church; the Christian has nothing to fear. But even to the Church, which watches and waits for the return of Christ, Christ's coming will be sudden because no-one truly expects the thief; but again I emphasise the Church has nothing to fear:

But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction

cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

2nd Thessalonians 5:1-2

Christ, Himself emphasised this. If the Father hides the return of Christ from the angels – are we so bold as to say that we know more?

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

Matthew 24:36

I believe that there is very good reason for God to hide His timetable from the world and even from the Church – we would become so obsessed with that date – that we would neglect our duties for the present; which is the danger of false ideas around the 2nd Advent.

MISSING THE CURRENT PRIORITY FROM THE SECOND COMING

Christ's words about the Christian being a servant in a great household, where the master went away – are most relevant.

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and

pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all,
Watch.

Mark 13:32-37

These servants did not know when the master would return but every day they were to labour as if this were to be the moment of his arrival. It was vital that when he returns he would find them, watching, waiting and working – most definitely not sleeping.

It is said that Horatius Bonar, the Scottish Presbyterian minister and hymn writer, opened his blinds each morning with the prayer “Maybe today Lord” and at night he closed the blinds saying “Maybe tonight Lord”. In truth, however, there will be a day or a night when we will meet the Lord either through death or the return of Christ. Therefore our state of readiness, regardless of the manner in which we meet the Lord, must be constant.

Therefore, no view of the future or the return of Christ ought to interfere with the Church's mission – to preach Christ, to live holy lives and to pray for revival.

Paul when writing to the Thessalonians introduced a few other outcomes in a Church which strikes the right balance where the return of our Lord is concerned:

And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

1st Thessalonians 4:11-14

But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on

the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do. And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.

1st Thessalonians 4:4 – 15

From these texts we glean the prerogative to work hard in society and live godly lives before all men in the light of Christ's return.

The wonderful concept of comfort also flows from this doctrine. The Church is comforted by Christ's return because this will bring about the reunification of every family, whose loved ones are in Christ, as well as the assembling of the entire church in time and eternity for

the first moment in history. And this moment will never end.

God's plan for the world and for the Church is nothing but positive. In these alarming and challenging times, we need to refocus on "the big picture". Christ is coming again! Praise God. We have a message to proclaim, a Christ to represent, a cause that is triumphant!