

“MARANATHA” -- “OUR LORD COME”

A. sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 17, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Nineteen centuries ago, in the early days of the church, Christians used an expression which we seldom hear today. It was the Aramaic word, “Maranatha,” which means “Our Lord, come.” It was often spoken orally; it was used at the end of written documents; it was inscribed on the walls of the catacombs and elsewhere. It was constantly in the hearts and on the tongues of early Christians. It was a kind of prayer, “Our Lord, come.”

Christianity began in the pagan Roman world, where there were many persecutions and much uncertainty. These negative conditions encouraged the desire for the Lord to come speedily. In the second place, the early Christians lived in a rather meager world. They did not know the comforts and luxuries of life which we know today, but rather the bare necessities of life. There were privations common to all men in that day that we of our day would find intolerable. Add to this the fact that many of the early Christians were slaves and we can see still another reason why the early Christians were quite willing to give up this world for a better world to come. We can further understand the longing of the early Christians for Christ to come when we realize that they had a very real conception of the blessings of the future life in heaven. Having heard from Christ and the apostles something of the untarnished joys of heaven, they looked forward to eternity with enthusiasm.

Today, in our twentieth century, we have less fear, less persecution, and less suffering than did the early Christians. It certainly goes without saying that our lives are also filled with more temporal blessings than were theirs, for we have not only the necessities of life but an abundance of luxuries. The contrast between this world and heaven is not so sharp as it was in the minds of the early Christians. As a result of all of these factors, the modern Christian does not really long for the coming of the day of the Lord. Hence, he seldom says, “Maranatha,” or “Our Lord, come.” Because I believe that we Christians of modern times need to think more often and more seriously of the life to come, with its wondrous blessings for the redeemed and its terrible catastrophic tragedies for the lost, I want to read with you some of the passages which we find in the New Testament about the coming of the Lord. I believe that a clearer vision of heaven will afford joy to the Christian and that it will encourage all of us to make more careful preparation so that we may be ready when the Lord comes.

Incidental References

Throughout the length and breadth of the New Testament there are numerous references to the fact that Christ will come again. Many of these are woven in an incidental manner into portions of the scriptures which deal primarily with other subjects. For example, in I Cor. 11:23-26, we are reading about the Lord’s Supper, but we find an emphasis upon the coming of the Lord also. Here is the passage, “For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, this do as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.” Having pointed out that one of the primary purposes of the Lord’s Supper was the remembrance of Christ, Paul then pointed out a second reason for eating the supper. “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord’s death till he come.”

A similar incidental emphasis is found in II Tim. 4:7-8, where the apostle Paul, as an old man imprisoned in Rome, writes to the young preacher Timothy, as follows, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me in that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing.” Those who will be saved are those who have looked forward to the coming of the Lord.

More Extended Passages

In addition to these brief indications that the early Christians expected Christ’s return, there are more extended passages whose central message is the coming of the Lord. Matt. 25 is such a passage. It begins with the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom were foolish in that they made no preparation for the return of the bridegroom, and five of whom were wise in that they did make preparation for his return. The passage ends, “Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour.” (Matt. 25:13).

The second section of Matt. 25 presents the parable of the talents. The men who received five and two talents were rewarded because they had used their lord’s money wisely, whereas the man who received one talent and did nothing with it was cast out into the outer darkness.

The final section of Matt. 25 is the extended picture of the final judgment, the most complete such picture that we find in the entire Bible. It begins, “But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his

glory, and before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats; and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world ... Then shall he say also to them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels ... And these shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25:31-34, 41, 46).

In the previous chapter of Matthew our Lord had said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only. As the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and they knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall be the coming of the Son of man. Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken and one is left: two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is taken, and one is left. Watch therefore, for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh.” (Matt. 24:35-42). The emphasis here is upon the unexpectedness of Christ’s return.

A Heavenly Home

Perhaps the dearest of all the passages announcing Christ’s return is that found in John 14:1-3, where the Lord said, “Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” Surely it is heart-warming to know that our Lord has gone to prepare a place for us. This is a great encouragement to live in such a manner that we will someday be prepared for the place that the Lord is now preparing for us.

As we grow older and our physical faculties fade, it is heartening to remember the words of the apostle Paul, “Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; but we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens.” (II Cor. 4:16-5:1). A few sentences later the apostle Paul adds, “For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” (II Cor. 5:10).

Because some of the early Christians had lost loved ones and feared that their deaths meant that they would miss the coming of the Lord and the life everlasting, the Holy Spirit guided Paul to write, “But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep, that ye sorrow not even as the rest, who have no hope, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.” (I Thess. 4:13-18).

No Earthly Reign

In this beautiful and moving description of how the Lord will come we Christians are encouraged. It will certainly be a great moment when all of the saintly dead are raised and those who live on until the end of time join with them as together they are caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord. This passage also, along with others that we have studied, indicates that when the Lord comes it will be to judge mankind and to take the righteous home with him to heaven, rather than to reign on earth for a thousand years, with Jerusalem as his headquarters city. While there are many conscientious believers in Christ who expect him to reign on earth for a millennium their expectation is a false one based on a misunderstanding of figurative passages.

Actually, there is no scripture that indicates that Christ will ever set foot on the earth again. He will come to call forth the righteous, will meet them in the air and will take them to be with him eternally in heaven. Our Lord’s kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, not a literal, physical one. If he had wished to establish a physical kingdom in Jerusalem, he could have done so when he was on earth before. There is no indication that he had such a desire then nor that he has such a desire now. In John 18:36 he said, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” The figurative, prophetic passages of the New Testament which are sometimes interpreted to mean a literal, earthly reign of a thousand years are simply indications that the gospel of Christ will bind Satan for an indefinite period of time. Certainly no one literalizes the abyss and the chain of Revelation 20. Why then should he literalize the one thousand years that is a part of the same verse?

Several decades had passed and the Lord had not returned. Some of the Christians began to wonder if perhaps they had misunderstood the Lord in thinking that he planned to come again. Critics mocked the Christians, saying that their hope of a returning Lord was pure imagination. It is in this situation that the Holy Spirit guided Peter to write, “In the last days mockers shall come with mockery, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things

continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willfully forget, that there were heavens from of old, and an earth compacted out of water and amidst water, by the word of God, by which means the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: but the heavens that now are, and the earth, by the same word have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." Just as God had destroyed the earth once by water, he has promised that he will destroy it again by fire.

Destruction of the earth

"But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." This simply means that long periods of time from the human viewpoint are as nothing in God's sight. His long delay in coming is not significant, though it seems like a long period of time in man's eyes. Then, Peter gives the reason why the Lord has delayed his coming, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." It is a rather wonderful thought that the Lord has delayed his return and the judgment which will immediately follow because he loves the souls of men and wants all men to come to repentance before the great and terrible day of judgment.

However, the passage continues, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? But according to his promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (II Peter 3:3-13).

It is apparent from this reading that the day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly. When it comes this earth will be destroyed by fire. Surely we do not want to be here when that terrible event takes place. It is imperative that we come to Christ and let him cleanse us from our sins and that we then follow in his footsteps as we live so that someday we may be worthy of being called forth to meet him in the air and to escape the terrible tragedy of the sinful world. A clear realization that Christ is coming and that man must face the judgment is a great encouragement toward righteous living. Faith in Christ as God's son, made meaningful by obedience to the Lord's commands is an imperative for each of us. If you have not repented of past sins, confessed the name of Christ, and been baptized for the forgiveness of sins, you must do so immediately. There is no certainty of tomorrow, only a certainty that without becoming a Christian, man is eternally lost.

Conclusion

Recently I visited one of our dear friends, a devout Christian in her nineties, who is now bedfast. Several years ago she lost her beloved husband, a companion of more than three score years. She has no children to care for and love her in these declining years of life. With tears in her eyes she asked, "Brother Baxter, is it wrong for me to want to die and go to heaven?" Some of her friends had chided her a bit when she had expressed such a desire, urging her to want to live on here on the earth. My answer was, "No, it is not wrong to want to die and go to heaven. It is Christian."

Without being dissatisfied here on earth, and without lessening our efforts for the Cause of Christ here, let us all look forward to our Lord's coming. Let us appreciate this life and use it to the full in every good and wholesome way. Let us enjoy wholesome family relations, challenging work, and the beauties of the world about us, but let us also look forward with eagerness to a better life to come. It was the apostle Paul who used the expression, "For it is very far better." (Phil.123). Let us make every effort to be sure that we are ready when the Lord calls us home, whether he calls us in an individual way through death, or whether we live until the great day of the Lord's return. Let us learn to say, "Maranatha,"--"Our Lord, come."