

Waiting...In Light of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

I like to read biographies of godly men who have served God in the past. Recently I came across a biography of William Miller, a Baptist layman and student of the Scriptures who lived in the eighteenth century. The book of Daniel from the Old Testament held a particular fascination for Miller. He made an intense study of the passage dealing with the "times of the Gentiles, the 70-week period spoken of in the book, and attempted to calculate the time of the second coming of Jesus. He actually forecast that day would come somewhere between March 21, 1842 and March 21, 1843. Of course he was wrong. Miller apologized to his followers, but the excitement his forecast had caused did not fade away. "Adventism" had been born. At a camp meeting in Philadelphia some time later one of his followers announced that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. Once again people began to prepare for that date. Shops were closed, farmers abandoned their fields, and 200 people left the city of Philadelphia to wait for our Lord's return. The date came and passed, and Jesus did not return. Five years later, Miller, the founder of the Seventh Day Adventists, went to be with the Lord. The organization he founded is still alive and growing.

Every generation seems to have its share of impatient and restless people who forecast the imminent return of Christ. This is strange when you consider the Lord's thrice-repeated warnings in the 24th chapter of Matthew's gospel: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone"; "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming"; ". . . you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." In our studies in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians we have seen that the apostle shared with them the biblical message of the second coming of Jesus_including the fact that no one knew the date of his coming. But there is coming a day when Jesus will, in Paul's words, "come to be glorified in His saints," when he will "deal out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ."

While they await this day, what should Christians be occupied in doing? In the passage from the letter which we will look at today, verses 1 through 5 of chapter 2, Paul has two words for them and for all Christians of all ages who are awaiting that glorious return. First, Paul says,

1. Don't Be Quickly Shaken 2:1,2

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

In our last study we saw that on the "day of the Lord" two different events will occur. First, there will be the gathering together of our Lord's people when he comes in secret for his flock who are alive on that day, and also for those who have already "fallen asleep" in Christ. The second event of the "day of the Lord" will be when he appears visibly as Israel's Messiah. That is when he will come to judge the world and begin his rule of righteousness in Jerusalem.

The Thessalonians were no different than the disciples of Jesus who repeatedly asked him questions about his coming. They too would have asked him, had they the opportunity, "What will be the sign of your coming?" Before Jesus was crucified, the disciples were hoping he would achieve political power and rule over Israel. But our Lord, of course, was looking on to the day when he would return to earth in power and glory. In the Olivet Discourse (recorded in Matthew 24), Jesus had warned his followers about false Christs who would arise. He warned of wars, famines, earthquakes, lawlessness, etc. But four times in his discourse, Jesus cautioned them, "Do not be misled." These signs would but mark the beginning of the end. The gospel first

had to be preached to all the world, "then shall the end come" (the end of the age), Jesus promised. He then spoke of the activities of the antichrist, based on the prophecy of Daniel, and uttered the solemn words, "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30).

Despite these words of Jesus and Paul's teaching, however, the Thessalonians had become restless in their spirits over the second coming of our Lord. Thus Paul's first word to them is that they should not be "quickly shaken from [their] composure" They had opened their ears to voices that were sounding a different message than the one he had preached to them. Whereas they had been like boats lying at anchor in calm water, they had been suddenly disturbed by a false message on the second coming of Jesus and scattered in all directions. Writing some years later to other believers, Peter would say, "The end of all things is at hand. Be of sober mind for the purpose of prayer." That too is Paul's message to his flock: "Do not become drunk with anxiety about the exact date of the coming of Christ."

Secondly, Paul says, they should not be "disturbed" emotionally frightened--that "the day of the Lord has come." He had already written them in his first letter, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (5:2,3). The Thessalonians, however, had allowed themselves to be misled. They were being persecuted for their faith, and they believed they had missed the invisible coming of Christ for his saints.

Paul identifies three possible sources "a spirit or a message or a letter" as causing the spiritual, mental and emotional unrest they were experiencing. As to the first source, perhaps someone among them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit had made a prophetic utterance that was misinterpreted. Or perhaps it was a false spirit who had misled them. Paul would later write to the very people he was living amongst, the Corinthians, warning them about false teachers who would come among them. The apostle John warns, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Perhaps someone had visited Thessalonica and misinterpreted something Paul had said on the coming of Christ. On a more sinister note, someone may have brought them a letter purportedly written by Paul, saying that the day of the Lord had come. If that is what happened, Paul is saying, that letter was a forgery.

It was not that the Thessalonians did not know the facts about the "day of the Lord," but they seemed to be unaware of the *order* of the events of the end times. We see the same problem in religious circles today. Many teachers seem to revel in spreading alarm among Christians about these events. I was shocked recently to hear a TV preacher claiming he had a vision in which God told him he was the only one whom God would use to tell the world of the gospel. Then he asked everyone to send him money so he could carry out his ministry. Last week I received in the mail something called "The Rapture Report," giving what they claim is all the "latest information" on the Lord's return. I also got an eight-page letter telling me I just had to read a book about the last days of America. Every week someone is trying to disturb Christians and untie them from their biblical moorings.

Are you being emotionally disturbed by these false prophets? When you receive this kind of thing in the mail, or when someone comes to you with the latest "prophecies" of the end times, remember to turn first to the Scriptures and see what Jesus and the apostles have to say. The Scriptures are the final authority--not, to use Paul's words, some spirit, message or letter.

So, having advised his flock in Thessalonica to not be quickly shaken from their composure or disturbed, next Paul says,

2. Don't Be Easily Deceived 2:3-5

Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, SO that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that

while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

Here the apostle is warning the Thessalonians to beware lest they be deceived or misled. He would later warn the Corinthians to be watchful for deceivers who purported to be apostles of Christ and spread false doctrines among Christians. The Thessalonians did not need new truth, they needed to review the truth they already knew. That would bring order to their troubled minds. The "day of the Lord," which they thought was already upon them, Paul says, would not arrive unless two things occurred: "unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed:"

The word "apostasy" in classical Greek conveys the idea of military or political rebellion or desertion. In a religious context, the word is used of abandonment of religious beliefs, of turning away from God. Speaking of the last days, Jesus said, "many will fall away and betray one another." In his letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, "the Spirit explicitly says that in the last times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons . . . "

Apostasy is manifested by denying Christ after confessing him as Lord; by falling away from the faith because of persecution; and by denying the deity of Christ. Some regard a temporary falling away of Christians (like the disciples of Jesus at the cross) as apostasy. Others feel that Christians can lose their salvation through apostasy. In this context, however, as Paul is speaking of the last days, it would appear that he is referring to professors of Christianity, not possessors of Christ. This apostasy will be a worldwide rebellion against all government systems in order to set up a world government; and it will also be a rebellion against God in order to set stage for the antichrist to become the political and religious world leader.

Some scholars think the apostasy or falling away does not refer to a spiritual falling away, but rather, in the context of this section, they take it to mean 'our gathering together to Jesus. It may very well be that Paul had both of these meanings in mind: a departing of the saints to heaven., and a falling away of the professing church. Of course, we don't have to wait for the last days to see rebellion in our nation against godliness. How many of us have seen people who claimed to be Christians walk away from the Lord? A brother and I recently counted mutual friends who during the past 15 years have turned their backs on Christ. These were people we had loved, taught, prayed for and ministered with, yet they now deny their Christian witness. Last week a man told me that his wife, who had been raised in a Christian home and attended a Christian school, was in the process of divorcing him and going off with another man. She was leaving him, her children and her home and proclaiming that she was not a Christian. In the midst of this tragic situation the spiritually bankrupt husband turned to Jesus and asked him to become his Lord and Savior.

That kind of situation tends to weaken one's faith, and question whether Christianity is even valid. Worst of all, it tempts other Christians to want to do likewise and fall away from Christ. I'm thankful I have a healthy fear of God and a love for him. My wife and I have been married for 30 years, but we know the source of the spiritual glue that holds our marriage together. A few days ago she asked me, "If Jesus was not Lord of our lives, do you think we would still be married?" I had to reply, "No way!" She said, "I agree." Thank God for the grace he has given us to make it this far.

So before the "day of the Lord," Paul says, the apostasy must first come, therefore do not be deceived. There will be a worldwide political and religious rebellion, a falling away. Then, secondly, "the man of lawlessness is revealed."

Daniel has many references to this "man of sin, the "little horn" which would spring up from the fourth beast of Daniel's dream. In Daniel 7, the prophet records this dream he had in which he saw four great beasts. Each beast represented a kingdom which would one day come on to the world stage. The fourth one would be by far the most terrible and cruel of them all. In the dream, the beast with the ten horns had a "little horn" 'come up among the others. "This horn possessed eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth uttering great boasts" (Daniel 7:8). This "little horn" represented the future Gentile world leader who would be revealed in the final period of the great tribulation. This "little horn" of Daniel 7 is the "Syrian king" to come in Daniel 8, the "desecrator" of Daniel 9, the "despicable person" of Daniel 11, the antichrist of Matthew 24, the "man of sin" of II Thessalonians, the "antichrist" of I John, and the "beast out of the sea" of Revelation 13 and 19. But he will be judged at the wonderful second coming of Jesus Christ.

In these verses in Thessalonians, Paul reveals four characteristics of this leader. He will be a "man of lawlessness," the apostle declares. Throughout history many figures have attempted to become world rulers_Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, the Roman Caesars, to name just a few. History has the familiar ring of leaders overthrowing religious and civil laws, setting their own standards in place, only to be overthrown in turn by other despots. In our own day we only have to turn on our televisions to see leaders defying the laws of God and man. But in this context, Paul is thinking of just one man, whom he calls "the man of sin," the final world leader who, according to Daniel 7, "will intend to make alterations in times and in law" for a period of 3 1/2 years." According to Daniel, this leader will break a covenant he will make with Israel. He will forbid the regular sacrifices in the temple and make it unfit for use, and he will fling truth to the ground.

Paul's second description of this man is, "the son of destruction." This is the same name that was given to Judas. He will oppose the divine rule of law and by doing so will set himself up for eternal ruin. As we see in both the prophecy of Daniel and in the book of Revelation, ". . . the court will sit for judgment and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever."

Thirdly, Paul says, this leader, this counterfeit Christ who will gradually reveal himself, will "oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship." In 164 B.C., the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes subjugated Israel and desecrated the temple. He set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies and scattered a soup made from swine around the temple. He exalted himself as the human manifestation of God and demanded to be worshiped. This statue and symbol was the "abomination of desolation" referred to in Daniel 11 and in Matthew 24. Epiphanes became the symbol of the antichrist who was to come. To his disciples, Jesus said that when they saw the "abomination of desolation," this would mark the beginning of the great tribulation.

Finally, Paul says, this man will "display himself as being God." He will take his seat in the temple of God which he has allowed the Jews to build, and demand to be worshiped as God--just as Epiphanes did back in the second century B.C. Revelation tells us that the false prophet will enter the temple and command the image which was made by man to speak, and all the world will bow to it. You ask how all the world could worship an image, but you only have to remember some of the celebrations in New York harbor for the centenary of the Statue of Liberty. A lot of people did and said a lot of strange things before an image that didn't even talk!

People who are in rebellion against God are always ready to worship an image, it seems. Arnold Toynbee, the noted historian, concluded after studying civilization across the span of history that self-worship was the paramount religion of mankind. Although he may try to hide it, man himself is the god of atheistic humanism. Man without God--this is the final answer to his problems that man will come up with.

As I studied the characteristics of the antichrist while preparing for this morning, the words of the apostle John kept coming to my mind: ". . . every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (I John 4:3). The antichrist, the last world leader, will attract followers, men and women from every nation in the world with whom he shares a kindred spirit: they will be haters of God and lovers of self. A member of the feminist movement said recently, "I hope that by the year 2000 our children will be worshiping human potential, not God." These followers of the antichrist will resist divine authority, hate righteousness, and exalt themselves. They will be godless, rebellious, and abandoned to pleasure.

As I studied, however, I suddenly realized that up until the day I bowed my proud heart to Jesus as Lord and Savior, if the antichrist had appeared on the scene, I would have been one of his followers. What a shock that was to me! I too had the spirit of lawlessness. I too exalted myself and sought to display myself as God in so many different ways. I was the god whom I worshiped in the temple of my heart and I was stung when people did not worship me. I too was a "son of destruction." I was under the wrath of God, dead in my sins. Only the mercy, love and grace of God saved me. And now even as a son of God I am sometimes tempted to become lawless, boastful, and exalt myself to sit in the temple of God, displaying myself as God. Only the fine line between walking in the Spirit and walking in the flesh separates me from doing just that. Let us thank God that he will never leave us or forsake us. Let us thank him that he will provide us with the power to resist the spirit

of antichrist.

Let us thank God too that our Lord is coming again. He will destroy the "man of sin" and the power behind him, Satan himself. While we are awaiting that glorious return, let us not be quickly shaken from our composure or disturbed by the many voices forecasting the various dates of that return; and let us not be easily deceived, for Jesus will not return "unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction."

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