

Our Lord's Return

“As he was sitting upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him, privately, saying—Tell us when these things shall be,—... the sign of thy presence, and the conclusion of the age.”

*—Matthew 24:3,
Rotherham
Emphasized Bible*

IN THIS DAY OF TURMOIL, chaos and perplexity, the hearts of the people are filled with fear as they look ahead to what may happen to themselves and to the human race if no solution for the world's many troubles can be found. Students of the Bible who have faith in its promises and prophecies believe that the only sure and lasting remedy to the problems which have been brought about by human sin and selfishness is the return of Christ and the setting up of his long-promised kingdom of righteousness and peace.

Views concerning this great event in the plan of God are widely variant. Some claim that Jesus returned at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the waiting disciples, and that since then, as each sinner is converted, it constitutes a further coming of Christ. These further say that when all

are converted he will have fully come. This view holds that such a process will fulfill Jesus' promise, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world [Greek: age]."—Matt. 28:20

On the other hand, many claim that Jesus will return to earth as a man and that he will be recognized by the print of the nails in his hands and in his feet and by the spear wound in his side which he received at the time of his crucifixion. This latter view depends to a considerable extent upon a literal interpretation of certain prophecies, such as that of Revelation 1:7, where we read, "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him."

We believe that the truth of the matter, supported by the combined testimony of the Scriptures, lies between these two extreme and opposing views. The first view erroneously renounces the necessity of a personal coming of Christ, yet approximates the truth concerning the nature of Jesus, in that it considers him to be so far above humans in nature that he can be present with them without their being able to see him.

The second view holds to the clearly established scriptural fact of a personal return of the Master. However, it limits the grandeur and possibilities of that momentous event. This is done by means of the unscriptural claim that he returns to earth as a glorified man and not as the powerful, invisible divine being which he became when the Heavenly Father raised him from the dead and gave him a name which is above every name.—Phil. 2:9

The Scriptures teach that when Jesus was raised from the dead he was no longer a human, but a powerful divine being, the "image of the invisible

God.” (Col. 1:15; II Cor. 5:16; I Pet. 3:18) This means that Jesus is now invisible to the human eye, even as God is invisible. It is this divine Christ who returns. Hence, the fact of his return will need to be recognized otherwise than by seeing him with the natural eye.

Although Jesus did appear as a man to his disciples on several occasions following his resurrection, this does not mean that he was, by nature, still a human. The circumstances of his few brief appearances prove to the contrary. For example, he always appeared in a different body, which would not have been the case had the form in which he appeared been his real body.

Only once did Jesus appear in a body similar to the one which was crucified, and that was because Thomas indicated that he would not believe the Master had been raised from the dead unless he could see his wounds. Jesus satisfied his lack of faith, although only this once did the disciples see any wounds. This appearance is described by the Apostle John as one of the “signs” by which Jesus proved to them that he had been raised from the dead. (John 20:29-31) On the other occasions of Jesus’ appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, they did not recognize him by his personal appearance but by the things which he said and did.

Jesus’ appearances to his disciples after his resurrection were of the same nature as those of angels in more ancient times. For example, three angels appeared to Abraham. They talked and ate with him, but they were not humans, although for a time Abraham thought that they were.—Gen. 18:1-8; Heb. 13:2

Jesus was present with his disciples for forty days between the time of his resurrection and ascension. However, during only a very small portion of this time were the disciples able to see him, and then only when he miraculously appeared to them. It is this Jesus, who is able to be invisibly present among humans, who was to return for the purpose of establishing his kingdom of righteousness. It is by this means that the problems of human selfishness will be solved, and the redeemed race of mankind will be restored to happiness and life upon the earth.

JESUS' FLESH A RANSOM

Jesus was made flesh in order that he might give his humanity as a corresponding price—a ransom for Adam and his race. The Master said, “My flesh ... I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) Had Jesus been raised from the dead as a human it would have meant that the ransom was taken back and that the world of mankind had not been redeemed.

The Scriptures show, however, that while Jesus was put to death in the flesh, he was made alive in the Spirit, or as a spirit being. (I Cor. 15:44-47; I Pet. 3:18) Jesus had previously explained to Nicodemus that one who is born of the Spirit can come and go as the wind—that is, be invisible to the human eye and have great power. He proved this to be true in his own case, for after his resurrection his disciples could not tell from whence he came or where he went when appearing to them.—John 3:8

We do not dispute that the glorified Jesus has the power to appear to humans as he did to his disciples following his resurrection from the dead. However, the Scriptures do not say that his return to earth

will be revealed to the world in this manner. His appearances to his disciples following his resurrection were evidently intended to establish for them the fact that he had been raised from the dead. This fact having been demonstrated, we have no reason to expect its repetition.

In Romans 1:20, we read concerning God that “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” Here is a key which will help us to understand the significance of the prophecies pertaining to the return of Christ. He is now invisible to human eyes, even as the Heavenly Father is invisible. Hence at his return he can be recognized only by the visible things which transpire, and which can be identified through the prophecies of the Bible as the “signs” which were to mark this all-important event.

Stating the matter another way, we believe in the existence of God, not because we have ever seen him, but because we see his works. With our limited abilities we survey the vast universe, and say there must be a powerful, all-wise Creator behind it. Similarly, in the Bible we find an impressive array of events which are said to take place in the world following the return of the divine Christ. Hence, when it is seen that many of these events are taking place, the logical conclusion concerning that which the Bible describes as Christ’s second visit to earth is that it has become a reality.

GOD OF THIS WORLD INVISIBLE

The Scriptures teach that there is a personal devil, yet no human has ever seen him. However, we have all seen the result of his nefarious influence. The

Apostle Paul informs us that Satan is the “god of this world,” a powerful spirit being who is the “prince of the power of the air,” who now works in the hearts of “the children of disobedience.” (II Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2) Jesus, likewise, spoke of Satan as the “prince of this world.” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) If we believe the Bible, we must realize that this powerful being has, throughout the centuries, been exercising control over the affairs of men.

The devil is the invisible ruler of “this present evil world.” Peter declares that he goes about as a “roaring lion ... seeking whom he may devour.” (I Pet. 5:8) This clearly indicates that Satan’s field of operation is right here on earth, yet even those who realize this most fully have never heard him literally roar as a lion.

With the return of Jesus, and as a result of his presence, a new world, or social order, is ultimately to be established. In this new arrangement Jesus will be the King, supplanting the rulership of Satan. In a vision, the Apostle John saw an angel come down from God out of heaven and lay hold upon Satan and bind him with a mighty chain. Following this, Christ and his church are seen to reign for a thousand years. As Satan, the one to be bound, is invisible, the agencies which bind him must likewise be invisible.—Rev. 20:1-4,6

Satan’s power and influence in this present evil world are no less potent because of his invisibility. On the contrary, it has given him a certain advantage in that, unseen, he has been a powerful force for evil. Thus, he has been able to make his influence felt in the chambers of the rulers and princes of earth, and to a considerable extent direct their affairs.

Jesus' rulership will also be an invisible one, exercised through human agencies. He will rule the people, however, in righteousness and not in unrighteousness as Satan has done. Even as the evil results of Satan's rulership are now easily discerned, so Jesus' reign will be recognized by all mankind through the righteous results that will be accomplished.

TRUTH CONCEALED BY A MISTRANSLATION

Important truths pertaining to the manner of our Lord's return have been long hidden by a mistranslation. The Bible was not originally written in the English language, hence we who use the English language must depend upon translations from the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. In most instances in our English Bibles very little of the richness of meaning has been lost through mistranslation. However, there are exceptions in which profound truths of God's plan have been long hidden by unwitting mistranslations.

One of these exceptions is in the case of the Greek word *parousia*, which is used by Jesus and the apostles to describe the Master's second visit to earth. In our *King James Version* of the Bible this word is almost universally translated "coming." The result of this has been that many students of prophecy have attempted to interpret the prophetic signs pertaining to our Lord's return as denoting that his coming was near. However, the true meaning of this Greek word is defined by *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* as "presence," and is translated "presence" in the *Rotherham Emphasized Bible* and *Young's Literal Translation*. It follows, then, that if we see fulfilled

signs of the Master's *parousia*, or presence, it would indicate that he is already here.

The disciples inquired of Jesus, "What shall be the sign of thy coming [*parousia*: presence]?" (Matt. 24:3) They were not asking how they might know in advance when he would come, but how they would know of his presence once he had come. In other words, they wanted to know what evidences they were to look for as tokens that the invisible Christ had returned, and that his kingdom would ultimately be established.

Archeological discoveries reveal that the Greek word *parousia* was used in ancient times to describe the visits of kings and emperors to various cities and provinces of their realms. One such discovery shows that taxes to pay the expenses of such a visit were raised by the issuing of a special "*parousia* coin." How appropriate, then, that this word should be used in connection with the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords. However, as in the case of earthly rulers whose visits are thus described, so with Jesus, *parousia* does not merely mean the moment of coming but covers the entire duration of his presence.

The first presence of Jesus, when he was here on earth as a man, lasted a total of only thirty-three and one-half years. He remained forty days longer as a resurrected, divine being, invisible to the world, and then he returned to the heavenly courts. There are many prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Jesus' first presence. Some tell of his birth, and some of one or another part of his life and ministry. Still others tell of his death as man's Redeemer. The fulfillment of these prophecies did not, as a rule,

run concurrently, but covered the entire time of his presence.

The prophecies and promises of Christ's second presence likewise cover a great variety of events, culminating in the destruction of death and Satan. The fulfillment of some of these prophecies runs concurrently, but in other instances there is a sequence of events. This calls for carefulness in our study of the prophecies relating to Christ's return and second presence lest we fall into the mistake of expecting them all to be fulfilled at a given moment of time, or within a relatively short period.

MANNER OF HIS PRESENCE

Jesus said to his disciples, "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 [Greek: bright shining] cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming [*parousia*, presence] of the Son of man be." (Matt. 24:26,27) By these words Jesus is conveying to our minds that his coming and presence were not to be like that of a human. He was to return as a great divine being, the "express image" of his Father's invisible person. (Heb. 1:3) Jesus is saying that he will not be found hidden away in some secret chamber, as you might find a man or a woman. Rather, his presence would be discerned even as we discern the existence of God himself—that is, by the great things which we ascribe to him.

Thus it is that we behold the sunshine and the rain, watering the earth and warming it that it may bring forth and provide for those upon it, and we

attribute these things to the existence of an all-wise and loving Creator. Similarly, Jesus explained that we would know of his second presence because it will be like the lightning, or bright shining, which, similar to the sun, comes out of the east and shines even unto the west. The blessings to be dispensed to humankind after being brought forth from their graves during the time of Christ's presence are represented as coming to the people because the "Sun of righteousness" shall arise, bringing healing and life to the peoples of earth.—Mal. 4:2

AN INCREASE OF KNOWLEDGE

As already noted, Jesus explained that his second presence would be like a bright shining. Here, we understand, is the idea of enlightenment, symbolizing increasing knowledge. The Prophet Daniel, describing conditions which were to exist in the "time of the end," declares among other things that "knowledge shall be increased." (Dan. 12:4) The "time of the end" here referred to is the period of time in which the rule of sin, selfishness, and death is to be brought to an end. Christ's return and second presence are closely associated with the various processes by which the "end" of this present evil order will come to pass. The world of today has unmistakably been impacted by this foretold increase of knowledge. However, because fallen man does not have the wisdom to use it properly, chaos results, even threatening the destruction of the race.

Thus, man's great strides in knowledge have led to what the Prophet Daniel further described as a "time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation." (Dan. 12:1) In speaking of this same time

Jesus said there would be tribulation on the earth so great that unless it was shortened no flesh would survive. (Matt. 24:21,22) We face this very situation today. Thankfully, however, God's divine intervention through the establishment of the long-promised kingdom of Christ will prevent this.

The long reign of sin and death under Satan, the prince of this world, is described in the Bible as a period of darkness. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "Darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people." (Isa. 60:2) Through the agencies of Christ's kingdom, when established, the increase of knowledge will be a great blessing to humanity, because it will include enlightenment concerning God and his love in providing redemption from sin and death through the sacrificial work of Jesus. We read concerning the time when Christ's kingdom will be governing in the affairs of men, "The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."—Isa. 60:3; Luke 2:32

In John 1:9, it is said that Jesus is that "true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." The prophecies clearly show that the complete fulfillment of this promise will be during the second presence of Christ; that ultimately the "earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9) Not until the end of the reign of Christ and his church will this prophecy be completely fulfilled.

"HE COMETH IN CLOUDS"

In Revelation 1:7, we are informed that Jesus returns in clouds, and that every eye shall see him. As discussed in foregoing paragraphs, Christ is a

divine being, the express image of God. Humans can see him only through the incidents and events which accompany his return and subsequent presence. The time will yet come, and we believe it is not far off, when these events will be of such a pronounced character that all will readily recognize their true significance.

In Joel 2:1,2, there is further reference to the “clouds” which become so distressingly ominous in the period of Christ’s presence prior to the establishment of his kingdom. Here we are informed that this period is not to be a time of peace, but rather, the reverse. It is to be “a day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations.”

It will be noted from this that the clouds here mentioned by the prophet really consist in this case of “a great people and a strong,” the like of which has never before been known. This is evidently a reference to the uprising of the discontented of mankind in such tremendous numbers as to cause the current systems of this world to crumble and fall under the impact of the revolutionary struggle they precipitate.

These clouds of trouble are even now greatly affecting society on every front. The people of earth are filled with fear because of them, although as yet they do not “see” the Master’s presence as being associated with the forces which are gradually destroying “this present evil world.” Jesus said that there would be great mourning because of his

presence, and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity and fear. (Matt. 24:30; Luke 21:25,26) How confounded the peoples of earth are today! No solutions can be found for the many baffling problems which combine to fill the world with chaos and the hearts of the people with fear.

GOD'S HAND OVER ISRAEL

The experiences of the Jews throughout these days of trouble constitute additional evidence of Christ's second presence. It is the time, according to the Scriptures, when their land was to be restored to them. The events which have occurred along this line during the past century are miraculous, and without doubt have been in preparation for the coming blessings of the Messianic kingdom. This regathering of Israel was prophetically due at the very time when the nations as a whole would be gathered together in preparation for the final climactic events of the "time of trouble." Joel 3:1,2 reads, "Behold, in those days, and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land."

This prophecy indicates that, while the Jewish people would be restored to their land, it would be amidst a period of trouble for them as well as for the nations in general. Other prophecies indicate that Israel may yet experience additional difficulties. This is not hard to foresee, in view of the circumstances which have existed since their re-establishment as

a nation in 1948, seventy years ago, since which time they have experienced continual trouble from within and without.

It is not wise to go into detail concerning events which have not yet transpired. However, the Scriptures indicate that near the end of the present struggle among earth's nations there will be an attack against the Israelites in their land. Then they will turn to Christ, and he will intervene on their behalf, rescue them from their enemies, and through their resurrected prophets and other worthies of ancient time establish his Messianic kingdom throughout the whole earth.

Ezekiel 38:14-23 presents some of the details of this final trouble. The etymology of the names given to Israel's enemies in this prophecy indicates that they are used prophetically to identify nations, particularly of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The prophecy shows that these forces eventually will attack the Jewish people. Agreeing with the prophecy of Joel already quoted, Ezekiel explains that the clouds are the armies of great trouble from these nations which finally will threaten the destruction of the returned Israelites.—vss. 15,16

It will be a time of “shaking,” the prophet explains. (vs. 19) However, the promise is that God will deliver his ancient people, and that through this deliverance the “eyes” of the nations will discern the presence and power of Christ, the new King of earth. (vs. 23) Thus will all eyes discern the presence of Jesus in the thick, dark clouds of trouble. Moreover, the people will become convinced of his majesty and glory through the new kingdom arrangements which will then be put into operation.

This series of events will lead to the opening of the eyes of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. We read, "So will I make my holy name known in the midst of my people Israel; and I will not let them pollute my holy name any more: and the heathen [Gentile nations] shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel." (Ezek. 39:7) This will be merely the first manifestation of the operation of the new world order. From then on, its heavenly and earthly agencies will rapidly calm the storm of human passions, which, by that time, will have brought the people of the whole earth to a state of readiness to enter the kingdom arrangement.

Part 2, in our consideration of this subject, will appear in next month's issue of The Dawn magazine. In it we will examine the work to be accomplished in Christ's kingdom, and its many blessings to all the families of the earth. ■