

# “So Shall We Ever Be with the Lord”

*“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.”*  
—*I Thessalonians 4:16,17*

## IN THE VERSE FOLLOWING

our opening text, Paul wrote, “Comfort one another with these words.” (vs. 18) The hope of Christ’s return was indeed very comforting to the brethren in the Early Church. They were in the difficult position of bearing witness to one who could not be seen. Their enemies would taunt them with the fact that their leader had been put to death. To this they could counter that he had been raised from the dead, and that there were many “infallible proofs” of this. (Acts 1:3) However, he was not in their midst, and they realized that this absence would continue until his promised return. Thus, they earnestly looked for his coming, for they knew that when he came again, he would receive them

unto himself, that where he was, there they would be also.—John 14:3

The brethren in the Early Church believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one whom the Creator had sent to deliver Israel from her yoke of bondage to Rome, and to set up a kingdom which would rule over the people of all nations. Through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, they learned that the Messianic kingdom would not be set up in the earth until he returned. During his First Advent Jesus gave himself in death as “a ransom for all,” and they believed that during his Second Presence would come the “due time” when this great truth of man’s redemption would be “testified,” or made known, to all.—I Tim. 2:3-6

They no doubt had in mind the promise Jesus had made to his disciples while he was still in the flesh, that when he returned he would “gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, . . . and serve them.” (Luke 12:37) They surely recalled also Jesus’ prophecy, that when he would come “in his glory, and all the holy angels [or messengers] with him,” he would “sit upon the throne of his glory,” and all mankind would be judged by him and his associates.—Matt. 25:31,32

According to the prophecies, there were other things to be accomplished during the period of our Lord’s Second Presence. Outstanding among these is what Peter described as the “restitution of all things.” This, he said, would be in fulfillment of the testimony given by all of God’s “holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:20,21) Surely then, the hope in which the brethren of the Early Church rejoiced was very comprehensive. All their expectations

concerning the accomplishments of the Messiah were dependent upon his return. Jesus' death and resurrection would have been in vain, if he would not come again to reward his faithful followers and to bless all the families of the earth through the agencies of his kingdom. Indeed, it was this kingdom in which they believed that, if faithful, they would live and reign with their Master.

## **THE GLORIFIED JESUS INVISIBLE**

When we study the promises and prophecies of the Bible pertaining to Jesus' Second Advent, it is important to realize that they apply not to a human being, consisting of flesh and blood, but to an all-powerful, divine, spirit being. The Scriptures teach that when Jesus was raised from the dead he was no longer human, but the very "image of the invisible God." (Col. 1:15; II Cor. 5:16; I Pet. 3:18) Because of this, the verity of his return and Second Presence is revealed, not by seeing him with the literal eye, but by the fulfillment of signs which are outlined in the prophecies.

It is true that Jesus did appear in the form of a man to his disciples on several occasions following his resurrection, but this does not mean that by nature he was still human. The circumstances of his few brief appearances prove to the contrary. For example, he always appeared in a different looking human body. He would not have looked differently each time if the form in which he appeared had been his glorified, resurrection body. Jesus was present with his disciples for forty days between the time of his resurrection and his ascension. However, only during a very small portion of this time were

they able to see him, and then only when he miraculously appeared to them in a human form. It is this Jesus—able to be present invisibly among humans—whom the Scriptures declare was to return for the purpose of establishing a kingdom of righteousness, and restoring the redeemed race to life on the earth.

As an all-powerful, divine, spirit being, Jesus still possesses the power to appear to humans, as he did to his disciples following his resurrection from the dead. This we do not dispute, but the Scriptures do not indicate that his Second Presence is to be revealed in this manner. The Lord's appearances following his resurrection were evidently intended to establish in the hearts and minds of his disciples the fact that he had been raised from the dead. This truth having been clearly established, we have no reason to expect the repetition of such appearances.

In Romans 1:20, we read concerning God, "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." Here is a key which will help us to understand the significance of the prophecies pertaining to the Second Advent of Christ. God is invisible, Paul says, but can be "clearly seen . . . by the things that are made"—his visible creative works. Christ likewise is now invisible to human eyes. Hence at his Second Advent he can be recognized only by visible circumstances and events which transpire. These are identified through the prophetic pages of Scripture as the signs which were to mark his return.

Let us state the matter in another way. We believe in the existence of God, not because we have ever seen him, but because we see his works. Even with our limited abilities, we survey the vast universe, and conclude that a powerful, all-wise Creator must be responsible for what we observe. Similarly, in the Bible we find set forth an impressive array of events which were foretold to take place in the world following the return of the glorified Christ. If, then, we observe that many of these events have already, or are now, taking place, the logical conclusion is that the Second Coming of Christ must already have come to pass, and that we are living in the period of his presence—though he is invisible to the literal eye.

We have another illustration of this principle in the presence and activity of Satan, the Devil. Satan is a living being, but no human has ever seen him. Yet, we have all seen the results of his wicked influence throughout the earth. The Apostle Paul informs us that Satan is “the god of this world,” and “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.” (II Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2) Jesus refers to Satan as “the prince of this world.” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) If we believe the Bible, we must conclude that this powerful, invisible being has, throughout the centuries, exercised great control over the affairs of men.

The Apostle Peter writes concerning the invisible ruler of this present world order, and declares that he goes about “as a roaring lion, ... seeking whom he may devour.” (I Pet. 5:8) This clearly indicates again that Satan’s field of activity is right here on

earth, and among humans. Yet, even those who realize this most fully have never literally seen him or heard him “roar,” nor is Satan actually a lion. The meaning of this language is easily understood, however, by those who consider the methods by which lions seek out their prey.

### **“AS A THIEF”**

The Apostle Paul wrote, “The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.” (I Thess. 5:2) Here Paul employs the symbol of a “thief.” The “day of the Lord” is, we believe, the time of his Second Presence. Jesus does not return to steal the possessions of others. The symbolism of a thief is used, rather, to illustrate the manner of his coming. A thief enters a building quietly and, if successful, without being observed. Thus the Lord would have us grasp this fundamental fact concerning Christ’s return and Second Presence. So far as the unbelieving world is concerned, it is unknown, because he returns “in the night” of darkness still upon mankind in general.

“But ye, brethren,” Paul continues, “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.” (vss. 4,5) This harmonizes with Jesus’ own prophecy concerning his return, in which he uses similar pictorial language. He said, “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye

also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.”—Matt. 24:42-44

Here Jesus’ clear implication is that those who would be watching, while not knowing in advance of the time of his return, would become aware of his presence after it became a reality. It also means that Jesus would be present invisibly, that none but the faithful watchers would know, and that only those who watched the fulfillment of the prophetic signs given concerning “the times and the seasons” would be aware of his return. (I Thess. 5:1) All others, as Paul states, would be “in darkness” so far as this great development in the plan of God was concerned.—vss. 4,5

### **“WITH A SHOUT”**

Thieves do not announce their presence with a shout. Since Jesus comes in the manner of a thief—that is, secretly and invisibly—it is apparent that when Paul wrote in our opening text that Jesus would “descend from heaven with a shout,” he was again using pictorial language. The Greek word here translated “shout” means to incite or urge on. What is the import of this statement? Returning again to I Thessalonians chapter 5, Paul explained that in the day of the Lord the unbelieving world would say, “Peace and safety,” and that then “sudden destruction” would come upon them, “as travail upon a woman with child,” and they would not escape. (vs. 3) Let us keep in mind that the main objective of our Lord’s return is the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. This means that the kingdoms of this present world, which are under Satan’s control, must first be set aside. In this

prophecy we are told that the destruction of the present world order will be as “travail upon a woman with child”—that is, in spasms, with periods of easement between.

The ending of Satan’s present world order, although accompanied by visible violence and destruction, is primarily rooted in the rising up of the people, in which there is a great struggle for rights, freedoms, and liberties—real and imagined. In the Lord’s providence, the great increase of knowledge of the past century and a half, and, in particular, mass communication on a global scale, also unique to this time period, have “incited” and “urged on” a clamoring for equality and rights in every corner of the earth. We can see how this symbolic “shout” has ripped the fabric of the present world, and shaken its very foundations!

Daniel foretold the increase of knowledge which has brought about this rising up of the people. (Dan. 12:4) This increase of knowledge, especially as viewed in its resulting incitement of the people, is one of the evidences that we are presently living in “the day of the Lord.” He is invisible to mankind, but his presence has surely had a profound effect on man’s world.

Hence, we see that a mighty “shout” has attended our Lord’s return, even as Paul predicted. The people have heard it and have taken it up, though they do not realize the Lord is its source. By it the Lord is creating a state of mind in the masses of humanity and in the suffering millions of mankind that will ultimately contribute to the complete overthrow of the present world order. How thankful we are, however, that a new, righteous, order is to

take its place—the kingdom of Christ. Having exhausted all futile human endeavors to gain “peace and safety,” the hearts and minds of the people will then be ready for the blessings of the kingdom, which will begin just beyond the final “travail” and “sudden destruction” of Satan’s order.

### **“VOICE OF THE ARCHANGEL”**

In our text, Paul prophesied that the Lord would also return “with the voice of the archangel.” There is only one archangel mentioned in the Bible, and his name is Michael. (Jude 9) This name is symbolically applied to Jesus at the time of his return and Second Presence. In Daniel 12:1, we read of the time when “Michael” would “stand up,” and when as a result there would be “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” Jesus alludes to this prophecy in Matthew 24:21,22, as part of his response to the disciples’ question concerning the sign of his presence and the end of the age, or world order. (vs. 3) He speaks of it as a time of “great tribulation,” so destructive that if it were not shortened, no flesh would be saved. We are now living in that time, and even the wise of the world understand that the human race is now threatened with destruction. How evident it is that the commanding voice, or authority, of the archangel, Michael—the glorified Messiah—is causing the foundations of man’s world to tremble.

Throughout the history of man there have been wars and revolutions, but in some way the people have at least temporarily resolved their disputes, even if, as in most cases, this has been accomplished by one group yielding to the power of another.

However, Daniel said that the trouble resulting from the exercise of authority by the symbolic Michael would be such as “never was” since there was a nation. One of the ways in which the present trouble upon the world is different from all others is in the fact that, due to man’s selfishness, resolutions for the problems in the earth are either impossible to be agreed upon, or when agreements are reached, they are ignored by large segments of the people, and entire nations. We believe the reason for this is that the returned Lord, in ways invisible and unknown to man, is overruling in world affairs in preparation for the establishment of his kingdom. Thus, all humanly constituted authority must be set aside.

### **“THE TRUMP OF GOD”**

The “trump of God” is another meaningful symbol used in our text. In Joel 2:1,2, we read, “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand; A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains.” In this prophecy, a trumpet is also associated with the coming of the “day of the LORD.” It symbolizes the proclaiming of a message—in this case a warning of trouble coming upon the earth, a symbolic “day of darkness,” when the “inhabitants of the land tremble.”

The conditions and events described in this prophecy are associated with the return of Christ and his invisible presence during this “day of the LORD.” God’s consecrated people fulfill this prophecy

of trumpet-blowing, at least in part, for it is our privilege to call attention to the testimony of God's Word which explains the meaning of present world events. We believe, in fact, that this "trump of God" will continue to sound throughout the entire period of Christ's presence and kingdom, announcing pertinent events which the Lord will want to have made known.

This symbolic trumpet is styled "the trump of God" because its message pertains, not to what man is accomplishing, but to what God, through his glorified Son, is doing in preparation for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. It is not a literal trumpet, any more than "the shout" and "the voice of the archangel" are literal sounds. While much has already been accomplished throughout the earth as a result of these three manifestations of divine intervention, only those of the Lord's people who are watching understand the significance of what is taking place.

### **"DEAD IN CHRIST" FIRST TO RISE**

Describing a further work associated with the time of Jesus' return, the Apostle Paul said, "The dead in Christ shall rise first." The faithful followers of the Master throughout the age did not receive their heavenly reward—spoken of by Jesus in John 14:3 as being "received" unto himself—immediately upon their death. In another place, Paul wrote that there was "a crown of righteousness" laid up for him, which the Lord would give him "at that day," and not to him only, he added, "but unto all them also that love his appearing." (II Tim. 4:6-8) Paul was among "the dead in Christ" who were awakened

from death and highly exalted to be with the invisible, glorified Jesus when he returned.

Contrary to the concept that when our Lord returns he gathers up to heaven all the faithful living on the earth—referred to by many as the “rapture”—Paul says that those asleep in death will be his first concern. These shall “rise first,” and those of his followers who are “alive and remain” will not “prevent”—or “precede,” as is the meaning of the Greek word—“them which are asleep.”—I Thess. 4:15

Referring again to our opening text, Paul further explains, “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.” Here is the further use of pictorial language—“clouds” and “air.” Clouds, in the prophecies, denote trouble, and we have already seen that as a result of our Lord’s return there is “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” The faithful followers of Jesus receive their exaltation—being “caught up”—amidst, or during, this trouble. The “air” is a symbol of spiritual power or control, and the saints are exalted for the purpose of living and ultimately reigning with Christ as the spiritual rulers of the kingdom.—Rev. 20:4,6

## **THEREAFTER**

In the phrase, “Then we which are alive and remain,” the Greek word translated “then” means “thereafter.” Consequently, we understand from this passage that after the faithful ones who fell asleep in death throughout the age “rise first” and are with the Lord, those of his consecrated people alive

at the time of his return and subsequent presence would remain for a period. Sometime “thereafter,” Paul says, they would be “caught up,” or exalted, to be together with the previously awakened saints.

The Greek word translated “together,” in the expression “caught up together with,” is the same word also translated “together” in I Thessalonians 5:10, where, in speaking of Christ, Paul says “whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.” Clearly, the thought here is “close association,” which is one of the meanings attached to this Greek word. All the true followers of Jesus will ultimately be together—closely associated—with him by virtue of their exaltation to the divine nature. However, as Paul explains, the saints who have “slept” in death during the Gospel Age prior to the Lord’s return are “first” raised, and afterward those “who are alive and remain.”

In I Corinthians 15:50-52, Paul gives us further information concerning the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus’ faithful followers. “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Paul here speaks of a “mystery” concerning the resurrection and exaltation of the body members of Christ. Indeed, the resurrection is always a mystery to our finite minds, but Paul is calling attention to a special mystery, one connected with the time when

the “last trump”—“the trump of God”—would sound, in “the day of the Lord.” He said that all the saints would not sleep in death. Paul is one who did sleep, and so did the saints who died down through the centuries of the Gospel Age. He explains that at the time that “the trumpet shall sound,” those who had previously slept in death would be “raised incorruptible”—“changed” to glorified divine beings.

However, Paul says, for those of the Lord’s followers living subsequent to his return, it would no longer be necessary to sleep in death. This is in harmony with his statement in our text, that those who are “alive and remain”—though they would need to finish their covenant of sacrifice by being faithful unto death—would not need to sleep in death. Rather, at the moment of dying, they would receive their “change” and be “raised incorruptible,” just as those who had experienced their “change” after having slept in death for a period.

In Revelation 14:13, we read, “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.” This verse says that at a certain time, mentioned as “from henceforth,” those who would “die in the Lord” would receive a special blessing. In harmony with the texts previously considered, we believe this is the blessing of not needing to remain asleep in death. Indeed, there could be no blessing upon these if they still were dead, for the Scriptures clearly state that “the dead know not any thing.”—Eccles. 9:5

The period of time indicated in the context of this special “blessing” is the “harvest,” which Jesus

said would be at “the end” of the age. (Rev. 14:14-17; Matt. 13:39) These “blessed” ones participate in the work associated with the “harvest” while they “remain” in the flesh. When they finish their course in death, and are “changed,” their works “follow them”—that is, accompany them, which is the meaning in the Greek.

The Scriptures do not tell us what specific “works” the risen saints are doing for the Lord during the time since his return. We know they are not reigning with Christ as kings and priests, nor has the “marriage of the lamb” taken place. These phases of our Lord’s presence cannot begin until the “body of Christ” is complete, beyond the veil. (Rev. 7:3,4; 14:1; 19:7; 20:4,6) However, we can be sure that there is plenty of work in which the resurrected, faithful followers of the Master are engaged in as they assist him in preparation for the Messianic kingdom.

### **“COMFORT ONE ANOTHER”**

How clear this precious truth becomes when we consider all the Scriptural testimony bearing on it, and what a blessing it is to be living in this wonderful time in the outworking of the God’s plan! We look forward to the time when, together with all the faithful saints and our Lord, we will share in the great work of the kingdom. What a joy it will be to assist in bringing back from the dead all that are in their graves, uplifting the downtrodden family of Adam, and instructing mankind in the way of truth and righteousness.—John 5:28,29; I Cor. 15:20-26; Micah 4:1,2

At the beginning of this article, we quoted Paul’s encouragement to the brethren of his day, “comfort

one another with these words.” Today, we should similarly “comfort one another.” These words concerning the prospects which lay ahead should encourage all who have an ear to hear and believe the promises of God. They assure us of the glorious progress of events in the plan of God, which lead not only to the “first resurrection” of those who will live and reign with Christ, but also, and soon thereafter, to the general resurrection of all the dead. May we endeavor to be faithful witnesses to this glorious Gospel of the kingdom. “So shall we ever be with the Lord.” ■