

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Truth leaves its mark: The Truth of the Lord's Coming

As I am writing these words, the day of the American presidential election is almost upon us. For weeks there have been claims and counter claims as to which candidate will best deal with the economy, crime, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. When these words are being broadcast all the votes will have been cast and you will know the answer. Obviously, the successful candidate will not have had chance to put his ideas in place, but all his promises will have been noted, meaning that he will be held to account by America's electorate. That country, like ours, has many problems that require co-operation with other nations to solve them fully, so that it is most unlikely that instant answers can be found.

A nation's politics is not a usual subject to open a *Truth for Today* broadcast, so I need to explain that today's main theme is the biblical teaching of the coming again of the Lord Jesus. For some, this is a contentious subject leading to long, sometimes acrimonious, argument; for others, it is a 'non event' that doesn't concern them, or affect their lives. It is this latter point that I wish to base my talk upon today.

A purely academic matter, or theological discussion, that does not impinge upon our lives for the better, is not biblical Christianity. Every doctrine that Paul, and the other apostles, recorded in Scripture was meant to have an end result. Attitudes, manners, ethics and church life were all brought under the domination of the risen Lord. Their lives were meant to be lived according to their beliefs, though I am sure that they experienced the moments of doubt and difficulties that we do. No age has been an age when all believers were super-Christians. To emphasise my main point, I repeat, again, that everything I say today must have a practical influence upon our everyday lives.

When an unexpected calamity affects us, we are all apt to say: 'Why did this happen? It is not fair.' We know that the system under which we live is not fair and we become convinced that 'bad things' happen to 'good people' and that 'bad people' often come off best. If we examine Scripture carefully, we will notice that there has always been recognition that injustice and cruelty, to mention but two evils, are constantly in evidence. The Old Testament, especially the Psalms and the Prophets, has many references to an imperfect world.

To illustrate this point, I am going to read Psalm 94:3-7 "LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? And all the workers of iniquity boast themselves? They break in pieces thy people, O LORD, and afflict thine heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless. Yet they say, The LORD shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it." We, in our age, could easily take these thoughts and apply them to society at large.

What, then, is the Psalmist's answer? One answer is found in the same Psalm, verses 14 and 15: "For the LORD will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance. But judgment shall return unto righteousness: and all the upright in heart shall follow it." There are more verses I could have read, but the main thrust is that the writer is relying upon God to bring about the necessary changes in men's hearts, and to put in place a just and righteous regime.

The New Testament declared hope, of the return of the Lord Jesus, is inextricably linked with the establishing of the Old Testament view of the kingdom of God upon earth, when the King will reign in justice and peace. It would not be stretching the truth to say that one of the main themes of the Bible is the setting up of this kingdom, meaning, that a large proportion of Scripture is always looking to the future, when God will act decisively in history. I emphasise that this is not at the expense of God intervening in the ongoing affairs of man. One commentator puts this as: "...the Hebrew faith included a sense of ongoing history. In it, God who continually influenced the course of history is expected to intervene even more directly in the future to accomplish His will and final goal."

We, at *Truth for Today*, believe that this goal is the time when God will display His glory and inaugurate an administration of holiness, among His people, and indeed throughout this world.

This should not mean that we sit idly by, ignoring the state of the world, and of our neighbours. When the traveller was mugged, in the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, we find that the Samaritan's action, in taking care of the injured and robbed man, was commended by the Lord Jesus. He could not possibly have found the robbers, but he did what he could to alleviate the man's condition. Christians should not be complacent in the face of suffering and

injustice. Personally, I don't believe that we are. Prayer is a powerful weapon that ought to be used frequently. Appeals for practical help from missionaries, or aid workers, working at the place of need, have to be answered. We can also get involved in being aware through reading the many newsletters, and informative mail shots, that Christian organisations send out. That, I feel, is sufficient counter against claims that eager expectation of God's intervention leads to, what could be termed, selfish ignorance to the face of an unjust world.

We must now return to the subject under review, and if you have just joined us can I remind you that you are listening to a *Truth for Today* broadcast, where we are discussing the Lord's coming again for His own and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God, a Biblical doctrine of immense importance throughout Scripture.

There is, in Scripture, a sense that God has always ruled in His creation. Owing to shortage of time, one verse will have to suffice as an example; "The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all." That is 103:19. There are many others that could be cited, all giving the same message, that, even now, in our age, God reigns supreme in sovereign authority over the universe. If He did not our prayers would be useless.

There is also a definite strand of teaching that the Kingdom is yet to come. No Christian living in this world, with its wars, crime and disease, could really accept that the kingdom of God has arrived. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:4, tells us that Satan is still active in manipulating events: "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Paul often identifies this present age as evil and ruled over by those who are ignorant of God's purposes. Such verses as 1 Corinthians 2:6 and Galatians 1:4 show us that.

The prophets were waiting for the time when God would rule, not only over the earth, but on the earth. Zephaniah encouraged his people with the thought that: "The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the King of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil anymore." Those words are from Zephaniah 3:15.

This verse illustrates one of the major points that I wish to draw from the biblical concept of the coming again of the Lord Jesus. It is that such a hope contains the knowledge that God has not finished with this world. The teaching of His coming holds much for the believer, as we shall see, yet I am convinced that the thought that God will reign on the earth in righteousness must delight the believer. When it will be we do not know. Scripture plainly teaches, however, that happen it will.

Up to now, I have not really concentrated on the return to this world of the Lord Jesus. Though there is not perfect agreement between Christians on the timetable involved, the fact of His coming again must be a living hope to all believers. We, at *Truth for Today*, claim that the Lord's coming for His own, as described in 1 Thessalonians 4, will precede the setting up of the Kingdom of God, when the Lord Jesus will rule in righteousness. Consequently, everything I say will follow that line of teaching. All I wish to emphasise at this stage is that very point, that all we have discussed regarding the coming age is centred around, and awaits, the coming of the Lord for its fulfilment.

It is beyond argument that the New Testament is full of references to this event. I have been told that one out of every twenty-five of its verses refers to His coming again. Galatians, Philemon and the last two letters of John are the only New Testament works that do not contain a mention. His return will be the consummation of His great victory at the first Easter. His death and resurrection, when the world was judged, and the prince of this world cast out, brought salvation from sin for His people. At the present moment however, His people still suffer and the world is still in rebellion against God. The Scriptures pulsate with the thought that He will come to bring judgment against unrighteousness, and establish a reign of justice and peace.

Perhaps, I ought to mention that the New Testament also contains a strong line of teaching that the kingdom has already begun, in a spiritual sense, through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. This was an immense victory with its destruction of the enemy's power, and I read now Hebrews 2:14-15 "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." That statement makes clear that something tremendous happened through the death and resurrection of the Lord. So, for the believer, the fulfilment of the ages has come, as 1 Corinthians 10:11 puts it.

The prophets foretold that, in a future day, God would initiate a new covenant and pour out His spirit upon man. We Christians should rejoice with great rejoicing that we are the recipients of the new covenant in a spiritual sense and enjoy the poured out blessing of life in the Spirit. For us that new age has dawned, through the actions of God's beloved Son. Obviously, the final revelation, or manifestation, of these truths is still to come, but for us the judgment is past, and eternal life is our present possession. I say, again, "Let us rejoice".

I want now to turn to the coming of the Lord for His own, as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent 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." I have already confirmed that we, in the church, live in the power of the Spirit, freely given when we became followers of Him and, consequently, are eagerly awaiting the personal return of the Lord Jesus, that is outlined for us in the passage I have just read.

This is the blessed hope of the church and ought to be before every believer, though some Christians think little of this teaching, almost rejecting it as impossible to accept in the age of universal education and modern knowledge of the universe. When we think like that we are moving into the region of unbelief. At the very centre of the Christian message is the fact of the incarnation of the Son of God. I say, reverently, that if we have been taught by the Spirit to appreciate that we ought not to have difficulty with other truths associated with Him. If He, who is eternal, could come in flesh at His first advent, why not in glory at His second? God is still God despite mankind's accumulation of knowledge.

I wish, now, to concentrate upon the practical effects of having this truth in our lives. If the New Testament doctrine of the Lord's return does not affect our life and attitude, then we do not really believe in it. If we say we believe in the power of prayer, yet never pray then, it can be claimed that we do not really believe in prayer. Similarly, the Second Advent ought to alter the way we view things, and I shall now consider a few Scriptures that help us to see that. John in 1 John 3:2-3 writes: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."

In verse 3 of that quote the first "him" refers to the Lord, as the Darby translation makes clear, and not to the believer. The Lord Jesus Himself is pure. Indeed there never could be any thought of impurity in Him as He, being God, is unalloyed purity. Consequently, as our meditations rest upon Him, and His coming again for the church, they should be a spur for holy living. Often these two thoughts of the Lord's return and holy living are linked together in Scripture. Titus 2:12-13 states: "Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;" If, when this broadcast is over, you find in your Bible 2 Peter, and read chapter 3 especially verses 10 and 11, you will notice how our manner of life should reflect the fact of His coming.

Allied with these thoughts is that the coming of the Lord will bring perfection for His people. We all must admit that, even as we seek to live righteously and godly lives in the power of the Spirit, we fall short of the full stature of being filled with the fullness of God. It is only at His coming, when the church is lifted into the immediate presence of God, that all saints will know the immensity of the love of God, in Christ, and be perfected, with bodies like unto His body of glory. Meanwhile, we should be living here for Him in the earnest expectation of His return.

When I was younger, I was invited to preach in one of the towns of the midlands area of the UK, known as the Black Country. The invitation also included having a meal before I preached. While I was there I was told about a couple who always kept an envelope containing the week's rent, so that if the Lord came the landlord would have what was owing to him. Such actions might seem quaint to our modern ears, yet they indicate that the couple were living righteously in the light of the Lord's return.

Just a few more Scriptures to add to what I have said and then I must finish. We have read how the apostle John claimed that when the Lord comes we shall be changed, "for we shall see him as he is". In 2 Corinthians, 3:18, Paul writes: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord". He is to be the constant object of our meditations, whether privately or corporately. I know it is said that it is possible to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use, yet I am convinced that without a view of the ascended Christ in His heavenly glory, waiting to receive His saints, then we would not have the New Testament in its full perspective.

Here and now, we are taught to live a life worthy of the calling of God, as we can read in Ephesians 4:1. Perhaps the best summary of the need to live a holy life, in the light of His coming, is found in Colossians 3:1-3 and then verses 9 and 10: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory ... Lie not one to another, seeing that you have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him;"

Time has gone, so I close, first with a verse from a nineteenth century hymn, and then a text:

*“A little while, He'll come again;
Let us the precious hours redeem;
Our only grief to give Him pain,
Our joy to serve and follow Him.
Watching and ready may we be,
As those that wait their Lord to see.”*

The closing text, containing some words of the Lord Himself, is found in Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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