

AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

That which is good, everyone desires to obtain quickly. The second appearing of the Lord from heaven involves the coming of every good that it is possible for the heart of man to conceive, and good that it is not possible for the heart of man to conceive. Therefore those who are “*looking for him*” and “*love his appearing*,” join naturally in the prayer of John,

“Lord Jesus, come quickly.”

We have before us this morning a part of the letters of our beloved brother Paul, which brings this matter before us in a specially interesting and instructive form. To the Thessalonians he had written concerning the dead brethren. The consolation was that the dead would lose nothing by falling asleep, but that on the contrary, they would be the first to be regarded by the Lord at his coming, when together with the living, they would be glorified in his presence.

“Wherefore,” says he, *“comfort one another with these words.”*

And comforting words they were. But the question of the time for this glorious release naturally came up; as if the brethren had said, “we rejoice in the consolation—but oh! When will it come?” Paul’s answer is,

“But of the times and the seasons ye have no need that I write unto you.”

In this, there was probably a deeper meaning than Paul himself was aware of, for as with the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11), so, doubtless, with the apostles, the Spirit gave them utterance of things of which they did not apprehend the full import. There was a special sense in which the brethren had no need to be informed on the question of times and seasons. There was the sense expressed by Christ himself when, on the same subject, he said to the apostles,

“It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:7).

It was not for them: it would have been of no use to them. It would have been worse than of no use: it would have burdened and perhaps discouraged them, to know that nearly two thousand years lay between them and the glory to be revealed.

The reason, however, Paul gives for there being no need why he should write to them on the subject of times and seasons, is the state of their knowledge on certain features of the case.

“Yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.”

That is, when the time should arrive for the coming of this day of the Lord, which should be characterised by the resurrection of the dead as well as judgment upon the ungodly, it would come unexpectedly; it would come as a thief comes—the very phrase used by Jesus himself concerning his coming under the sixth vial:

“Behold, I come as a thief” (Rev. 16:15).

To use another expression of his (Luke 21:35) “*as a snare*,” it would come. A creature taken in a snare is taken unexpectedly; it is unaware of the very existence of the snare a moment before. One moment it is free, thinking only of the question of food; the next, it is in a trap, from which there is no escape. The idea of unlooked-for suddenness is, therefore, associated with the arrival of the day of God. The same idea is conveyed by the phrase “*as a thief*.” The thief steals into the house without notice; nothing is more foreign to the thoughts of the inmates. If they had any idea of a visit from a thief, they would be on the watch and not suffer the house to be broken into; but any token of his approach is the last thing a thief allows.

Upon whom, however, is it that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night? Is it upon the brethren of Christ? By no means. They are of those of whom Jesus, in connection with the very intimation of his thief like coming, says:

*“Blessed is he that **watcheth**.”*

Paul expressly says, in the chapter under consideration (1 Thess. 5:4),

“Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.”

It is to *“them that look for him”* that Jesus *“appears the second time, without sin, unto salvation”* (Heb. 9:28). Not upon the brethren of Christ, then, but upon the world at large, the day of the Lord, will come as a thief in the night.

It is profitable for us to remember this. We see the world busy from year to year, with its public and private affairs, conducted with an air of vast importance. They follow pleasure and minister to their own glory, and neglect God, apparently with perfect impunity. The things of God figure very small in the presence of their pomp and their display. Nothing appears so absolutely trashy as the hope of Israel, and nothing so ignoble as a stickling for the commandments and ordinances of God. In such a situation, we are apt to be victimised by the impressions of the moment. We are apt to doubt our own reading of the word. We are liable, almost unconsciously, to feel as if there must be something wrong in an attitude which all the world despises; in a view of things which all the world repudiates with scorn; in expectations which even the learned, and the wise and renowned, dismiss as the raw conceptions of half-enlightenment, or something worse. The slow, constant action on the mind of this spectacle of unbelief or indifference on the part of Society at large—rich and poor, great and small, learned and ignorant, cultivated and ill-bred—to the most glorious facts of the gospel, is in danger of benumbing us, and making us feel, contrary to the facts and the evidence, that there is something wrong in our position. It is profitable to remember that the Spirit of God has forewarned us, that the approach of the day of the Lord would find the world in this state: that the day would come upon them as a thief, and would bring sudden destruction upon them.

It may be wondered how the day of the Lord can be said to come as a thief, seeing that its approach has been so long proclaimed beforehand, and seeing there are so many signs of it recognisable in the public affairs of the world. The wonder will cease if it be remembered that it is only to those who are indifferent to that proclamation and ignorant of those signs, that it is said to come as a thief. To those who believe and watch, we have already seen, it will not come as a thief, but rather as an expected and much desired friend. Why cannot the world see the signs? Because those signs are communicated in a form that can only be apprehended by childlike and patient persevering study. It was said to Daniel, concerning them:

“The wise shall understand, but none of the wicked shall understand” (Dan. 12:10).

The same idea was indicated to John, in the words:

“Here is wisdom: let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast” (Rev. 13:18).

Now, the world lacks the very beginning of wisdom, the fear of God; and, therefore, can never obtain access to secrets accessible only to a state of mind of which that fear is the very first characteristic. The world aims at its own gratification and glory; and, therefore the secrets of God are hid from it.

“His secret is with the righteous.”

“The scorner seeketh wisdom,” we are told, *“and findeth it not: but knowledge is easy to him that understandeth”*

(Prov. 14:6).

Another reason why the world cannot see the signs, or, rather, another aspect of the same reason, is that the signs themselves, when understood, are so gradual in their development that it requires the patience of a loving and affectionate watch to be able to discern them. They do not flash like a rocket before our vision: they are not like the flaming meteor, rushing across the sky, and

dazzling all our eyes by its brightness; they are not even like the slow-moving comet, spread out in the heavens in definite and luminous form. They rather resemble the stately and unsensational movements of the starry universe, from which the dates of eclipses are deduced. They are movements in the political heavens correspondent with the indications of the prophetic word, telling us of the approach, not of an eclipse, but of a sunrising which is to bring healing to the world. The scoffer cannot discern these movements, even though he may be acquainted with the facts of which they consist. He laughs at the expectation of the saint, and says,

“Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

They join with the scoffers of ancient days in Israel (for such there were), who said,

“Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it” (Isa. 5:19).

The day that is coming will justify the faith and hope of the righteous, and overwhelm the despisers of the word with consternation.

Paul’s words teach us that “*peace and safety*” will be the cry to the last, and that the actual arrival of the day of the Lord will find the people with these words in their mouth. This is also very useful to know. It helps us to endure the placid indifference and absolute stolidity with which the whole subject of the purpose of God is regarded in the earth. The signs indicative of the approach of the day of the Lord are abroad. Yet the people say, “Oh, there have always been wars.” You point to the Eastern Question and its terrible complications; and they say, “Oh, it will be settled by and by. This Eastern Question: this Roman question: all these questions will be arranged in due course of politics—without war perhaps—after war, certainly. They are mere matters of difference between nations, such as there have always been, which will be settled somehow, as time rolls on, without interfering greatly with the general stability of human affairs. Peace and safety are the rule: war the exception: and war only affects a few after all.” To have the Word of God smothered under bushels of easy-going unbelieving talk of this sort is trying in more ways than one; but it will be less trying if we remember that it is revealed that “*peace and safety*” is to be the pleasant speech which men will ring in each other’s ears up to the very crisis of that appointed “*sudden destruction*” which will change the face of the world.

This “*sudden destruction*” comprehends a great deal. It comprises all the details of the terrible convulsion by which the present system of things is to be overthrown in judgment, and a new heaven and new earth established wherein dwelleth righteousness. These details will be terrible beyond all human experience. The languid interest with which people regard the sure word of prophecy will undergo a wonderful change when they come to pass. There will be a fearful anxiety to understand when the judgments of God begin to reverberate throughout the world. The cry of “*peace and safety*” will cease when destruction walks at noon-day, and myriads perish by the wrath of David’s Son, which, kindled but a little, will be terrible to those who, with the Bible in their hands, know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must remember that it is not war merely that will press home upon the world the fact that “the hour of His judgment is come.” War is an element, but it is the war of the great day of God Almighty, who brings into play means and agencies of destruction unknown to what we may call merely providential wars—wars in which God makes use of one nation against another nation, in a perfectly natural war. The power put forth in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt illustrates the nature of the judgments by which, in addition to war, the inhabitants of the earth will be taught righteousness. Egypt, destroyed by a succession of supernatural visitations, may be taken to represent the world in the crisis when it is to be “*dashed to pieces like a potter’s vessel*.” We are justified in entertaining this view from the fact testified, that when the Lord goes forth to fight against those nations, He is to fight against them “*as when he fought in the day of battle*” (Zech. 14:3). This historic allusion is identified with the Egyptian deliverance in the words of Micah:

“According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I show unto him (Israel) marvellous things. The nations shall see and be confounded at all their might.”

When we refer to the account of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, what do we find? We find that not only did Israel fight as an instrumental means in the case, but that God wrought visibly and powerfully with them,

*“The Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them (the Amorites) unto Azekah, and they died: **they were more which died with hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword**” (Joshua 10:11).*

Can we forget, also, the dividing of the Red Sea to let Israel through, in which same divided sea, returning to her strength, the Egyptians found their grave? Can we forget the earth opening her mouth and engulfing the rebellious company of Korah? the flashing forth of fire in the consumption of their sympathisers in the congregation? or the attack on the camp by fiery serpents—the messengers of Yahweh’s anger? Can we forget the dividing of the Jordan, or the downfall of the walls of Jericho before the innocent blast of rams’ horns? No marvel that the nations of Canaan fainted in their hearts at the report of the onward march of this terribly formidable foe. These wonderful works are to be repeated in the earth on a larger scale. Israel is Yahweh’s battle-axe and weapons of war with which He will break in pieces the nations and destroy kingdoms in the day of His anger (Jer. 51:20). Their leader is Emmanuel—the child born, the son given, the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father—because of which, the war waged by Israel against the nations, will be distinguished from all ordinary wars. So it is written:

*“Every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood: **but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.** For unto us a child is born,” etc. (Isa. 9:5).*

The angels, inferior to Jesus, were able to overwhelm Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone out of heaven. He is to be *“revealed from heaven . . . in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power, when he shall come,”* etc. (2 Thess. 1:7-9). The very first blow is marked by the employment of supernatural atmospheric means of destruction:

“I will plead against him with pestilence and with blood; and I will rain upon him, and upon his bands, and upon the many people that are with him, an overflowing rain, and great hailstones, fire, and brimstone” (Ezek. 38:22).

See also Zech. 14:12.

“Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongues shall consume away in their mouth.”

These statements refer to the first great act of judgment by which the land of Israel will be cleared of the enemy. We learn, however, that the same destructive manifestation of power is to be extended afterwards to the earth generally, for the purpose of making the fear of God universal.

“I will send a fire on Magog, and among them that dwell carelessly in the isles; and they shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezek. 39:6).

“He will plead with all flesh: he will give them that are wicked to the sword . . . The slain of the Lord shall be at that day from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth: they shall not be lamented, neither gathered, nor buried: they shall be dung upon the ground” (Jer. 25:31-33).

“When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”

The cry of “peace and safety”—the universal persistence in the habit of interpreting public events on purely natural principles, to the exclusion of the purpose of God from all recognition, will

not delay for a single hour the advent of the terrible destruction from the Almighty; it will come whether men sleep or wake; neglect or consider. In relation to the world it will come suddenly. To the sons of God, it will come as a welcome and long-looked-for deliverance. Ye are not in darkness, that that day should come upon you as a thief. Be strong, be vigilant. Our neighbours may laugh at our confidence and pity the fanaticism, as they regard it, that looks for these things; but, in truth, they themselves are the objects of true pity. They are blind to what God has purposed and what God has revealed, and will be the victims of a helpless terror when the long-sleeping but approaching tempest of divine vengeance breaks forth upon the world, and sweeps away for ever the whole system of godless comfort in which men repose. Our single anxiety, while the vision yet tarries, ought to be to keep ourselves apart from the universal unwisdom, not sleeping as do others, but keeping our eyes open to the solemn though invisible facts of the situation; that when they are no longer invisible, but the patent, terror-striking events of the hour, we may have a refuge in the haven of protection from which, after the storm, the saints will issue forth to bless the world with peace.

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