

1 Corinthians - Commentaries by W. Noel Tomkins

The Return of the Lord Jesus Christ From Heaven to Meet His Saints in the Air, Return of the Lord Jesus Christ From Heaven to Meet His Saints Air, On the: No. 4 (15:23)

1 Cor. 15:23. On the authority of this verse, some have concluded that the Lord will not come till all who are His, and are children of resurrection, are brought to know Him, and are ready to rise together to meet Him in the air at one and the same moment. I admit the apparent force of this. But I believe it is but apparent, and will not abide the light of the whole scripture. Because, if we have nothing further, we have the ascension of the two witnesses, after the quickening of their dead bodies in Rev. 11—ground, may I not say, for denying that this verse includes all that are Christ's. This would be enough for checking confidence in the unimpregnableness of this conclusion. But I believe, further, that the Apocalypse teaches us that there will be other saints taken up at other times than that contemplated in this passage. For instance, in chap. 41 there appears to be a remnant who are heavenly in their destiny, after the man-child has been caught up; and there are companies seen at times, through the action of that wondrous book, apart from the living creatures and crowned elders, and yet in heaven—such as the slain ones on the sea of glass in chap. 15 as, at the close, distinction is still preserved in chap. 20:4. And, again, I observe, this is not disturbing scripture. It leaves previous revelations untouched. It does in nowise break 1 Cor. 15:23. But it again shows us that, in His perfect method, the Lord so orders and fashions His word under His various "ready writers," if I may so call them, as to provide that the earlier light should let in, not the rebuking or disturbing, but harmonizing light of His further revelations.

And to help our apprehensions of the heavenly position of Israel joining "the fullness of the Gentiles," now gathering in the heavens, I might remember such ones as Hobab and Rahab. Canaan had been espied by the Lord as the portion of the twelve tribes. But at least these two strangers sit down in that inheritance with them. This, however, was no disturbance. It involved no infraction of the family settlement. It was not a new thing, or an after-thought, with God. Our exactness may be offended, but God's provisions were quite ready for those things. But I by no means speak of this as a type, but only as a little helping of our thoughts.

Rev. 16:15. This verse has been read as marking the moment of taking the saints into the air. I would therefore consider it a little, desiring ever to do so in fear and yet delight before Him. There is a promise that the day of the Lord shall not overtake the saints as a thief in the night. (1 Thess. 5) A question may arise, in what way will this scripture be fulfilled? for, like every other, it cannot be broken. There are two ways in which the goodman and his household might be secured from a nightly thief. They might be either removed previously from the house, or kept from their guard in it. Both of these ways will, I believe, in the varied and perfect doings of the Lord, get their illustrations. For when His day comes, and in the majesty and power of judgment He touches this rebel earth again, He will find His elect Israel ready. "Blessed is he that cometh" they will be prepared to say, or have already said, like a guarded watchful household; though they know neither the day nor the hour, they will be in readiness. They will not be injuriously surprised by the solemn visitation which is to destroy the wicked. But in that hour, the saints of the heavenly places will be seen in the train of Him who comes as the thief. As the heavenly army they will then accompany Him (Joel 3:1-11, see ver. 9). For we are abundantly taught that to exercise the power of that day in company with the Lord is part of their promised honor. (Col. 3:4; Rev. 2:26, 27; 17:14; 19:14.) Two distinct companies, therefore, exhibit these two things. Israel will be delivered from the judgment of "the day of the Lord," by being prepared for it in the place where it enters; and the heavenly saints, by being taken away from that place, belonging, as children of the day, to that sphere out of which the day is to pour down its light and terrors. I say not how long this previous removal may have taken place. Other scriptures may lead to that inquiry. I speak here only of the fact of that removal, and thus of the mode of the security of the heavenly saints against the day of the Lord. But I may add, that it is morally, fitting, I judge, that "the more excellent way," so to call it, should be prepared for them.

And these two modes of deliverance can scarcely fail to remind us of Enoch and Noah. Enoch knew that a day of the Lord was coming, for he prophesied of it (Jude 14, 16). So did Noah, for he was told of it (Gen. 6), and that day did come. (Of course I know that it is still to come, in the full sense of Enoch's prophecy.) But Enoch had been previously removed (Gen. 5). And Noah was prepared for it in the place it visited. And all this, I quite believe, has mystic or typical meaning for us. Now in reading 1 Thess. 5 I do not at all doubt that the fear of being kept here on the earth, for the hour of the thief, might arise in the mind of the disciples. And I believe that it did, for that fear, as I judge, becomes, in its season, the occasion of the second Epistle, in which the apostle sets himself to correct the error which sprung from that fear. For as I observed under another meditation, he separates the coming of the Lord from the day of the Lord, attaching our gathering to His coming, and the exercise of judgment in the earth to His day. And in this way their minds, which had been in fear, would be fully relieved. Their fear had come from an imperfect reading of the first Epistle, or from some source which would have worked in the same way, and that epistle at least had not given them ease. But their relief would come from the second, telling them that they should be separated from the house ere the thief enter it. And let me add that the coming of the Lord in the character of a thief in the night, is always (if I judge rightly) connected with this return to the earth, or the coming of the Son of man, i.e., the day of the Lord (Matt. 24; Luke; 1, Thess. 5; 2, Pet. 3). It is connected with the manifestation of judgment, and not with the Lord meeting His saints in the air, or with His coming again to receive them unto Himself.

The duty of watchfulness, most surely, is a moral duty of common enforcement. "What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch." Nothing that could be said as to the strict prophetic application of the Lord's coming as a thief in the night, should, for a moment, be allowed to weaken the sense of the common duty of watching. It is, therefore, in the full spiritual power of this, as being of common concern that it is said, "If therefore, thou wilt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief." But still I say, that as prophetic of a given step, or action in the divine purpose, the coming of the Lord as a thief in the night intimates His surprising the earth in the day of His judgment of it. "As a snare shall it (the day of the Son of man) come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth."

According to this, I read Rev. 16:15. I find the coming of the Lord there spoken of under this figure, and announced as belonging to the time when that faction has been formed on the earth which is to bring Him back. And the reappearing of this figure "the thief in the night," at this

place of scripture, is evidence to me that this word of scripture contemplates an earthly action. And let me ask, let me put it to the thoughts of brethren, does it suit our minds or our hearts to speak of the Lord's coming to meet His saints in the air under such a figure as this I Jesus then comes, and His reward is with Him, He comes as the bright and morning star. He comes again to receive us to Himself, having prepared mansions in heaven for us. He comes with the voice of the archangel. Our conversation is already in that very place from whence He comes, and the bride is ever in spirit bidding Him welcome. Is a coming, thus variously and gloriously spoken of, to take its likeness from the coming of a nightly thief? Never, I believe, does the Spirit give it such. "That day shall not overtake you as thief." His day will surprise all who dwell on the face of the whole earth after that pattern; but He meets His heavenly ones, already in the spirit of their minds there from whence He comes, with other thoughts altogether. If we, therefore, consult all the scriptures which speak of "the thief in the night," we shall find, I think, that such a coming of the Lord does not connect itself with the mystery of His meeting the saints in the air, though it most surely addresses our souls in the power of an exhortation to watchfulness. Rev. 16:15 is not, I therefore in submission suggest, a note of the time at which the saints of the heavenly places are borne upward to meet the Lord. On 2 Peter 3 where the same figure, as we know, is used, I would just add a word—that, in the brilliant and distinguished prophecy which occupies that chapter, the apostle clusters objects together (not confusedly, most surely, but still together) very much in the style of the prophets. It is as though the mantle of the prophets of the circumcision had fallen upon the apostle of the circumcision when he prophesies. But of course I say this, as remembering that all was but the penmanship of the Holy Ghost; believing, however, that this style is to be observed as a help to a right interpretation of that grand prophetic scripture.

Here, I will now leave this deeply interesting subject, desiring I trust unfeignedly, that the light of His own word may either rebuke or sanction all our thoughts as they need.

2 Peter 2, &c., &c. It has been observed, that in the epistles, we get constant warning of certain things which were to happen in the course of the present dispensation, which is sufficient notice to us of delay being put on the coming of the Lord. I grant that we have this warning again and again. "Latter days" and "latter times" are marked by strong moral characters. Grievous wolves also were to enter. Perverse things were to be spoken, and thus both from without and within danger and evil were to come. False teachers were to appear, as in Israel there had been false prophets. These and more than these are announced. The deep and deadly shadows of many corruptions are definitely forecast. I grant all this most surely. How could it be denied? And further, I grant that the history of the dispensation has already been making good, and, as long as it lasts, will continue to make good all these notices, and reveal the substances and terrible forms of these appalling shadows. But the apostles, who severally declare these things, attach them to that present generation, warning those to whom they ministered personally about them, and giving them instruction as to the security of their own souls against them. And at length under the ministry of one of them, the crisis of the churches or candlesticks arrives, the lights of the sanctuary are all gone out, and in the next moment the scene is changed from earth to heaven, and the elect are there (Rev. 1-4). The longer, however, the time of the present gathering from among the Gentiles goes on, and with it the unjudged field of wheat and tares, all these awful notices, I quite admit, will only be the more and more realized, as they hitherto have been. The only thing I suggest here is, that this has not made a necessary delay to our passing upward to meet the Lord, since that great crisis of the candlesticks. Certain things were to be, surely, but the saints of that day are counseled as though they were, even before that crisis. But after that crisis, the heavens are opened and the elect are seen there, as it were like Enoch, without any necessary passage through either evil or sorrow any farther, and without the needful measuring out of days and years.

(To Be Continued)

Bible Treasury: Volume N7, Till He Come (11:26)

Surely if any words find an echo in the believer's heart the above are they. And if there is any center on earth to which with peculiar significance they attach it is surely when, mindful of the Lord's own words, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed," we gather to His name on the first of the week, to remember Himself, and to announce His death "till He come." Has not that death brought us all we have? Was it not at the cost of that body given for us, and by God's will once offered, that we are sanctified—here shown in the loaf? And was it not also that He might sanctify the people with His own blood—shown in the cup, He suffered without the gate? Can we forget those sufferings on Calvary? Yet, alas! we may forget. We need the table of remembrance to call back our hearts to Him, and His devoted love to us, until the time come when we shall need it no more, when He shall come to meet us in the air and we shall be forever with the Lord. May it then be emphatically true for us, "As often as ye eat the bread and drink the cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

At other times He says to us, "Occupy (or trade) till I come" (Luke 19:12-13), for we are His servants. It is only in Luke that He is spoken of as "a certain nobleman." Such, indeed, He was and is. When here, He "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil, for God was with Him." Yet "not this man, but Barabbas," was the object of the popular choice. Do you ask His life? It is not to be found in the earliest list of peers that we have, even amongst the dukes of Esau as given in Genesis 35. That would be far below His dignity, as James says in chapter 2:11, "Our Lord Jesus Christ of glory," and Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:8, "the Lord of glory." Well, "He has gone to receive for Himself a kingdom and to return." It is now our business here to serve Him, as in that coming day His servants shall, "and they shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads" (Revelation 22:3, 4).

As the One who has gone to the Father's house of many abodes (which in no way conflicts with His having taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high as the purger of our sins), He says, "I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am there ye may be also." Is this "blessed hope" (not to be confounded with His appearing, which, too, we love) to be stigmatized, a selfish one? If so, may we in like spirit with the spouse of Sol. 7:10, who could say, "I am my beloved's, and his desire is towards me"—may we desire, in face of all animadversion, to become even more selfish than ever in this respect, that is, to court His approval and delight in us. For do we not "love Him because He first loved us"? Then, truly, we shall desire earnestly that "upon Himself shall His crown flourish" (Psalm 122:18). Yet will not the wish to be with Him predominate? And would He not have it so? "He that hath the bride is the Bridegroom."

In view of His coming for us, how blessed is the assurance given in Revelation 3:10, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience," not merely "my word" (as in John 14:23, R. V., where "word" comprehends His words as a whole), but "the word of my patience." He is patiently

waiting for those concerning whom He says, "I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee." How blessed, then, is His assurance that "I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth." Connected with these words of cheer, what gravity, nevertheless, in the promise and exhortation, "Behold I come quickly! hold fast that which thou hast that no man take thy crown." The crown may be taken. Or do we despise the warning? For these words are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, though given to us by the apostle John, who in his second epistle (ver. 8) admonishes us in connection with the glory of Christ's person, "Look to yourselves that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." Well, "He that shall come will come and will not tarry" (Hebrews 10:37). May we, then (as "the just"), live by faith and not draw back, lest it should have to be said of us, "My soul does not take pleasure in him."

We have been meditating on the Lord's coming for us. Let us, for a while, consider it as regards His coming to Israel.

Jacob's dying charge to his sons is particularly blessed as to Judah; "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a law-giver from between his feet until Shiloh come; and unto Him shall the gathering of the peoples be" (Genesis 49; 10). Now, if Shiloh be taken to mean "sent," or "peace," as some ever it may be, how comforting it is to know that He who at His first advent came unto His own and they received Him not, shall, when He comes back, "receive the obedience of the peoples unto him" (R. V.)!

And, again, "Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city" (Numbers 24:19). "For he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). Cain's city was built after the murder of his brother, and when he "went out from the presence of Jehovah." But destruction shall fall on "him that remaineth of the city." But there is a city—not of man—which Abraham, the friend of God, looked for, even "the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

Until He come! "And thou, profane, wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, when iniquity [shall have] an end. Thus saith the Lord Jehovah, Remove the diadem and take off the crown." What now is shall be no more. The word is, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it; and it (or, this also) shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it" (Ezekiel 21:25-27).

Further, He shall repay recompence. So shall they fear the name of Jehovah from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun. When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the spirit of Jehovah shall raise up a standard against him. And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith Jehovah" (Isaiah 59:19, 20). Yes. "They shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother; saying, Know Jehovah, for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Hebrews 8:11, 12).

But for ourselves, we wind up with the promise thrice given in the last chapter of the Revelation, and a threefold cord is not easily broken, "Behold, I come quickly; blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (ver. 7). And, "Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give every man according as his work shall be" (ver. 12). Finally, "He which testifieth these things saith (not, behold), Surely I come quickly" (ver. 20). May our hearts respond, "Amen, come, Lord Jesus"! Meanwhile, may His grace be "with all the saints," and be enjoyed and counted on by them, for His name's sake! W. N. T.

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