

## ***Christian Destiny—2*** ***Christ our Hope (Part II)***

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*The second part of Professor Bruce's contributions to our series*

### **3. THE MINISTRY OF PAUL**

Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles *par excellence*, viewed his special ministry in this light. While the Jerusalem leaders naturally expected that the Jews' acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah would lead to the conversion of the Gentiles through their witness, Paul (by virtue of a 'mystery' revealed to him) looked on the evangelization of the Gentiles as destined to precipitate the latter-day conversion of Israel, provoked to jealousy by the spectacle of the Gentiles' enjoyment of the blessings promised to the patriarchs. He 'magnified' his ministry to the Gentiles because indirectly it would work for the large-scale blessing of Israel and therewith for the consummation of God's gracious purpose for mankind (*Rom. 11: 13-32*).

To Paul, as to his fellow-apostles, the gift of the Spirit was the witness that the age of fulfilment had been inaugurated, but in his eyes it was more—it was the seal, the guarantee or initial 'down-payment' (Gk. *arrabōn*) of the heritage of glory into which believers would enter at their resurrection. The indwelling of 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead' was the pledge that their mortal bodies would in due course be quickened into resurrection life; indeed, the inward work of the Spirit was already preparing them for that transformation (*Rom. 8: 9-11*).

From one point of view, the present age is the age of the Spirit; from another, it is the period of Christ's reign at the right hand of God. The 'right hand of God' was as metaphorical an expression to the apostles as it is to us; it denoted the supremacy to which Christ had been exalted by God. It was derived from *Ps. 110:1*, widely invoked throughout the New Testament as a *testimonium* of Christ, who was now reigning until all His enemies had been subdued by God. Then would come His advent (Gk. *parousia*) and the resurrection of His people (*1 Cor. 15: 20-28*).

There are two principal passages in the Pauline writings which deal with this coincidence of advent and resurrection (*1 Thess. 4. 13-18* and *1 Cor. 15: 20-57*), and in both of them the apostle is concerned to deal practically with issues which arose in churches for which he had pastoral responsibility.

During the weeks he spent at Thessalonica in the spring of A.D. 50, preaching the gospel and planting the church of that city, he gave his converts (*inter alia*) instruction on things to come, but was forced to leave before his instruction was completed. When, therefore 'some of their number died not long afterwards, they wondered if these departed friends would miss the blessings in store for believers at the advent of Christ. Paul set their minds at rest by assuring them that those who had 'fallen asleep' would suffer no disadvantage: because Jesus died and rose again, His people who had died would rise again at His coming, and then be united with those still alive to greet the returning Lord and be with Him for ever. This assurance he gave them 'by the word of the Lord', meaning either an utterance of the historical Jesus or a more recent prophetic utterance in the Lord's name which was discerned as vested with His authority.

When Paul moved south to Corinth he stayed there for eighteen months and had ample opportunity to give the church which he founded there all the basic teaching which it required on this and other subjects. But some of the Corinthian Christians were over-influenced by the current climate of thought and came to the conclusion that the hope of bodily resurrection was a superfluous accretion to the gospel—one, perhaps, from which Paul had been unable to emancipate himself because of the strength of Jewish tradition. The body, they held, was irrelevant to true religion: its reanimation was undesirable. Paul himself spoke of believers as having died and risen with Christ in baptism: what further resurrection was needed by those who had already received the Spirit, the gift of the new age?

News of this development came to Paul at Ephesus along with other information about the church of Corinth, and he dealt with it, together with other problems, in the letter we know as *I Corinthians*. First he affirms that the resurrection of the people of Christ is bound up with the resurrection of Christ Himself, an indispensable article of the message on which their salvation depended. The resurrection of Christ was the first-fruits of the great resurrection-harvest to come.

Paul sketches a sequence in his unfolding of this phase of the divine purpose: the resurrection-harvest was to be reaped at the advent of Christ and would mark the destruction of death, the last of all the enemies to be subjugated beneath His feet. This swallowing up of death in victory would be followed by the consummation, when the present mediatorial reign of Christ would be merged in the eternal kingdom of God.

Paul knew, however, that some of his Corinthian friends were asking sceptical questions about the reanimation of corpses. He therefore conveyed new teaching to them in the form of a 'mystery' something now revealed for the first time. At the advent of Christ, not only will the dead be raised in

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immortal bodies but living believers will experience an instantaneous transformation. All of them, to whichever category they belong, will require a new, 'spiritual body', adapted to their new order of existence, that 'kingdom of God' which 'flesh and blood cannot inherit' (*I Cor. 15: 50*). The present mortal body is inherited from the 'man of dust' who was made a living soul (*Gen. 2: 7*); in resurrection believers will wear the image of the 'man of heaven' who, when raised from the dead, became 'a life-giving spirit' (*I Cor. 15: 45*). Or, as Paul puts it more concisely in writing to the Philippians, the awaited Saviour will at His coming 'change our lowly body to be like his glorious body' (*Phil. 3: 20 f.*).

In writing both to the Thessalonians and to the Corinthians on these subjects, Paul associates himself with those who will survive to witness the advent rather than with those who will there have to be raised from death, referring to the former in the first person plural (we, us) and to the latter in the third person (they, them). To the Thessalonians he contrasts 'we who are alive, who are left' with 'those who have fallen asleep' (*I Thess. 4: 15*); to the Corinthians he says that at the last trumpet 'the dead will be raised imperishable and we (the) living shall be changed' (*I Cor. 15: 52*). It is not that he was speaking dogmatically, for he had manifestly received no special revelation regarding his personal state at that future time. It is simply a matter of perspective. He was daily exposed to the risk of death, it is true (*I Cor. 15: 31*); yet in that earlier period it was more natural for him to think of himself as surviving to witness the advent,

although he had no means of knowing when the advent would take place. At a later stage, however, he associates himself rather with those who will be raised than with those who will still be alive: 'he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you (the living) into his presence' (2 Cor. 4: 14). This reflects no additional revelation on the subject, but a change of perspective. Have we any means of knowing what caused this change of perspective between 1 and 2 Corinthians?

We probably have a clue in Paul's account in 2 Cor. 1: 8-10 of the 'affliction' which he had recently undergone in the province of Asia. Whatever the nature of this 'affliction' was, it had brought him face to face with what seemed at the time to be certain death—so much so that when, beyond all expectation, he was delivered, he greeted his deliverance as a restoration to life granted him by 'God who raises the dead'. Perhaps never before had he been consciously so close to death—inescapable death, as he thought—and the experience compelled him to consider very seriously what his personal state of being would be between death and resurrection. On this occasion he cites no 'word of the Lord' as he did to the Thessalonians; he has received no 'mystery' to impart as in 1 Cor. 15: 51. But with confidence in God he says 'we know' (2 Cor. 5: 1)—and what he knows is this: that at death he will not be left in a 'naked' or disembodied state, isolated from all means of communication with his new environment; he already has laid up for him a new 'dwelling' in heaven, ready to be donned at the moment of dissolution, 'so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life' (2 Cor. 5: 4). The fact that this 'dwelling' is described as 'eternal' (verse 1) seems to rule out the suggestion that it is but a temporary integument to be worn pending the putting on of the resurrection body at the advent of Christ. It may be that here Paul goes beyond what he says in 1 Cor. 15: 51 ff. and looks forward to putting on the 'spiritual body', the 'image of the heavenly man', immediately on death. Of this the indwelling Spirit is his present guarantee; by this he will be enabled to enjoy uninterrupted communion with Christ.

Paul did not shrink from the prospect of spiritual 'nakedness' simply because it was so dismal in itself, but above all because it would deprive him of continued fellowship with Christ; he did not so eagerly desire the heavenly 'housing' for its own sake as because it would enable him to enjoy continued fellowship with Christ. His confidence therefore amounts to this: the man or woman who enjoys the presence of Christ in this mortal life will not be deprived of it when this mortal life is past but will rather enjoy it with unprecedented intensity when 'away from the body and at home with the Lord' (verse 8). The believer in face of death may be sure that the next thing he or she will know when the last mortal breath has been drawn is to be the immediate presence of the living Lord—to be, as Paul puts it elsewhere, 'with Christ, for that is far better' (Phil. 1.23).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It was suggested in *The Harvester* for April and June 1977 that there is, in some Christian groups, insufficient ministry to prepare believers for death, to the point where hymns which are calculated to provide such preparation have their words altered, because of a feeling that nothing should be done or said which would diminish the reality of the hope of surviving to the Lord's return. But, as was said then, death is the lot of every Christian generation except the one that will witness the advent, and it would be a pity in any degree to deprive those who will pass through death of one jot of the comfort and hope which Scripture holds out for them. It is good for Christians to have the blessed hope before them, but the knowledge that, when Christ our life appears, His people 'also will appear with him in glory' (Col. 3: 4, cf. 1 John 3: 2) is as valid for those who have died as for those who will still be alive.

The cosmic significance of the advent of Christ is plainly revealed: that is the time when 'in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord' (*Phil. 2: 10 f.*), when God will accomplish His eternal purpose of bringing the universe into a reconciled unity in

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Christ (*Eph. 1: 9 f.*), 'so that God may be all in all' (*1 Cor. 15: 28*). But what is its significance for individual believers?

We must beware of importing an element of unreality into our thought and speech about the blessed hope, to the point where Christians who have been taught to expect it feel disappointed if it does not come in their lifetime. 'The coming one shall come and shall not tarry' (*Heb. 10: 37*), but His time-table is not ours; indeed, He is not at all subject to our earth-bound sense of time. If He was 'at hand' to His people in New Testament times, if He assured the seer of Patmos that He was coming 'quickly' or 'soon' (*Rev. 22: 20*), what meaning do we today attach to this language?

Several years ago I came upon some words in a sermon by John Henry Newman which seemed to me to express the truth so aptly that I have quoted and requoted them, and do so again:

And therefore, though time intervene between Christ's first and second coming, it is not recognized (as I may say) in the Gospel scheme, but is, as it were, an accident. For so it was, that up to Christ's coming in the flesh, the course of things ran straight towards that end, nearing it by every step; but now, under the Gospel, that course has (if I may so speak) altered its direction, as regards His second coming, and runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ, then is ever at our doors: as near eighteen hundred years as now, and not nearer now than then; and not nearer when he comes than now.

Chronologically, our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, but *personally*, Christ was as near then as He is now. At times the partition between the course of time and the presence of Christ becomes paper-thin—when His people enjoy His real presence at the holy table, for example, or in other moments of such conscious nearness to Him that something like absorption into Him is experienced. For each believer in the moment of death the partition disappears; at the last advent it will disappear on a universal scale. There may have been several events in the history of the Christian era in which partial comings of the Son of Man have been discerned by faith; they will be consummated in that definitive coming. The present order is to be done away; the new order of God in Christ is destined to endure. Let the hope of this be maintained as something to be ardently anticipated and promoted by believers—come death, come life—because it is the hope of Christ's own presence.

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