

The Second Coming of Christ

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The Second Coming of Christ is an Integral and Central Part of the Christian Faith

The world has always had problems, often severe ones. But that does nothing to reduce the gravity of the problems that confront the world at this present time. Many of these are the same old ones that have always troubled man, but nowadays they are compounded with additional modern difficulties that the ancient world knew nothing about.

There is at the moment a critical world shortage of basic materials and near or complete famine conditions in many parts. That is nothing particularly new; famines have frequently stalked the world. What is new is that the shortage of supplies is aggravated by a population explosion such as the ancient world never dreamed of. War and the fear of it are nothing new, but the power of modern weapons makes the prospect of world war more hideous than could possibly have been imagined before. Mankind could now virtually blot out this planet.

The conflicts between Israel and the Arabs have been smouldering for many years, but the recent oil crisis demonstrated with what alarming suddenness the troubles in the Near East could flare up into world conflagration. Meanwhile the slumbering giants among the nations have woken up. China now possesses sophisticated nuclear weapons and the Third World will not be content forever to sit by passively and watch others enjoying all the affluence. And on top of it all there is worldwide inflation. Certainly then the world has problems of gigantic proportions, which seem to have got beyond the ability of mankind to control.

The alarming situations that could arise if they are not solved, however, are beginning to lead many people to ask, 'Might these problems in some way be leading up to some catastrophe, perhaps to Armageddon?'—which in the popular mind stands for some terrible event that is talked of, they know not where, in the Bible and vaguely connected, they know not how, with the end of the world.

In the midst of all this gloom one might have expected that Christians everywhere would be loudly proclaiming Christ and asserting the certainty of their hope that forms such an important and integral part of the Christian gospel; demonstrating the validity of the grounds upon which it is based and urging on men the repentance it calls for and, at the same time, the optimism and courage that it inspires. There is hope, even for this world. It is still God's world, he has not abdicated his rights to it or lost his interest in it. His declared purposes for it shall be fulfilled strictly according to the programme announced in holy Scripture.

Evil and folly, sadism, greed, cruelty and violence, unreason and accident shall not have the last word. There is hope for the whole creation and for this world within it. Listen to the New Testament:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:18–21)

A hope, big enough to encompass the whole of creation in its scope, is of course big enough to include hope for the individual. Listen again to the New Testament:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:22–25)

This is a message to be preached from the housetops and in some quarters that is precisely what many Christians are very successfully trying to do. But in other quarters the prophetic voice of the Christian gospel is strangely subdued, if not altogether silent. Indeed one may encounter among some Christians a certain cynicism about the whole topic of biblical prophecy. Others, who are forced by the evidence to admit that prophecy formed a large part of our Lord's message, have gone off into sheer blasphemy and asserted that, in all this matter of prophecy, he was mistaken.

As a result there is among the Christian public in general a certain unease and embarrassment whenever the topic of prophecy is raised, as though it were an improper subject—a feeling that, although it is undeniably a feature of some parts of the Bible, it would indicate a certain lack of good sense or intellectual health, or both, to be seriously interested in it.

For this sorry state of affairs there are of course a number of reasons.

The first of these is perhaps the earlier prophecy-mongering of men who have only to hear of a volcano erupting somewhere to be ready to assure the world that the second advent will take place next Friday. Or, on the basis of some quaint juggling with arithmetic and the calendar, they are prepared, quite in defiance of our Lord's express prohibition, to predict the exact year, month and day of his coming. The fact that their predictions never come true (and never will) doesn't seem to deter people of this sort; they are always ready to believe the next prediction. But the effect on many people is that the whole subject of prophecy is injected with an air of the bizarre and those who take the subject seriously are thought of as simply those on the lunatic fringe of Christianity.

Another cause is the bewildering number of prophetic schemes that have been erected on the basis of Scripture, or so their authors claim. Some have resorted to fantastic

interpretations of the symbols of prophetic language; but other, more sober scholars have nevertheless forgotten to distinguish the plain, explicit statements of Scripture and the intricate and complicated schemes of inference that they have made from those statements. And here the danger is that, when thoughtful people find these schemes of inferences unjustified, they in turn fail to distinguish between the inferences and the basic statements of holy Scripture and throw out both indiscriminately.

But there is still another cause that is more subtle but more dangerous than the first two. It can best be described as hidden unbelief. I call it hidden because it is not the open unbelief of liberals who are prepared to say that Christ and his apostles were mistaken over matters referring to prophecy. Those who indulge in this hidden unbelief are probably unaware of what they are doing. They will conscientiously affirm belief in the prophetic Scriptures in general and in the promise of the second coming of Christ in particular, but they take the attitude of a friend of mine, who recently expressed himself to me as follows. 'Yes, I do believe in the second coming of Christ, but I am not interested in it. I don't think it is very important. The main thing about Christianity is putting Christian principles into practice here and now in the present.'

Now, at first sight, such an attitude seems not only respectable but in its way positively virtuous. It seems to have got its priorities right—practical daily Christian living, doing its best to deal with the world's problems in the here and now rather than speculating about the future. But actually there hides beneath this attitude an alarming amount of unbelief. The second coming is a topic to which our Lord devoted a major part of his teaching. To dismiss it as unimportant, or to treat it as being largely irrelevant to practical Christianity, is to deny by inference his authority.

Similarly with the apostles, there is scarcely an apostle that does not either implicitly or explicitly mention the topic; several deal with it at length. It is a wild impertinence to suggest that in their statement of the faith the apostles have got their emphases wrong and all out of proportion.

The first thing we ought to do is to see that the second coming of Christ is not a superstition held by those on the lunatic fringe of Christianity, nor simply a minor detail of Christian doctrine, but an integral and central part of the faith. Listen to our Lord introducing the subject to his disciples on one occasion:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:1–3)

The comfort that these words have brought to generations of Christians needs no comment here. But it is important to notice that Christ precedes his statement about this aspect of the second coming with a clear and unreserved claim to deity. He calls us to place our faith in him as fully and unreservedly as we place it in God, 'You believe in God; believe also in me.' Of course, the statements he makes here are statements that we could only accept

from deity anyway. It is different with statements about morality; our own consciences do not need his authoritative statements on the subject. But conscience by itself could never tell us anything absolute about the rooms in the Father's house and the second coming of Christ to take believers to the Father's house; nor could any philosopher give us any assurance on the point. Only one who is God, and therefore knows of these things, could tell us, or has any right to be believed on such topics. Jesus acknowledges this and he thus speaks about heaven and predicts the future. To withhold faith in his prophetic statements, or to dismiss them as unimportant and irrelevant to practical living, is tantamount to questioning his deity.

As to the importance which Christ attached to the doctrine of the second coming, it should be enough to appeal to the length and solemnity of such passages as Matthew 24, Luke 19:22–37 and to the fact that many of his parables¹ deal with the topic explicitly or by implication.

But let us consider one specific example in detail. When Christ stood before the high priest's court (Matt 26:63–65) the high priest eventually adjured him to tell whether he was 'the Christ, the Son of God.' Christ knew, as everyone in the court knew, that for him to claim to be the Son of God would mean signing his own death warrant. In that tense and critical moment he not only repeated his claim to deity but also made explicit prediction of his second coming. His words were: 'You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven' (v. 64). That claim to his deity was a testimony for which he was prepared to give his blood.

Not only is the second coming a major part of the faith, considered as a body of doctrine; a true conversion leads to a life in which the expectation of the second coming is one of the leading points of reference. Take, for instance, Paul's description of what conversion had meant for the Christians at Thessalonica.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.
(1 Thess 1:9–10)

It is an absolute necessity, if one is to be saved, to turn from idols to faith in the true God. And it is the necessity and required result of any conversion experience, if that experience is to be regarded as genuine, that it shall lead to a life of service to God. But at the same time that life of service—if it is to be kept in the proper focus of the purpose of God and serve him intelligently according to his will—must keep constantly to the fore, as one of its fixed points of reference, the certain expectation of the second coming of Christ.

Moreover, the second coming of Christ is not only a major and central part of the faith and a very important guideline in the business of daily practical Christian living, but if Paul's practice is any guide it is a truth that we need to impress on our Christian converts at the

¹ e.g. the parable of the Five Wise and Five Foolish Virgins, the parable of the Talents, the parable of the Pounds, the parable of the Sheep and Goats, the parable of the Wheat and Tares, and the parable of the Dragnet.

earliest moment. Paul stayed at Thessalonica a comparatively short while before he was obliged to move on and his first letter to the new church was written shortly after his departure. It mentions the second coming in every chapter and in his second letter he again talks more about the second coming than about anything else.

In the course of his letter he includes an interesting piece of information. He is discussing the details and timing of our Lord's coming in power and great glory, and how that coming will be preceded by the coming of the Man of Sin, whose activities again he describes in some detail. Suddenly Paul says, 'Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?' (2 Thess 2:5). Apparently then, in the very first days after their conversion to Christ, Paul had considered it good and necessary not only to tell them the bare fact of the second coming, but to tell them of the details of the events that, according to the prophetic word, will lead up to that second coming.

This, admittedly, is very different from a good deal of modern practice. We tend far more to preach to people's need, offering forgiveness to their sense of guilt and satisfaction to their sense of spiritual hunger. And this is right and proper. Christ did the very same when he offered himself as bread and living water to the spiritually hungry and thirsty.

'Young man,' we say, 'have you an aching void in your heart? Come and let Christ fill it.' But very frequently the young man has no aching void in his heart, or if he has he doesn't know it. He is enjoying life immensely. Twenty-four hours a day are not enough to do all the interesting things that he is finding to do and to study. Nor do I mean that the young man is falling head over heels into a life of gaudy sin. There are multitudes of perfectly healthy and excitingly enjoyable and challenging things to do in life, without going into lurid sin. This is God's world and it is a mighty interesting place. The young man finds it so and he regards people who have aching voids in their hearts as unfortunate or possibly neurotic. He himself senses no such void and feels no need of Christ. And if we have no other gospel than a gospel that can only begin to tell people that they must first sense a need in themselves, we shall make little impression.

The gospel that Paul preached was different. It pointed out that, whether people felt any need or not, this world is still God's world; and for creatures to live in it without regard for their Creator and his purposes is a cardinal sin. Paul would point out that God was not going to let the world go its own selfish way forever.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

And Paul would call on any young man, or woman for that matter, to repent and align themselves with the purposes of God in Christ, lest the great day of Christ's coming should arrive and they find themselves, to their eternal discomfiture, living contrary to the purpose of their almighty Creator. It seems to me we should be nearer the apostolic preaching of the gospel if we focused a little less on people's subjective feelings and a little more on God's objective facts.

The Second Coming of Christ
will be Accompanied by Events of
Unparalleled Joy and Unimaginable Gladness

We saw in our last talk that the second coming of Christ is an integral and central part of the Christian faith. Let us think now of one or two more reasons why that must be so.

It must be so because the Christian message is nothing short of Christ himself. The Buddha and Confucius and Mohammed can come into the world, develop and preach a system of ethics, philosophy or religion, then disappear out of the world; and if they were never heard of again it would make no difference to the validity or otherwise of their systems. But that is impossible with Christ. He is *himself* the message: his person as God incarnate, his death as an atonement for sin, his resurrection and ascension. Without his person and work there is no message. It would be impossible then, to have him disappearing out of our world never to be heard of again and still to have a Christian gospel to preach. If Jesus is the Son of God as well as being the carpenter from Nazareth, we must ask what is his relation to the vast universe around us.

The Holy Spirit's answer to this question is found in such epistles as those to the Ephesians, Colossians and Hebrews. The relation of Christ to the creation is that it was made by him and for him and he maintains it. The inevitable question is, what is he going to do with the world and creation in general? And the answer to this begins, so to speak, with the second coming.

Again the second coming lies at the centre and heart of the Christian gospel because that gospel has its roots in the Old Testament revelation of God and his purposes for humanity. Genesis chapter 1 informs us that man² was made as the crowning peak of God's creation, in God's image as God's viceroy, to 'fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth' (v. 28). Reflection on God's glorious purpose for man moved the psalmist to the poetry of Psalm 8:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet. (vv. 3–6)

² The term 'man' is used in these talks in the generic sense of both men and women.

We know, of course, that men and women turned against God and thousands still today try to live as if this world belonged to them; as if there were no God, or as if this world is a self-contained flat into which they have a right to enter, shut the door and keep God very much outside. But pessimism at the chaos that has resulted from their attempts at unilateral independence should not lead us to imagine that God has abandoned his purpose, either for earth or the world. For the New Testament's gospel is—and it is thoroughly good news—that not only is God still proceeding with his original purpose, but that that purpose is in an advanced stage of fulfilment. Listen to this passage from Hebrews 2:

Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet.' (vv. 5–8)

Thus far the writer to the Hebrews is quoting from Psalm 8, and now verse 8 continues with a comment of his own. 'Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.' The writer is proving that mankind was intended to have universal and complete dominion, with nothing excepted. Then he continues,

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (vv. 8–9)

So in Jesus the ancient purpose is being fulfilled, and has been fulfilled right up to the point of Jesus' being crowned with glory and honour. Only the last bit remains so far unfulfilled, 'putting everything in subjection under his feet'. The inspired writer tells us explicitly that we do not yet see all things subjected to him. And we need to be told this, for there have been times when the church has got it into its head that all things have already been subjected to Christ and that it was the church's job to keep them there and administer them firmly in Christ's name.

And so we were treated in the Middle Ages to the spectacle of the church attempting to control the kings of the earth, setting up some and putting down others. They surely forgot that this was the sin for which Paul sharply rebuked the Christians at Corinth, when it first made its rudimentary appearance among them. They were beginning to behave as if the reign of Christ had already begun. Says Paul,

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when

persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Cor 4:8–13)

Evidently the time to reign with Christ had not then come. It hasn't come yet. The thing we are asked to do with Christ now is to suffer with him (2 Tim 2:11–13). But the time for reigning will come, both for Christ and his church. It will come at the second coming of Christ.

What then are we to understand by the second coming? We can help ourselves to define what is meant if we first consider what it does not mean, and then consider three or four salient points that will be associated with that coming.

There is a comparatively simple mistake, more common in days gone by perhaps than nowadays. It was thought that when our Lord said, 'I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also,' he was describing what happens when a believer dies. The Lord comes invisibly (at least to those standing around) and escorts the departing believer from this world to the Father's house. Now it may be true that the Lord so comes and escorts the departing believer to the Father's house, but that is not what is meant by the second coming.

To see that, we need only read the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, which assures us that when the Lord comes not only will all the Christian dead be raised, but the living Christians also will simultaneously be taken up with those resurrected to meet the Lord in the air. Here are the verses:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

It is plain for all to see that this does not happen every time a Christian passes away. There is a more serious misunderstanding, which claims that descriptions of the second coming, such as we have just read, were never meant to be taken literally in the sense that one day Christ will literally come down from the sky; but these colourful words were meant to be a vivid way of saying that Christ is always breaking through into history. He is unseen of course in any material sense, but real and powerful nonetheless and particularly in times of world crises.

We shall have to deal on another occasion with the assertion that these passages were not meant to be taken literally. That our Lord's second coming is something other than his constant breaking through into human affairs, can simply be shown from the fact that the New Testament does affirm that our Lord does from time to time break through into human affairs and particularly into the affairs of his church; but also that he will one day come again at the end of the Age accompanied by cosmic disturbance. It distinguishes carefully the one kind of event from the other.

From this point of view, Luke's handling of the theme of the coming of Christ in the closing section of his Gospel is very instructive. In chapter 19 he relates our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. He follows the progress of that entry in detail:

When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here.' . . . As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen . . . And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it . . . and he entered the temple. (vv. 29–30, 37, 41, 45)

Luke followed his approach stage by stage, because this coming of Christ to Jerusalem was his official coming as Messiah, the fulfilment of the coming prophesied by Zechariah, 'Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (9:9). But the Old Testament also prophesied the coming of Messiah in quite different terms:

Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13–14)

Luke records our Lord's statement as to how this prophecy too shall be fulfilled:

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. And he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.' (Luke 21:25–31)

We notice that once more the stages of drawing near are carefully traced, though this time they are stages of time rather than of road travel. This event too is the coming of Christ, but not of course his coming in the sense Zechariah predicted. It would surely be difficult to confuse his coming on a donkey and his coming in a cloud amidst cosmic disturbance.

The Jews admittedly had a problem in trying to understand why the Old Testament spoke of Messiah's coming in such a way. We know the answer; it was prophesying two different comings. Or, if you prefer, one coming in two different stages—what we now call the first and second comings. But, in the same way, we should not confuse the second coming. Luke gives an example in chapter 24:

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (vv. 13–16)

We notice at once the recurrence of the term used in connection with the two comings, *drew near*. But this coming was remarkable, because by this time our Lord had been crucified, dead, buried and risen again. He was breaking through once more into history, into the affairs of this current world.

We cannot now stay with this coming, though it is very interesting to notice how he appeared, drew near, for a long time was unrecognized, and then when he was at length recognized for who he was he disappeared into the unseen world. This was not the only occasion on which he thus came to his own in the days before his ascension; and even after that ascension he has constantly been fulfilling in a spiritual sense the promise he made to his disciples when he was about to leave them, 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live' (John 14:18–19).

Doubtless he has from time to time had to visit disobedient and fractious churches in the same way as he declared he would visit the church at Pergamum. 'Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth' (Rev 2:16). But our immediate task is to observe that our Lord's breaking into history after his resurrection, to come to his people in their time of distress and bewilderment, was a vastly different thing from his second coming as prophesied in Luke 21.

When Christ drew near to the two people on the road to Emmaus it was certainly a miraculous coming, but there were no signs in sun, moon and stars. There was no distress of nations, men's hearts failing for fear and for expectation of the things which were coming on the world. And certainly the powers of the heavens were not shaken and the Son of Man was not seen coming in a cloud. All was peaceful and ordinary and the world at large continued with its business unaware of what was going on.

Luke, then, helps us to distinguish the various senses in which the term *coming* is used of our Lord; and he makes it abundantly clear that the second coming, as it is popularly called, will be a cosmic event immediately visible to all.

Let us sum up the facts so far with two more quotations. 'For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day' (Luke 17:24). 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him' (Rev 1:7).

His coming will not be all gloom. It will be accompanied by events of unparalleled joy and unimaginable gladness; though there will inevitably be some gloom. What the major events associated with the coming will be, we must consider in our next talk.

The Second Coming of Christ will Lead to Immeasurable Progress of the Gospel

It is a matter of simple observation that when the Old Testament prophesied what we have learned to distinguish as our Lord's first coming, it predicted not just one but a whole array of events that in the nature of things could not possibly have been fulfilled in one single coming.

It predicted that Messiah would come by being born of a virgin (Isa 7:14); that he would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2); that he would come on a donkey amid great rejoicing (Zech 9:9); that he would be despised and rejected by men and put to death, and yet that he should prolong his days and divide the spoil with the strong (Isa 53).

How all these diverse events were to be fulfilled in one coming must have been a puzzling problem to Old Testament students, but we now know that the answer was very simple. The first coming was not simply a point in time but a period of some thirty-three years, at various stages in the course of which the different events were fulfilled.

Similarly, both Old and New Testaments tell of a number of events associated with the second coming. It would be quite impossible to suppose that they will all take place in one and the same split second. Take one simple example. Revelation 19:7–10 looks forward to what is called the marriage supper of the Lamb. This seems to be the consummation of all Christ's ways with his church, described in Ephesians 5:27 as the presentation of the church. 'So that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.' Revelation 19:11–16 describe what seems to be the same event in the context of our Lord's coming in power and great glory.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8 Paul describes it thus: 'When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.' It would be difficult to imagine that these two events take place at one and the same time; that, in the moment when there is great joy in the Father's house as Christ is presenting the church to himself, he is simultaneously descending from heaven to render vengeance on the enemies of God.

I shall perhaps be reminded by the learned at this point that events which take place in heaven are by definition outside time altogether and belong to eternity where there is no time-past or time-future, but only one eternal present. Any attempt, therefore, to relate the time of the marriage supper in heaven to our Lord's dealing with his enemies on earth is fallacious. There may be some substance in the observation, but I confess that for my part it seems to me that the idea that there is altogether no sense of past or future in eternity is over-simplification. Actually we don't know what eternity is like in this regard and it is a

good thing to remember that Scripture speaks of our Lord, who is at this moment seated at the right hand of the Father, as 'waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet' (Heb 10:13). Apparently heaven is quite conscious that Christ's enemies have not yet been subdued and they are waiting for the time when they shall be.

So let us content ourselves here with considering two of the four major events that are associated with the second coming of Christ, without trying to put them into any chronological sequence. We shall deal with the other two in our next talk.

1. *The coming of Christ to raise the believing dead, change the living believers and take them both to be with himself*

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thess 4:13–18)

The passage is expressly written to comfort the Christians over their fellow-believers who have died, so that they should not grieve as others do who have no hope. This is an integral part of the faith. 'Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,' then we may and must also believe that he is coming again. We must notice that it specifically and explicitly states that it is the dead in Christ that shall rise, i.e. those people who in life have received Christ and have been incorporated into him by his Holy Spirit. Nothing is said about the impenitent dead being raised. This appears to be a selective and not a general resurrection. Likewise, when it says, 'We who are alive, who are left . . .', this is to be understood in its context. It is not talking of the whole of mankind that shall be alive on earth when the Lord comes. The *we* is intended to be the same as in the earlier verse, 'Since *we* believe that Jesus died and rose again.'

Paul is, after all, writing to people of whom he can say, 'You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven' (1:9–10). Nothing is said at all in this passage about the whole of mankind being summoned at this stage to appear before the final judgment and we should not gratuitously suppose that the passage is about the same occasion as the final judgment.

Paul introduces what he says by the words, 'For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord' (v. 15). Different opinions are held as to whether by this phrase Paul is claiming that he had been given some special revelation from the Lord to make known what he declares here, or whether he means that what he is about to state is based upon a word uttered by our Lord in the days of his flesh.

We have no need to try and settle the difference of opinion, but it is very instructive to notice the conversation that passed between Martha and our Lord on this very subject, as recorded in John 11. Martha's brother Lazarus had died and Martha was very grieved and not a little perplexed that Christ had apparently made no effort to save him from dying. He had remained at a distance throughout Lazarus's illness. When Christ eventually arrived, he said to Martha, 'Your brother will rise again' (v. 23). Martha, with a good deal of impatience and irritation in her voice, replied, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' The idea of a general resurrection at the last day was nothing new to Martha; she had believed that all her life. But Christ replied with something that obviously was quite new to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die' (John 11: 25–26).

What did he mean? It is at once clear that he was talking about two groups of believers: those who believe and yet subsequently die and those who likewise believe but never die. This is what Paul is saying in Thessalonians. At the second coming there shall be two groups of believers: those who believed and then subsequently fell asleep—and they shall be raised. Then there are those who, having believed, live on until the coming of the Lord—they shall never die but shall be caught up without dying to meet the Lord in the air.

So, with this in mind, let us go back over Christ's statement, 'Whoever believes in me, *though he die*, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' Notice 'though he die'—not all believers will die; but 'though he die, yet shall he live.' Live, in the sense of being raised again. See Paul's phrase in Romans 14:9, 'Christ died and lived again,' lit. returned to life, rose again.

Not every person that lives on without dying until the coming of the Lord shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, so our Lord at once qualifies his statement. 'And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' Then our Lord asks Martha, 'Do you believe this?' Without any evidence except this new word of Christ, the like of which she had never heard before, Martha replies, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'

A short time later Christ in his mercy gave to Martha, and to us all, a marvellous token-in-advance of what he shall do when he comes again; he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. It was not a resurrection in the full sense of that word. Lazarus did not receive a glorified body and presumably when his time came he died physically once more. It was evidently intended as an illustration of the power of Christ as *the resurrection and the life* and it is most interesting and instructive that it was not a general resurrection, but a selective resurrection.

And so the Christian who loses loved ones who are believers has a warmer and nearer hope than that they shall be raised at the general resurrection at the last day. As Paul puts it, 'Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself' (Phil 3:20–21).

2. The coming of the Lord to bring the nation of Israel to faith

The conversion of Israel is also associated with the second coming of Christ. Here is one of the passages that speak about it:

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' (Rom 11:25–26)

The problem of Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and Saviour was one that constantly filled Paul's heart and mind, so he himself tells us. Nor was it only that he was distressed by the grief that naturally filled his heart when he thought of his kinsmen and fellow-nationals persisting in their opposition to Christ and to their own salvation. There was the additional problem that the gospel of Christ was not something that the apostles had invented. It was witnessed to, said Paul, by the holy prophets of the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom 1:2).

The prophets were Jews and the Jewish nation was the divinely appointed custodian of those prophetic Scriptures. How could it be explained that the nation as a whole officially rejected the claims of Jesus to be the Messiah promised by those Scriptures? If it could not be explained, was the Christian claim credible? We cannot now consider the detailed reply to this question; it takes Paul three whole chapters to give it (Rom 9–11). Our present interest is to notice what he says about the eventual conversion of the Jewish nation.

First, let us notice that when he says 'all Israel will be saved', he does not mean every one of them but the nation as a whole. Notice that he explicitly says that the conversion of the nation shall occur when 'the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.' That is to say, he is not thinking here of the conversions of isolated individual Jews that have from time to time taken place through the course of the Christian era (though he recognizes that even in his own day there had been a number of such conversions, 11:5). The conversion of the nation as a whole awaits the full number of the Gentiles coming in and by definition that will not happen until the Lord comes.

It would be natural to ask why, if Christ is going to save the nation of Israel as a whole when he comes, he cannot do it now before he comes. It is not a question that Paul overlooks. He deals with it in fact in the verses that follow (11:28–32, as well as v. 11). But again, this is not a matter that may be allowed to detain us now. What we should notice is what the conversion of Israel will result in. Listen to Paul talking in the earlier verses of this chapter:

Did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? (11:11–15)

It is idle to speculate what would have happened if the Jews as a whole had received Jesus as their Messiah. They didn't, but it is the fact that their very early rejection of him and his gospel led to Paul taking the gospel to the Gentiles and within a comparatively few years the Christian church was predominantly Gentile.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since then and it would be wrong to underestimate the tremendous progress the gospel has made from the days when a few score of people gathered in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. It is probably true to say that the gospel is being preached to more millions now than at any time in the whole history of Christendom. And yet, when all is said that can be said, there are vast areas of the world that have remained untouched by the gospel. How little the Hindu world has been affected, and how little the vast millions of China and Japan.

It is no reason to despair. The rejection of Christ by the Jews has led to the gospel going to the Gentiles and has brought uncounted millions to salvation. When all Israel receives the Saviour and acknowledges Jesus as her true and rightful Lord, it shall lead to such immeasurable progress of the gospel as to make all that has been accomplished in the intervening ages look small by comparison. It will be a veritable 'life from the dead'. Then, away with defeatism, the future is bright indeed!

The Second Coming of Christ will Bring about Perfect Government

We promised ourselves in our last talk that we would consider four events associated with the second coming of Christ and thus far we have dealt with only two of the four. We must now turn therefore to the third event:

3. The coming of the Lord to execute the judgment of God on those who have deliberately rejected the gospel

This is a gloomy topic, but not altogether and unrelievedly gloomy. Indeed, the really gloomy thing would be if there were no real prospect of an end to the evil and crime that fills our suffering world. And not only evil and crime in the sense of bank robbing and murder and drug-pushing, but the far greater evil of competitive greed and selfish squandering of earth's resources that, on an international scale, make our world into a cage of big cats constantly snarling at each other as they compete for the big chunks of meat. When the big cats start to tear each other, as they do every now and again, and millions of people around the world get killed, then what most people complain at is not that God has promised one day to put down all of it by force, but that he does not do it right away. And what provokes their cynicism is that, whereas the Bible has been promising for centuries that God will one day put a stop to evil, millennia have gone by and he seems to have done extraordinarily little about it.

If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, people say, then why doesn't he stop the war, or do away with the concentration camps or whatever the trouble is that looms largest in their minds? For the Jews, moreover, this is a special problem. Their Old Testament is full of glowing pictures of the coming of the Messiah to put down all oppression of every kind, establish social justice and bring in international peace.

Take, for instance, the prophet Micah:

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (4:2-4)

And Jesus claimed to be their Messiah. They expected him therefore to fulfil these promises, to liberate them from their servitude to their imperialistic overlords, put down oppression everywhere and bring in universal peace. But he didn't and he hasn't. Therefore, plainly, says the Jew, he cannot be the Messiah. And certainly if Jesus is going to maintain his claim to be the Saviour of the world, the Messiah, he will have to answer the question, not, how could God ever judge the wicked? but, why does he not do precisely that? And why has Christ not long since put down the wicked and introduced lasting peace in the world?

Our Lord discusses this question at length in Matthew 13, giving in detail, through a series of parables, the reasons why the rooting out of the evil by force must be and shall be left until his second coming at the end of the age.

We do not now have time to go into those reasons, but we should notice that the Old Testament itself prophesied that there would be an interval between Messiah's ascension and his coming to put down his enemies. 'The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool"' (Ps 110:1).

The LORD is, of course, God the Father. 'My Lord' is David's lord and, as Christ pointed out, David called him 'Lord'. In one sense he was a descendant of David but he was also Son of God. That he should be invited to sit at the right hand of God would scarce have made sense had he not previously descended from heaven to earth. The verse, therefore, implies our Lord's incarnation and as a sequel to that he speaks now of his ascension, 'Sit at my right hand.' But notice what follows next, 'Until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Here the Old Testament is plain, declaring that there would be an interval of time between Messiah's ascension and the putting down of his enemies. And the New Testament, using the language of this very psalm, declares the same. 'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet' (Heb 10:12-13).

But the time will one day come when he shall sit no longer, but arise and proceed to put down evil men. There are several passages in the New Testament that describe this element in the second coming. We shall now examine three of those passages and we shall notice that they all indicate that at the time of the second coming, though evil exists everywhere, it shall be expressing itself especially in one extreme and concentrated form. Christ's coming will deal primarily and specifically with this. This is how Paul puts it:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day [the Day of the Lord] will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2 Thess 2:3-10)

It is very noticeable that in these verses we do not get a general description of all the manifold forms of evil that shall occur at the end of the age. The passage is altogether taken up with the fact that at the end of this age there is to be what it calls the falling away, rebellion, or apostasy. This shall take the form, not merely of a denial of the deity of Christ or any other specifically Christian doctrine, but the outright denial of any God at all in the normal sense of that term and the substitution of the deification of a man who will demand divine honours and worship of all his fellow men.

His claim to divine honours, we are further told, will seem to be substantiated by all kinds of seemingly supernatural powers and wonders, which will in fact be performed by power lent him by Satan himself. They shall be false signs and lying wonders; that is, the signs shall appear so obviously supernatural that many will be deceived into thinking that this man represents ultimate truth. People that have known God's truth, but have been unwilling personally to receive it and accept it as the controlling and directing factor in their lives, will readily be deceived by this apparently supernatural vindication of the claims of *the man of sin* (v. 3 KJV).

Indeed, later it says, 'Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness' (vv. 11–12). At his coming in power and great glory Christ will summarily deal with this man of sin, or lawlessness—this arch-rebel, and with all who have been deceived by him.

Now all this is exactly what John says in the Revelation. He describes the coming of Christ with the armies of heaven, 'He will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty' (19:15). Here in John's language is what happens:

And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse. (19:19–21)

So here again, the specific object of our Lord's judgment at his second coming is said to be a figure called *the beast*, who deceives by means of his false prophet and the performance of seemingly miraculous signs and induces them to worship the image of the beast. He is clearly a political leader to whom ten other kingdoms agree to cede their sovereign power (17:9–14). Revelation 13 moreover, gives an extended description of this beast. He is marked by blasphemy against God (vv. 1, 5) and any idea of a heaven 'out there' (v. 6). Through his department of religion he shall institute the worship of himself as the unifying and controlling feature of his empire (vv. 11–18). Moreover, John expressly tells us that Satan engineers the rise and power of this beast and all his miraculous signs—which is exactly what Paul has said.

But not only do John and Paul agree on this matter. It is obvious that they are saying in more detail what Christ himself had said personally in his discourse on the end of the age:

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness', do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms', do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matt 24:15–30)

Clearly we are in the presence once more of a prophecy of the second coming; and the particular sign that begins the series of events that lead up to the coming is said to be 'the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place.' The holy place is clearly the temple. The abomination of desolation is one of a number of phrases used in the prophecy of Daniel, first to indicate the desecration of the sanctuary in Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes (8:13) when the true worship of God was stopped and pagan rites forcibly substituted; and later for the supreme example of this blasphemy that shall take place at the end of the Age (12:11).

Remarkable, then, is the emphasis that Scripture puts on this feature of the times leading up to our Lord's coming. Of course, we have earlier indicated that man's sin will then express itself in all the usual ways. But the feature that receives the most prominence in Scripture is not his extreme permissiveness in the realm of morality, nor is it the threat of ghastly wars waged with hideously modern weapons. First Thessalonians rather indicates that mankind shall at that time have largely got rid of the threat of war and shall be saying 'peace and security' (5:3).

The sin above all others at the end of the Age will be in the realm of thought; political, religious and philosophical thought—with political uppermost. People will decide, not just as a matter of abstract philosophical speculation but as a practical matter of politics and world control, that the idea of an almighty God 'out there', controlling the universe and this world in it, is no longer necessary or convenient. They will say that mankind has come of age and no longer needs the comfort or restraint of belief in a transcendent God. They will decide that man is God.

Of course, if we have followed the course of history, this will not surprise us. Every now and again political leaders of one kind or another have, as a political device, claimed divine honours. Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor at the time when the Jewish State first lost its sovereignty and for Israel the times of the Gentiles began, set up an image and demanded that his subjects and particularly his deputies and political officers and vassal kings worshipped it. The image was a thinly disguised image of himself and the State and the idea of getting people to worship it was to bring a certain unity and cohesion into his ramshackle empire.

The most notable and thorough use of this device was by the Roman Emperors. It was adopted, again for obviously political purposes, to weld the empire together; to help stabilize the peace that Rome needed so desperately after the Civil Wars. And it was a very convenient device because it could mean different things to different people within the empire.

The Orientals were used to thinking of the kings as demi-gods and emperor worship would seem quite natural to them. At the other extreme, the educated Roman, having mostly lost his faith in the old Roman religion, was quite prepared to offer his pinch of incense to the emperor's image, simply as a political gesture and social convention. And, if recognizing a fellow-human as god seemed to some an intolerably demeaning and potential enslavement of themselves, yet under the tougher emperors the price for refusing was for most of them far too heavy to pay.

But at the end of the Age there will be an outcrop of this deification of man that will make all previous examples look innocent child's play by comparison. The Roman emperors, for instance, never claimed to be more than one additional god among the thousand-and-one gods that pagan imagination had created and not even the chief god at that. The great political leader at the end of the Age will exalt himself 'above all that is called god or that is worshipped.' That is, he will not content himself with claiming to be one among many supernatural powers; and certainly he will not acknowledge a supreme Being above all supernatural powers, as well as natural. He will claim that he himself is the supreme power.

He will not be content to keep his strange mixture of atheism and religion to himself; nor will his idea that he is the Supreme Power be a neurotic fancy, which he indulges in privately. It will become the principle of the State and everyone will be compelled to pay him homage as a means to and token of political cohesion. Then will commence the biggest slavery the human race and spirit have ever known.

At first sight a prediction of this sort may well seem lurid and fantastically improbable. Is it thinkable that a sophisticated Western society, which has largely thrown out any real faith in God or a supernatural world, should ever descend to the institutionalized worship of a man? But a little thought will show that, far from being improbable, it will be but the natural and inevitable harvest of the seed that has been sown.

Take, first, the ideas of the materialistic evolutionists. They deny that there is any God at all and assert that the whole universe, mankind included, is the result of non-intelligent forces working on blind and thoughtless matter. They ascribe the present state of affairs, with its mixture of fantastically wonderful good and horrific evil, to pure chance and accident. But, seeing clearly that one day an accident might well happen that would destroy the world

and man on it, they argue that man (who, by a most fortunate fluke, has evolved an intellect!) must seize this chance and take control of the mindless evolutionary forces and develop his world himself until he arrives at paradise and immortality.

But that does mean taking a long-term view; putting up with a lot of personal suffering and even injustice; curbing one's own selfish desires in the present so that unborn generations may have the chance to enjoy the fruits of mankind's controlled evolution. Say, for instance, the Third World gets too impatient with its underprivileged state and the Western World is not prepared to forego its high standards of living; someone one day is going to say, 'Bother unborn generations and a paradise in the future that I have no hope of seeing. If I cannot have a decent share now, then I'm not going to let anyone else enjoy the world now either.' And if he should get his hands on the controls of a hydrogen bomb and blow the whole world to pieces, that will ruin his chances of bringing in a paradise by controlling evolution.

So those who are suffering and the selfish must be given some motivation to endure their suffering and restrain their selfishness. In the past this is what religion and faith in God supplied. A man who believed in God and in the life to come not only found comfort in his present sufferings and reason not to become embittered by the injustices of life, but he had also grounds for hope that there would one day be a paradise in which he himself might hope to share.

Atheistic evolution is at an immediate and obvious disadvantage. It can offer the individual practically no personal hope at all. It must restrain and repress greed and revenge, which it would find most gratifying, in the vague prospect that man will eventually be able to control his world and the colossal forces of the universe in such a way as will bring in a paradise some multi-million years hence. (Evolution never condescends to make any worthwhile changes within a man's lifetime but always in multi-million-year periods.)

Meanwhile, those who are not prepared to forego their greed and power lust proceed to crave the best paradise in the here and now at the cost of another's suffering and misery. But why should he put up with it and where shall he get the motivation and idealism to provide the strength to do anything about it? Not simply from the test tubes and charts and computerized statistics of the science laboratory. They are too cold and inhuman.

'We must,' says Sir Julian Huxley and evolutionists of his order, 'invent a religion for this purpose.' Not a return to the old religion of faith in an absolute and transcendent God, of course. In what, then? Presumably modern man won't go back to worshipping centipedes; and science has made it impossible for him to imagine the sun or moon as a living being, let alone as a god worth worshipping. The fact is that, if the atheistic evolutionist is right in his theory, the highest thing in the universe that we know of is *man*. A modern religion without a transcendent deity could not worship anything else. And once man is set up as the object of all men's highest aspirations, as the goal to which all his loyalties and loves should be expended, it would be a very short step to the position where—for the sake of focusing the new faith and giving it a heart and symbolic centre—man will be worshipped in the person of the reigning political head.

And it is interesting to observe how notions such as these have in recent years received strong support from men who would not like to be called atheists, but who in fact profess to

be Christians. They argue that God is dead. God is not personal, so it is useless praying because there is no God out there to listen to our prayers. The best one can do is to meditate, for God is in the depth of human experience. Jesus Christ did not come down from heaven or ascend there after the resurrection, for there is no heaven to come down from or return to; or at least no heaven that we could know about or need to be interested in. This is so-called Christianity already drafting out the religious creed of the man of sin.

But it is not unreasonable if one can first accept the presuppositions of the atheist. And indeed, if one could get millions of people enthusiastically embracing such a faith, it would certainly bring in a certain kind of peace, as does the almost universal acceptance of the Communist theory in the East. But when on this basis they cry, 'Peace and safety', Christ shall come and destroy their religion and its head (see 1 Thess 5:3). And he will do so, not because God Almighty is spiteful (though, in the biblical sense, he is jealous), but because it will be the only way of delivering mankind from what by then shall have been demonstrated to be the most evil slavery ever known. Ever since in the Garden of Eden Satan suggested that, if he ate of the forbidden fruit, man would be as God and thus attain a moral and spiritual freedom, mankind has toyed with the idea that if he could rid himself and his society of the concept of a Supreme God out there, he would at last set himself free. It is of course a lie; what Paul calls *The Lie* (2 Thess 2:11). It does not take the imagination of a George Orwell, writing his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to see why that is so. When mankind worships man he will want him to be as near perfection as he can be; and he will want every individual person to be conformed as closely as possible to Marx, the ideal man.

But who will decide what man is and ought to be and by what authority will he decide? The answer is that it will be whoever is able at the time to grasp the most power in his hands. It will be useless to appeal to any absolute standards of morality and truth. Truth will be what the government of the time decides it shall be. Similarly, the government scientists of the time will deny that man has any soul or spirit. According to them, he will simply be the product of his genes and his environment. In concert with the government, they will first arbitrarily decide what image man should be created in and then the scientists will attain that image by their biomechanical engineering. They will control the genes and the government by its politics will control the environment. Any deviations from the government's norm will be rectified or eliminated with all the fervour not only of a political ideology but of a religion. It will be a hideous slavery.

Multitudes will be deceived by it, and particularly people who in their heart of hearts have known the truth of the gospel and have deliberately and knowingly refused it. They shall believe the lie. Moreover the lie shall be supported by the most fantastic discoveries and achievements, many of them made by the help of demonic powers. Masses of people shall believe that the Head of State is indeed a Superman. They will unashamedly worship him, while those who object and determinedly continue to acknowledge and worship the true God of heaven will be dubbed as guilty of anti-social behaviour, in attempting to bring back the old superstitions that filled the world with fear and with religious wars.

4. The coming of the Lord to establish his kingdom and reign

Amid all that devilish deception God shall not leave man without witness. The cosmic disturbances, which our Lord warns us of, will then begin to take place and they will be beyond the power of the man of sin to prevent and control. These cosmic disturbances will not be blind lashings-out on the part of an enraged deity, but a merciful demonstration that the whole set-up of the man of sin is a lie. In those days too the gospel shall be preached in its stark opposition to the lie of man masquerading as God. 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water' (Rev 14:7).

The question will doubtless be asked, 'If our modern age is indeed moving to this frightful slavery and Christ's coming is the means by which man will be delivered, why will not Christ come before the slavery happens and so save mankind from the incalculable suffering of that slavery?'

The answer to that question must be that God is not a tyrant, but a God of love. It would have been an easy thing, power-wise, when man first chose to disbelieve God and grasped at independence, for God to have eliminated man. Doubtless it would have saved a great deal of suffering and trouble, but what would it have proved and what would it have effected? It would have proved God's power; it would have effected the destruction of man, as such; it would have declared the impossibility of having a creature to whom genuine moral freedom could be given. In other words, mankind would have had to be written off as a failure and God would have had to content himself, at best, with a higher form of animal which behaved as it should because it had no freedom of choice.

But God is love and could be satisfied with nothing less than a creature who could love him in the highest sense of that word, which would mean loving as of free choice. Therefore, when mankind rejected God as God and grasped at independence and tried to be as God, God did not immediately withdraw man's free choice but honoured it. True, he surrounded him with many restrictions that should delay his headlong flight to self-destruction, giving him an opportunity to repent with a repentance that was not forced simply by threat of almighty power, but induced by experience.

Long before man's chosen independence of God could lead him to the ultimate of human enslavement and degradation, God staged a demonstration in man's world, plain for all to see, that should make clear what sin would eventually do with the image of man; and at the same time declare God's unswerving love and loyalty to him in spite of his sin. It was so that mankind might see that his only hope of achieving true humanity and real freedom lies in accepting the reality of his relationship as a creature of God and the infinite and genuine love of that Creator towards him.

I refer, of course, to the cross of Christ, where God having become human, a perfect man, offered himself to men. Human sin was exposed for what it really is when, in the name of Roman politics, Greek thought and Jewish religion, it not only crucified him but so tortured him that his face was scarcely recognizable as human (Isa 52:14). When rejection of God had thus destroyed the image of man, God raised our Lord from the dead, thus unambiguously declaring his determination to continue with man. He proceeded to offer forgiveness and acceptance to all people, if they would repent, and a future, not of deification – that is Satan's

lie—but the possibility of becoming children of God, when before they had simply been his creatures, and union with God by his Holy Spirit.

Even so, when people have been able to look upon the love of God as expressed in Christ and his cross and still reject it and stubbornly maintain their myth that independence of God is the only way for them to come of age and grow up to freedom, God will not destroy them or forcibly intervene. He will not take the running of the world out of man's hands and put it into the hands of Christ and his believers before God has allowed man to discover exactly where his choice of independence of God will inevitably lead him.

God will presently remove all restraints that, according to 1 Thessalonians, have kept in check the full development of the mystery of lawlessness. When those restraints are removed man will rush, with the speed of the Gadarene swine, to the full and complete rejection of the whole idea of God and institute the worship of man instead. Scripture affirms that the time of the reign of the man of lawlessness will be mercifully short. But, in those hideous days, it will not be the physical face of God's Christ that they distort by their torture. In his attempt at complete independence of God, man shall find that setting up a man as God will not only mean enacting a lie that can never come true, he will find that he has destroyed the truly human image of mankind in the process.

With that it will be demonstrated at last that God is no tyrant. In sending Christ, the Son of God and perfect man, to destroy the man of sin (along with his religious set-up and those who have followed his pernicious ideology), he has done the only thing that can be done to save humanity. And by that same token, when Christ at his second coming forcibly removes that man of sin and takes over the government of the world, it will not be God taking over from man and so taking out of man's hands the government of the earth that God originally committed to him—it will be the perfect man taking over the government of earth and developing it and its resources as God had originally intended man to do.

It will be government by the perfect man, whose obedience to God was not only worked out in the actual conditions of life on earth in the days of his flesh, but also demonstrated to be utterly free obedience, motivated entirely by uncompelled love of God (John 14:31). And it will be government by the perfect man who proved his love to men by shedding not their blood—as so many earthly rulers have done, but by shedding his own blood for their redemption. And in the time when he reigns he has assured all those who have freely repented, trusted in him and suffered with him, that they shall share the government and reign with him. Paul puts it like this:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:15–17)