**THE FUNDAMENTALS: A TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH**

**VOLUME 4; CHAPTER 21. THE HOPE OF THE CHURCH**

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There are many indications of a revival of interest in the study of eschatology. The latest attack upon the Christian faith is being directed against the eschatological teaching of the New Testament. The Christian Church was founded upon the promise of a speedy return of Christ to establish His Kingdom in the world, but its history has taken an entirely different course. The expectation of the early Christians was not fulfilled. The teaching of the apostles has been falsified. Such is the argument that is now being used in some quarters to discredit the founders of Christianity. This is compelling Christian scholars to give renewed attention to the teaching of the New Testament about the Lord's second coming, and will doubtless lead to more earnest and thorough examination of the whole outlook of Christ and His apostles upon the future.

It is acknowledged that the eschatology of the New Testament is not the eschatology of the Church today. The hope of the early Christians is not the hope of the average Christian now. It has become our habit to think of the change which comes at death, or our entrance into heaven, as the crowning point in the believer's life, and the proper object of our hope. Yet the apostles never speak of death as something which the Christian should look forward to or prepare for. They do not ignore death altogether, nor do they cast a halo about it. It is always an enemy, the last enemy that is to be destroyed. But they do not take account of it at all in the scheme of things with which we have now to reckon. As a matter of fact the early Christians were taught that they had died already - "Ye died and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3, R.V.).

Nor is heaven set forth as the Christian's hope. The New Testament represents the Church as in heaven already. We have been raised up with Christ and made to sit with Him in the heavenly places. (Eph. 2:6.) Our warfare is carried on against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph. 6:12.) Our citizenship is there. (Phil. 3:20.) Browning's conception of the experience of Lazarus when he came back from the tomb:

"Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,

Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven,"

is almost precisely the apostolic representation of the believer's life upon earth. It is potentially a life in heaven. Neither death nor heaven, then, can be the Church's hope, for, in their essential relation to the Christian life, death lies in the past and heaven in the present.

The conversion of the world is not the object of the Church's hope. It is quite true that this glorious consummation lies in the future, for "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea," but the task of bringing this about was not committed to the Church. On the contrary, the New Testament descriptions of the last days of the Church upon earth preclude the thought. They are depicted in dark colors. (2 Tim. 3:1-5; 2 Pet. 3:1-4.) The history of the preaching of the Gospel in the world should be enough to show that this cannot be the object set before us, for, while whole nations have been evangelized, not a single community has ever been completely converted. It is a striking fact that the apostles had nothing to say about the conversion of the world. While they were busy preaching the Gospel in the world they gave no indication that they expected this work to result at length in the transformation of the world. They were not looking for a change in the world, but for the personal presence of their Lord. Jesus Christ Himself was their hope, and His appearing they intensely loved and longed for.

The attitude of the New Testament Church is represented by the Apostle John in the closing words of the Apocalypse. Visions of heavenly glory and millennial peace have passed before him. He has seen the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness, and the Holy City, New Jerusalem, whose light was like a stone most precious. But, at the end of it all, the longing of the aged apostle is not for these things to come. Greater than all these glories, dearer than all these dear things, is the Master Himself, and the prayer that rises from his heart as he closes his wondrous book is simply, "Come, Lord Jesus."

The hope of the Church, then, is the Personal Return of her Lord. As Dr. David Brown stated it in his book on the Second Advent, sixty years ago, "the Redeemer's second appearing is the very pole-star of the Church." Let us see how this hope lies upon the pages of the New Testament revelation, and how it influenced the life of the New Testament Church.

**1. Christ taught His disciples to expect His return.**

This was the last of the stages through which His teaching about Himself advanced. In the early part of His ministry He seems to have kept His personality in the background; He forbade those whom He healed to tell about Him. Then there came a time when He asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" and led them to think of His divine origin. After that He began to instruct them about His approaching death and resurrection, "His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). In the last days of His ministry His return to the world largely occupied His own thoughts, and He kept it prominently before the minds of His disciples. During His last journey to Jerusalem He foreshadowed His own history in the parable of the nobleman going into a far country to receive a kingdom and return, who left His servants behind with the command, "Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:12, 13). One evening during the last week He sat on the Mount of Olives, looking down no doubt upon the massive buildings of the temple, the total destruction of which He had just foretold. The disciples gathered about Him with the request: "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3). It is evident from the form of this question that His coming was no new thought to them. It was occupying their minds already. They knew that He was coming again, and they wished to know how to recognize the approach of that event. In answer to the question, the Lord unfolded a panorama of intervening history, and emphasized the need of watchfulness because the time of His coming would be uncertain. "Watch therefore, for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh. Therefore be ye also ready, for in an hour that ye think not the Son of Man cometh." He enforced this teaching with two striking illustrations of the twofold kind of preparation needed on the part of the disciples, the inward preparation of spiritual life set forth in the parable of the virgins, and the outward preparation of diligent service in that of the talents. Then He closed His discourse with a graphic picture of the changed conditions in which He would appear when He came the second time as the Son of Man sitting upon the throne of His glory.

Through the sad and dark hours of the very last night His thoughts were occupied with His return. In the upper room, when the faithful little band were grouped about Him in sorrow for the parting which all vaguely felt was near, He began His farewell words to them with this comforting assurance: "Let not your hearts be troubled. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go I will come again" (John 14:1-3). A few hours afterwards He was in the midst of the shameful scenes of His trial. Mark His answer to the high priest, when He calmly acknowledged the claim to be the Christ, the Son of God: "Nevertheless, I say unto you, henceforth ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 24:64). He did not look like the Messiah at that moment as He stood there with bound hands before His accusers. His appearance seemed to belie His words. But the time would come when they would see that His claim was true. This was what was in His thoughts. Through all the shame of those awful hours, the vision of His return in glory to the world that was rejecting Him now shone like a beacon upon His soul; and "for the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame."

At His ascension the same truth was brought again to the minds of the disciples. As they stood gazing in wonder towards the place where the Lord had disappeared, from their view, the two angels were sent to remind them of His return. "This same Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). It was this thought that sent the disciples back to Jerusalem with the joy which Luke describes in the closing verses of his Gospel. It is very clear, therefore, that when Jesus departed from this world after His first coming He left His disciples radiant with the joyful assurance of His coming again.

**2. The apostles taught their converts to wait for the coming of the Lord.**

All the New Testament churches have the expectant attitude. No matter in what part of the world or in what stage of development they are found, they have this characteristic in common. The conversion of the Thessalonians is described as "turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1:9, 10). The Corinthians "come behind in no gift, waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7). To the Galatians Paul writes, "We through the Spirit by faith wait for the hope of righteousness" (Gal. 5:5); and to the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven, whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). In the Epistle to the Hebrews the same attitude is disclosed, for there we read: "Christ also, having been once offered to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time, apart from sin, to them that wait for Him, unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28), It is evident that the early Christians not only looked back to a Saviour who had died for them, but forward to a Saviour who was to come. There were two poles in their conversion. Their faith was anchored in the past in the facts of the death and resurrection of the Lord, and also in the future in the assured hope of His return. It is manifest, therefore, that the second coming of the Saviour occupied a most important place in the Gospel which the apostles preached, and which these Christians received.

**3. The whole life and work of the New Testament Church has the coming of the Lord in view.**

All the lines of her activity and experience lead to this event. The sanctification of the disciple is a preparation for the coming of the Lord. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). John puts the same thing in his own tender way: "And now, little children, abide in Him, that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28). Christian service gets its encouragement in the same inspiring issue. Paul exhorts Timothy to fidelity, charging him to "keep the commandment, without spot, without reproach, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 6:14). And Peter writes to his feilow elders: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, and when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Pet. 5:2, 4). The patience of the early Christians in suffering and trial is bounded by the same event. "Be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (Jas. 5:7, 8). "Let your forbearance be known unto all men, the Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). Their life of fellowship and brotherly love reaches its holy consummation at the Lord's return. "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we also do toward you, to the end He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (1 Thess. 3:12, 13). Their acts of worship, as for example, their observance of the Lord's supper, have the same end in view. "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come" (1 Cor. 11:26). Thus, whatever aspect of the Church's life and work we consider, we find it to be a stream which moves on towards one glorious future The appearing of the Lord Jesus Himself fills the whole horizon.

**4. The New Testament grace of hope rests upon the coming of the Lord.**

This word is emptied today of much of the meaning it had among the early Christians. It has come to be a vague and misty thing, the general habit of expecting things somehow to turn out well. Their hope was no such shallow optimism. It was the light that shone from that one glad coming event, casting its sacred glow over all their lives. Paul sums up the true Christian attitude in these words: "The grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world; looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:11-13).

The word hope was often upon the lips of the apostles. It is used more than a score of times in the epistles in direct connection with the coming of the Lord. It is not unlikely that, even when it is used alone without any qualifying phrase, as in the expressions, "We are saved by hope," "rejoicing in hope," it has the same specific reference. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes frequent use of the word in this way. There was a special reason for this. The Hebrew Christians were a small and despised community, living under the continual influence of that majestic ritual which was still going on in the temple at Jerusalem. The return of Christ was delayed, and there was a strong tendency to slip back into the old ceremonial system. Their patience and hope had need of every encouragement. The writer of the epistle turns their eyes again and again from the shadows of the past to the realities that lay before them. Their Messiah had indeed come to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, but He would come a second time, in glory, with a final and complete salvation. This was the hope set before them to which they had fled for refuge. (Heb. 6:18.) Let them hold fast their boldness and the glorying of their hope firm unto the end. (Heb. 3:6.)

In a beautiful passage in his first epistle, the apostle John points out the practical value of this Christian grace in its essential relation to the coming of the Lord: "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" (1 John 3:2, 3).

**5. Redemption is not complete until the second coming of the Lord.**

The apostles think of salvation in three different ways; sometimes with reference to the past, as a fact already assured at the moment of belief in the Lord Jesus Christ; sometimes with reference to the present, as a process still going on; and sometimes with reference to the future, as an act yet to be accomplished. In this last sense Paul uses the word when he says, "Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11); and Peter also, in the phrase, "kept by the power of God through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). Our Lord refers to the same thing when, after telling the disciples about the signs of His coming, He adds, "When these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). One of the most complete types of the history of redemption is to be found in the ceremonies of the day of atonement. It was an essential part of the work of the high priest on that day that he should come forth from within the veil, and laying aside his linen garments, reappear to bless the waiting congregation. Our great High Priest is now within the veil. He has offered the atoning sacrifice on the altar of Calvary, and with the merit of that sacrifice He has gone in to appear in the presence of God for us. But the great day of atonement is not yet closed. When His work within the veil is ended, He shall come forth, arrayed again in His garments of glory and beauty, for the final blessing of His waiting people. "Having been once offered to bear the sins of many, He shall appear a second time, apart from sin, to them that wait for Him, unto salvation."

Think of what this crowning act of redemption will mean for the Redeemer Himself, when, attended with heavenly glory, He prepares to descend to the very world that witnessed His suffering, sorrow, and shame. What will it mean to Him when the multitudes of the redeemed gather about Him, and at last He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied? Is it not reasonable that there should be such a manifestation of the Redeemer to the world? Is it reasonable that the despised Man of Nazareth should be the only view the world should have of Him Who is to be the Heir of all things? Is it likely that God would allow His Son's retirement from the world in apparent defeat without any subsequent vindication? If the prophetic vision of the suffering Servant had an actual personal fulfillment, surely the prophetic vision of the conquering King will also have a personal fulfillment. As the world was astonished at Him when He came the first time, because "His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men," so it will be astonished when He comes a second time, and the prophet's vision breaks upon its view: "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this that is glorious in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength?" (Isa. 63:1.)

And what will it mean for the redeemed? There will be, of course, the happy reunion of all the saints when the dead are raised and the living are changed, for, when the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, "the dead in Christ shall rise first, and we that are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." But glorious as these things are, they are only preliminary steps to a higher and holier bliss. The climax of redemption will be the manifested union of the Church with her Lord in the marriage of the Lamb. For then the Bridegroom shall come to claim His Bride, and take her to share His glory and His throne. Then the Church that Christ loved and purchased shall be presented to Him a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Then the astonished world, beholding her transformation, shall cry, "Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness leaning on her Beloved?" Think of what it will mean when, after sharing His humiliation in the midst of a scoffing and unbelieving world, the redeemed Church is exalted to His side, and, as the consort of the King of kings and Lord of lords, stands "all rapture through and through in God's most holy sight." Nothing less than this is the destiny that awaits the Church of Jesus Christ.

If the Lord committed to His disciples the promise of His personal return, and if it occupied so large a place in the lives of the early Christians, surely it is unfair to banish it from the Church today. It is unfair to the world, for this truth is part of the Gospel which should be delivered to the world. It is unfair to the Church, for it deprives the people of Christ of one of the most powerful motives for spiritual life and service. It is unfair to Christ Himself, for it obscures the reality of His personal presence within the heavenly veil and substitutes for it the thin air of a mere spiritual influence.

The hope of the second coming of our Lord has an important bearing upon Christian life and doctrine. It has a vital relation especially to some points of our faith which are being attacked or obscured by the subtle tendencies of modern thought.

**1.** It is bound up with belief in the supreme and infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures. It would never be adopted on rationalistic grounds. Those who receive it rest their belief wholly on the authority of Scripture, believing that therein God has spoken in a way that can be trusted. They accept the Bible as the record of God's revelation to man, and believe that in prophecy He has disclosed His purpose concerning the future of the world. It is a protest against the tendency within the Church to exalt the human reason above the Word of God, and to reduce inspired prophecy to the level of merely human foresight.

**2.** It bears testimony to the presence of God in human history. The tendency of our times is to explain away the supernatural element in history whether in the past, the present, or the future. To this tendency those who accept the doctrine of the second coming refuse to yield. The history of the world is controlled by God; His hand is on the affairs of men. In the person of Jesus Christ He has already supernaturally intervened in the course of human history. It is believed, on the authority of His Word, that He will supernaturally intervene again. The first coming of Christ was a descent of God into the life of the human race. The Scriptures teach us to expect another divine descent, not to bring history to a close, but to introduce new forces and to inaugurate a new dispensation.

**3.** It exalts the divine person and work of the incarnate Son of Cod. It is in direct opposition to the Unitarian tendencies which pervade so large a part of modern religious thought. It holds the truth of the Lord's continued existence in a glorified body, and regards this fact as of primary importance and of prophetic significance. The personal existence of the risen Son of Man is not to be dissolved away into a mere general spiritual presence. The risen and ascended Redeemer exists today in heaven in the true reality of His glorified humanity: and "this same Jesus," it is believed, shall be revealed one day in His glorious personality from behind the unseen veil, to carry on the redemption of the world to its full completion.

**4.** It takes due account of the fall of the human race. The tendency today is greatly to exalt man and to ignore the fact of the fall. The great advance that is being made in every department of human knowledge and activity predisposes men to form the highest conceptions of the possibilities of the race. The theory of evolution, which dominates modern thinking, leads men to expect a gradual perfecting of the race under the laws of its own being, which will issue at last, with the beneficent aid of Christianity, in a perfect state of human society and the redemption of the race as a whole. But human sin is too deep-rooted and too widespread for the attainment of this end in the present order of things, even with the aid of existing spiritual agencies. It is acknowledged to be the teaching of Scripture that, even with the aid of divine grace, the triumph of the kingdom of God in the individual is not complete in the present order, but only at his translation to a higher order at the resurrection. It would seem that the analogy should hold as regards the race, and that the triumph of the kingdom in the race as an organic unity will be brought about only by a supernatural intervention of divine power and the introduction of humanity into a new order of things.

**5.** It presents a sublime view of God's great purpose in His creation. It places the redemption of the whole world, the restoration of all things, in the very forefront of the divine purpose regarding fallen man. Everything has been arranged and foreordained by God to this end. This is the divine event to which the whole creation moves. He who has this hope has a large vision, a vision not limited to the present day and its affairs. He sees the will of God moving on through the history of the ages. The present age is but preparatory. A grander age is to be ushered in by the advent of the victorious Redeemer, an age in which man shall come to his own at last, and creation shall be restored to its harmony, under its true Head, the glorified Son of Man.

**6.** It provides the most inspiring motive for Christian life and service. It is a supremely practical hope. The repeated instructions of the Lord and His apostles to be ready for His return indicate the force this doctrine had as a motive in the lives of the early Christians. The great leaders who have left their impress on the history of the Church did not discard this doctrine, but made it a real hope in their own lives. Martin Luther, in the midst of the throes of the Reformation, wrote, "I ardently hope that, amidst these internal dissensions on the earth, Jesus Christ will hasten the day of His coming." The acute and learned Calvin saw that this was the Church's true hope. "We must hunger after Christ," he said, "till the dawning of that great day when our Lord will fully manifest the glory of His kingdom. The whole family of the faithful will keep in view that day." The intrepid soul of John Knox was nerved by this hope. In a letter to his friends in England he wrote: "Has not the Lord Jesus, in despite of Satan's malice, carried up our flesh into heaven? And shall He not return? We know that He shall return, and that with expedition." John Wesley believed this same truth, as is shown by his comment on the closing verses of Revelation: "The spirit of adoption in the bride in the heart of every true believer says, with earnest desire and expectation, 'Come and accomplish all the words of this prophecy.'" It formed the burden of Milton's sublime supplication: "Come forth out of Thy royal chambers, O Prince of all the kings of the earth; put on the visible robes of Thy imperial majesty: take up that unlimited scepter which Thy Almighty Father hath bequeathed Thee. For now the voice of Thy bride calls Thee, and all creatures sigh to be renewed." It was the ardent longing of the seraphic Rutherford: "Oh, that Christ would remove the covering, draw aside the curtains of time, and come down. Oh, that the shadows and the night were gone." It was the prayer of Richard Baxter in the "Saints' Everlasting Rest:" "Hasten, O my Saviour, the time of Thy return. Send forth Thine angels and let that dreadful, joyful trumpet sound. Thy desolate Bride saith come. The whole creation saith come. Even so, come, Lord Jesus." And if we would follow in the steps of these men, we will return to the simple, unmistakable New Testament type of experience, and, with faces uplifted towards the veil, within which the Lord of glory waits, and with hearts all aglow with a personal love for Him, we will carry on through all our life and service the same apostolic prayer.