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Will Christ Come Again?

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Those "earnest Bible-searchers," the Russellites, had confidently fixed upon the fall of 1925 as the time of the coming of the heavenly kingdom. ("Millions of men now living will never die.") While they are collecting their shattered wits and gathering sufficient audacity for a new prophetic escapade, Christians will all the more earnestly search their Bible for real information regarding the great event to which they are taught to look forward.

The daring predictions of millenarians, when demolished by the course of events, have always hurled many who had accepted them as genuine into rank unbelief. That is happening again since the uneventful close of the fall of 1925. The army of credulous dupes who first "believed" too much now refuse to believe anything. They were eager to accept anything upon the authority of a man's word. Now that they are undeceived, they decline acceptance of the facts about the Lord's return, for which there is ample guaranty in the Word of God. The host of infidel worldlings, moreover, who are habitually heaping scorn upon the idea of the Second Advent of Christ are pointing with unholy glee to the Russellite prophecy for the fall of 1925 and exclaim: "Didn't we tell you you were going to be fooled! Out upon all your Bible trash!" It is too pathetic a spectacle. The Christian pastors whom Mr. Rutherford, prior to the fall of 1925, haughtily lectured on their skepticism should now rivet the responsibility for the increase of infidelity on him. And when Russellites launch their next slogan, it should be met with the counter-slogan: "Thousands of men now living who accept Russellism will turn infidels."

Scripture warns against a twofold error to which men are liable in connection with the Second Coming of the Lord. On the one hand, it declares that the date of Christ's return will never be known in advance, either in the world of created spirits or in the world of men. Matt. 24, 36. Even the Son of Man in His

State of Humiliation, when He had for a season voluntarily laid aside the plenary use of the divine omniscience communicated to His human nature, truthfully declared that He did not "know of that day and that hour." Mark 13, 32. This statement of Jesus, which has perplexed the Church since the days of Arius, exhibits the reality of our Lord's self-abasement and opens up a depth of His exinanition which human reason cannot fathom, just as little as it can comprehend the first appearing of the Son of God in the flesh, which Paul declares a "mystery." 1 Tim. 3, 16.1)

Forgetful of the Lord's warning, Christians as early as in the postapostolic age began to figure out the date of the Lord's Second Coming. The writers of that age, and, indeed, of subsequent ages down to our own time, have often operated with a chronological scheme which regards the seven days of creation-week as prophetic of the duration of the world, each day of that week being figured

1) BENDEL *ad* Mark 13, 32: "Both in His twelfth year and subsequently *Jesus increased in wisdom*; and what He then gained He had not had before. Since this was not unworthy of Him, not even His teaching necessitated, at that time, a knowledge of the one secret reserved to the Father. Moreover, the assertion is not to be taken absolutely (comp. John 16, 15), but in reference to Christ's human nature, which, however, is implied throughout this passage, where there is a climax, which sets Him even as man above the angels. It is also to be referred to His State of Humiliation, whence His different language after the resurrection (see notes, Acts, 1, 7). In short, assuming both the human nature and the State of Humiliation with respect to Christ's office, He may be understood to say explicitly that He knows not because He had no instructions to declare that day, and to deter His disciples from seeking to know it. An apostle could both know and not know the same thing, from a different point of view (see note, Phil. 1, 25); how much more Christ! There is a wonderful variety in the emotions of Christ's soul. He had at times such a consciousness of dignity that He seemed scarcely to remember that He was a man walking on the earth; at times, such a sense of humiliation as to seem almost to have forgotten that He was the Lord from heaven. And He was wont always to express Himself according to His feeling at the time: now, as one with the Father; then, as if He were only in the same condition with all holy men. Often these two are blended in wonderful variety. He speaks most humbly in this passage and thereby modifies the sense of His glory, which His discourse on the Judgment induced. You may say, Why is He in this passage called *the Son*, a title not taken from His human nature? The answer is: In declarations concerning the Savior the name indicating His glory is commonly qualified by a fact implying His humiliation, and conversely: Matt. 26, 28; John 1, 51; 3, 13; Matt. 21, 3; 1 Cor. 2, 8; moreover, in this passage *the Son* is antithetic to *the Father*."

as equal to a thousand years. This view is found in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, 15, and is followed by a number of patristic writers. They reasoned — how, I do not know — that the incarnation had occurred during the last thousand-year period, and Christ's return would happen at the close of that period. Accordingly, Lactantius believed that in his time the world had still two hundred years to run; Hippolytus thought it would last fifty years longer. Others worked with the *Sibylline Oracles*, VIII, 148, as their starting-point. This mysterious document had foretold the end of the Roman Empire. By computing the numerical value of the letters in *Ρώμη*, as equal to 948, the conclusion was arrived at that the end would come A. D. 195. By a different mystical theory which he propounded in His *City of God*, XX, 6 f., Augustine gave rise to the view that the end would come A. D. 1000. Eschatological time-fixing, thus, has been attempted in all ages, and it has, just as in later times, down to our age been a confused and contradictory process, not worthy of a serious mind. Watch any one who predicts the Second Advent of the Lord, and you will find that his effort will turn out an involuntary corroboration of Matt. 24, 36 and kindred texts.

On the other hand, Scripture warns men not to commit another folly, namely, to argue from the delay of Christ's coming that He will not come at all or not soon. The first argument is quite elaborately treated in the concluding chapter of Second Peter, one of the greatest eschatological *excursus* in the apostolic portion of the New Testament, both because of its wealth of information and of its great moral applications. But also the second erroneous idea, that the return of the Lord is not imminent, is repelled in this passage. It is a fine pastoral talk which Peter is delivering to believers among whom the apostles of the Lord had been laboring. They all had told the Christians of the coming *parousia* of the Lord, and all that he himself wants to do is to remind them of what they already knew and believed. Particularly on one point would he refresh their memory: the antediluvian scoffers who had harassed the mind of righteous Noah while he was preparing for the Flood, which also had been predicted, will reappear before the Second Advent of the Lord. From the ranks of Libertinism they will come; they will be men who have renounced obedience to the rule of God's Word and — as is always the consequence — have abandoned themselves to think and speak and do as they please. The Lord had pointed to this sad phenomenon in His eschatological

discourses, Matt. 24, 37 f., and all his apostles repeated His warning to their hearers. The very denial of the Second Coming of Christ is thus a premonitory sign of the event. In other words, according to the Scripture account the event cannot occur unless there is first a plain and public denial of it. The infidel scoffers are unwittingly hastening the day of the Lord's return. Luther observed Frenchmen and Italians in his day who were helping to fulfil this scripture. Since then, through the age of rationalism, their voice has gained volume, and in our materialistic age the current opinion is cismundane. The bulk of mankind is settling down to the belief that eschatological beliefs are mythological notions dating back to the superstitious age of folk-lore and animism, when man had not yet evolved unto the present advanced position that is slandered upon him. The intelligence of the rude past, then, must, by the very testimony of advanced modern thought, have been closer to what Scripture clearly teaches than the godless enlightenment of the present age. The modern progress of man, accordingly, is a progress away from God and His Word. And that is one of the divinely authenticated criteria of the time when the Second Advent of the Lord is to be expected.

Strange as it may sound, twentieth century scoffing is an aid to faith. The Lord makes the wrath of men redound to His praise and to the believers' encouragement. The increasing power of infidelity retroacts toward an increase of the clearness and intensity of the believers' faith. Men who deny the Second Coming of Christ are living proofs of the truth of the Bible. This helps us to understand those words in the Epilog of the Revelation of St. John (chap. 22, 11): "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still." These words follow immediately upon the declaration: "The time is at hand." They are a parenetic conclusion which the apostle draws from his preceding teaching: Let each side, the believers and the unbelievers, continue to display the characteristics of its attitude toward the coming of the Lord. As unbelief is bold, so let faith be; as the former grows bolder, so let the latter become ever bolder. As the end approaches, the spiritual contrasts among men must stand out in ever stronger and clearer outlines. The final and irreparable cleavage that will be completed before the throne of the Judge of all the earth is beginning here. The last times must be marked, not only by most

shocking blasphemies, but also by astonishing heroisms of faithful confessors.²⁾

In one respect the scoffers against whom Peter warns Christians differed from the modern materialists of the *Kraft-und-Stoff* type: they pointed to the continuity of all things "*from the beginning of the creation.*" They still admitted a creation, which the advanced materialists of our age do not admit. The scoffers whom Peter sees coming seem to indulge the notion that the visible universe was stocked with abundant resources to support forms of life and was given a start that will keep it a-going forever. Changes may occur that affect the outward aspect of created things, but there will be no end.

Against these scoffers, Peter asks Christians to bear in mind two things: 1. the fact of the Deluge, which he plainly regards, not as a partial, but as a universal catastrophe. It came in accordance with the divine prediction and routed all infidel assertions that were set up against it. Men were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, utterly unconcerned about the end. When they were quite sure in their own minds that there would be no end, the end came. So it will be again before the return of Christ. The only difference will be that, while in the first catastrophe God used water as the destroying agency, at the second and final catastrophe He will employ fire. 2. The Deluge came "by the word of God," that is, because He bade it come. The same almighty fiat that spoke things into existence wiped them out of existence. Also in His destructive acts God speaks, and it is done. The end of the world will not come by physical necessity. For the purpose of throwing light on eschatological subjects, it is useless for economists to figure out how long the coal supply of the world or its oil and rubber resources will last, at what rate arable lands will be turned into desert wastes due to deforestation, what effect the lowering of the water-levels and

2) De Wette, Ebrard, Kienlen, Duesterdieck, Alford, and others see in the summons to the wrong-doers to continue in their godless course, and thus hasten their sure ruin, the figure of irony and point to Ezek. 3, 27; 20, 39; Matt. 26, 45 as parallels. I do not see the necessity of this, and I think Luther brings out the scope of this passage fully thus: "Just as those who are practising the works of unbelief are ever increasing in unbelief and by their daily practise are strengthening sin, so faith is increased and improved in those who are practising godliness and Christian works, whence they may conclude with certainty that they belong to the Church." (I, 1124.)

the evaporation of water will have on life, how the overpopulation of the earth will speed the exhaustion of its resources, etc. The antediluvian world could have lasted much longer, as far as its existence depended on its resources. At the Second Coming of Christ men will be working their fields, grinding at their mills, armies will be mobilized for expensive war enterprises, men will be engaged in their ordinary pursuits, and while there will be prodigious and progressive misery, there will be no sign of the exhaustion of vital forces. The consummation of the universe is not a scientific apothegm, but an article of faith. With Christians, moreover, it is a subject of prayer, and the Christian Bible closes with a prayer of that kind.

The end of the world and the Second Advent of Christ coincide in point of time. It was by the scoffing concerning "the promise of His coming" that Peter was led to address this warning to the Christians of his time. For it appears that the argument of the scoffers was beginning to affect orthodox belief. The persons whom the apostle begins to address in v. 8 are no longer the scoffers to whom he referred in v. 3. The latter had fully settled in their minds that there would be no Second Coming of the Lord at all. But there were some (*τινές*) in the Christian congregations who were perplexed because the Lord's return did not occur as speedily as they were expecting it. Accordingly, they were, either secretly or openly, charging God with tardiness. In the exegesis of this passage, I think, the force of *βραδύνειν* is of importance. Gerhard has called attention to this circumstance: *Discrimen est inter tardare et differre; is demum tardat, qui ultra debitum tempus, quod agendum est, differt.* The verb cannot mean simply "to delay," "to put off"; for that is what God is actually doing. If Christians could have had their way about the Lord's return, that event would have taken place long ago. But just as in their ordinary prayers, so in this particular matter, God, by giving Christians the promise of the Second Advent of the Lord, has not surrendered Himself to the fancies of His believers. Both the promise and the fulfilment of the promise are acts of His sovereign choice. As no human being could have dictated to God that He should make the promise, so no mortal can dictate the fulfilment of the promise. Both the promise and the fulfilment of the promise must remain purely matters of faith. Genuine faith never has any trouble with the question of the fulfilment of God's promises: to the believer the promises are always yea in Him and Amen in Him. He does not worry about them. They

are eternally settled to him. It is only when something that is not of faith, namely, impatience, which is a form of selfishness and is of the flesh, begins to handle the promises of God that the trouble begins. Then God is charged with slackness, with undue procrastination, with indifference. He is being distrusted and murmured against. His promise may be discarded.

This would not be an unusual situation in the Church. Habakkuk (chap. 2, 3) and Sirach (Eccclus. 35, 18) faced it in their day. It may have been the situation among many of the nominal members of the Old Testament Church prior to the First Advent of the Lord; for among the characteristics of Simon, Luke has noted this in particular, that he was "waiting for the Consolation of Israel." Again and again the spokesmen of God have had to reassure His people: "He will not tarry," "He is not slack," as Peter in this passage does, wording the reassurance quite emphatically: *οὐ βραδύνει κύριος*. (Comp. Heb. 10, 37.)

Two arguments are adduced by the apostle to ward off the thought that the Lord Himself was going back on His promise. In the first place, the Christians are reminded of a fact that is really self-evident: the relation of God to time is not the same as our relation. (Comp. THEOL. MONTHLY, IV, 1 f.) The apostle quotes Ps. 90, 4; but his quotation is really a paraphrase and expansion of what Moses had said. Moses had expressed the timelessness of God; Peter brings out that "God's *reckoning* of time which He created along with the world . . . is different from that of man." (Meyer *ad loc.*) "With God," that is, in God's way of looking at things, the happening or not happening of a certain event assumes a different aspect. "Since time has a different value in God's eyes from that which it has in the eyes of men, the tarrying hitherto of the Judgment, although it had been predicted as *at hand*, is no proof that the Judgment will not actually come." (*Ibid.*)³

3) BENDEL: *One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*, Ps. 90, 4. Sept.: *For a thousand years, O Lord, are in Thy sight as yesterday, which is gone, and as a watch in the night*. The preceding words have this force: Thou art our Refuge, eternal God; and not we ourselves, frail men. The reason is, *For a thousand years, etc.* Moses describes God's eternity somewhat more absolutely; Peter, in its relation to the Last Day and to men looking for this, so that His eternity itself is denoted, by which, in essence and in operation, He wonderfully exceeds all measure of time; and His divine knowledge is also included, to which all future things are present; and His power, which does not require long delays to complete its work; and His long-suffering, free from all impatient expectation and eager haste. *With*

“The fathers that fell asleep” are referred to in this passage. It is pertinent, therefore, to cite Luther, who points out that the departed saints, in a way, share God’s view of time: “This life and yonder life are of two kinds. This life cannot be yonder life because no one can attain to yonder life except by death, that is, by the cessation of the present life. Now, this life consists of eating, drinking, sleeping, digesting, begetting children, etc. All these things take place in numerical order, hours, days, years following one after the other. If you want to view yonder life, you must put the course of the present life entirely out of your mind; you must not imagine that you will be able to figure it out; for yonder all will be one day, one hour, one lifting of the eyelash. Now, then, since in God’s view there is no reckoning of time, a thousand years with Him must be as one day. Therefore the first man, Adam, is as near to Him as the last man who will be born before Judgment Day. . . . By our reason we cannot view time in any other way than by measuring its extent. We must begin counting from Adam, one year after the other, until the Last Day. But before God everything is massed: what is long in our view is short in His, and conversely. For with Him there is no measuring nor numbering. Thus, man dies; his body is buried and decays, lying in the ground, and being altogether unconscious. But when the first man will rise on the Last Day, he will imagine that he had been lying dead hardly an hour. He will look about him and observe that so many people have descended from him of whom he knew nothing.” (9, 1393 f.)

the Lord one day is as a thousand years (Peter adds this to the saying of Moses); that is, He is equally, blessed in one day, or in one moment, or in a thousand years and a whole age; He can perform the work of a thousand years in one day. Wherefore in the next verse it is added: *He is not slack*. It is always in *His* power to fulfil His *promise*. And *a thousand years are as one day* (thus Peter, while in this clause he echoes the former one and accommodates both to the subject in hand, appropriately varies Moses’ words); that is, no delay happens which is long to God.—Meyer-Huther: The following thoughts are not expressed here, although they may be inferred from what is said: “In one single day of judgment God can punish the sin of centuries and can adjust that great inequality which, by so long a duration, has been introduced into eternity” (Dietlein); and “in *one* day a mighty step onward may be taken, such as in a thousand years could hardly have been expected; and then again, if retarded by the will of God, the march of development will, for a thousand years, hardly move faster than otherwise it would have done in a *single* day” (Thiersch), p. 107).

In the second place, the apostle points out that the Second Coming of the Lord must always be studied in connection with God's economy of grace, or plan of salvation. The apostle appeals to the universality of divine grace. There are sinners in the world yet that must be led to repentance and faith. The ninety and nine are in the fold of the reclaimed, but there is still one stray sheep after which the Shepherd must go. No man can know how many efforts God must make to bring about the conversion of an individual. Even in his own case no Christian can compute the number of these efforts. The conversion of sinners is not after the piecework method in a Ford factory, where just so many machines are finished per day, and where they have actually begun to figure out how many years it will take before every man in the world will be equipped with a machine.

Peter's appeal to the long-suffering of God has a very personal point: he applies it to the very readers of his epistle. They had needed it in times past. What if the Lord had cut short their time of grace before His good work had ever been begun in them? Would they not have charged the Lord with undue haste, as they are now charging Him with undue slackness? Must they not love their unconverted brethren as much as they love themselves? But they are still in need of the long-suffering of God; He must perfect the good work that was begun in them. They talk about the unreadiness and slackness of the Lord as if they themselves were fully ready. God knows them better than they know themselves. The slackness of God of which they are complaining may be a great good fortune. If their faith has not yet learned to wait and abide the Lord's time, it needs more exercising. Endurance unto the end is the mark of victorious faith. Matt. 24, 13.

In His own eschatological discourses the Lord had pointed to the soteriological connection which Peter indicates. "This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come." Matt. 24, 14. Also the negative results of the Gospel ministry have been considered in the divine prearrangements for the Lord's return. Christians have never been given the right to study eschatology apart from soteriology. If they have done so, they have not been wise.

Spite of all blasted predictions of false teachers, spite of the disappointed carnal hopes and longings of His believers, Christ will come again and not delay His second visible advent one minute beyond the due time.