

CHAPTER SIX

THE ADVENT

WHAT a trial the departure of Jesus must have been to His disciples! His absence was a bitter blank in their circle. How they would miss Him! He knew this, and prepared them for it. Love like theirs could ill bear the absence of one so dear. No wonder that they delighted in the prospect of His return, and clasped the promise of it to their heart, as their treasure and their joy. "I will see you again," was the solace of their souls. They knew that he loved them though absent; they were made to taste the refreshment of His spiritual presence; their inward fellowship with Him was unbroken, yet to see Him again face to face was what they desired. Without this they could not be satisfied.

What a trial also must His departure have been to the family that He loved at Bethany! How often had He been their guest! How often had He sat at their table, and slept beneath their roof! How often had they watched Him in the still evening, coming over the brow of Olivet, and slowly descending its shady slopes! How eagerly they had gone forth to meet Him, and to welcome Him to their quiet dwelling, where no city hum could meet His ear, and nought be heard around save the breath of the breeze as it murmured through the palms! What a blank, then, would His absence be! How empty, how desolate would their dwellings now appear! Their loved friend and guest had gone, and left behind Him a vacancy which none but Himself could ever fill. They could not doubt His love; they had His abiding though unseen fellowship; but *He*, the living Jesus,—He, the visible companion, was away. How they would mourn! How eagerly they would cling to the promise of His speedy return! It would be to them truly a "blessed hope."

Such should be the feelings of the Church, such should be the longings of every saint. The

Bridegroom is absent, and should not the friends of the Bridegroom mourn? Above all, should not the Bride lament His absence? Should she not watch without ceasing, for the return of the beloved of her heart? Until He appear, she cannot be comforted. She must feel the dreary blank. No glory, no prosperity to which she may attain, can satisfy her without His personal presence. A Millennium, without Him in the midst, would be poor indeed. And besides, it is on His *return* that God wishes her to fix her eye. It is around His return that all her hopes revolve. It is *in* His return that all the glory she has been promised is wrapped up. It is *then* that the marriage is to take place, for this is but the time of her betrothment. It is then that she is to receive from His own hands the crown of royal dominion, and be invested with the rule of the universe as His queen. Till then, sorrow and tribulation are her lot below.

Some wish to brand all this as carnal. But what do they mean by carnal? Is it sinful, fleshly, corrupt? Do they mean this? Then I answer that it is not carnal; it is holy, it is spiritual. If by carnal, they mean human, natural, I admit it. It is human, it is natural. God meant it so to be. This was one of the ends for which the Word was made flesh, that God might present Himself to us in visible form, so that we might have fellowship according to our nature. It was the God who made us that gave us these longings for visible, tangible intercourse, this delight in hearing, seeing, handling each other. Without these our nature cannot be satisfied. And just that we might be satisfied, He sent us His Son, in the likeness of an elder brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, to meet those natural and God-given cravings of our souls. It is upon this principle of our nature, holy love, and holy desire for personal intercourse with Him we love, that our

grief for the absence of the Lord, and our desire for His return, are founded. They are not, then, carnal; they are spiritual, they are holy.

Our union with Christ by faith necessarily leads us to desire closer and more sensible union. Faith can do much, but still it cannot do all; it is not sight; and the stronger it becomes, the more does it excite within us the desire for sight. To know that I am His and that He is mine, and yet not to long to behold and embrace Him, is strange inconsistency, nay, it is undisguised coldness and estrangement. And to make His *spiritual* presence a reason for not desiring His actual presence, is to turn a blessed privilege into an excuse for unbelief and unfaithfulness. Was it not the beloved disciple,—he who enjoyed most of His spiritual presence,—he who was most favored with visions and revelations of the Lord, that has left behind him as the closing words of inspiration, so earnest an expression of his longing for the coming of the Lord? The well-known voice, addressing him amid the rocks of Patmos, had no sooner said, “Surely I come quickly,” than the full heart of the apostle joyfully responded, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” [Rev. 22:20]. Each year that passes over us says, “Surely I come quickly.” Each prophetic sign now pro-claiming itself, in heaven or on earth, each convulsion, each famine, each calamity, each rumor of war, says, “Surely I come quickly.” Every event in these last days gives utterance to the same note of promise and of warning. Do *we*, then, respond with joyful hearts, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus?”

The Lord likens Himself to “a certain nobleman” who went into a far country “to receive for himself a kingdom and to return” [Luke 19:12]. He is now in that far country, and has been sojourning there these eighteen hundred years. But He is not always to remain there: He is to return, having received the kingdom. Before He left, He gave many intimations regarding His return. His instructions were minute and special, imply-ing the great stress He laid upon it, and His anxiety that His Church should at all times be fully prepared for it, however sudden it might be. He always spoke of its time as a profound

uncertainty, but of the event itself as most absolutely certain, and most abruptly unexpected, overtaking men “as a snare,” stealing it upon them with silent foot, as “a thief in the night.” He intimated, moreover, that it was not far off; that the period of His absence would be but “a little while,” and that the day of His advent was so hidden that no one could calculate it, no one could say, “It cannot be in my day.” “Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, not the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” [Matt. 24:36].

Looking to these intimations, the early Christians were ever on the eager watch to hail His Advent. It was the resting place of their hopes, the strength of their souls, the very life of their joy. They allowed no object to intervene between them and their Lord’s appearing; they were ever waiting and looking for it, as if all between it and them were a dreary, rugged waste. As, in a night of clouds, when no small tempest lies upon his vessel, the seaman’s eye is ever on the outlook for the star of morning, so were their anxious eyes, amid tribulation and darkness, ever watching for the appearing of “the bright and morning star.”

He did not, however, come in their day. The Bridegroom tarried, the King delayed His return. Was, then, all their waiting profitless? Were they as men disappointed, cheated, befooled? No! their watching was not in vain. Besides its being their Lord’s command, it was blessedness unspeakable to them. It sustained them, comforted them, gladdened them, sanctified them in a way as no other truth, no other hope could have done. Verily they had their reward.

But are His promises made of none effect by this delay? Are we to suppose that when He said, “Surely I come quickly,” He did not truly mean what He said? No. He deceived them not: nor did He speak at random, using loose or exaggerated language. And though they miscalculated the time implied in the “quickly,” yet that did not prevent their holding fast the great idea involved in it, namely, the suddenness of the Advent, and the entire uncertainty as to its time. If the first age could

say, "Ah! He has not come in our time; the word "quickly" did not apply to our time;" he second age could take up the welcome promise, and say, "He came not in the first age, indeed, and thus far our ideas of His coming have not been verified; but His not coming in the first age is all the stronger reason for expecting Him in the second." So also might the third age reason from His not appearing in the second." And thus might each succeeding age most justly argue, concluding from His non-arrival in the preceding age, not that He coming was to be prolonged indefinitely, and that, therefore, they might cease watching and expecting, but that He must be so much the nearer in their day. Take a common instance. A friend promises you a visit "very soon." His language is such that he may perchance come tomorrow; and accordingly you wait for his arrival on that day. But he comes not. The third day passes, but still he comes not. What do you infer from this? Do you say forthwith, "Oh! He did not mean what he said; I must have mistaken him; he meant that I was to go to him, and not that he was to come to me." Would you reason thus? Not if you believed his word, and were assured that no hindrance could stay him. Not if you were really anxious for his arrival, and felt the dreary solitude of absence from him. On the contrary, you would say, "I know he will fulfill his promise, and that nothing *can* hinder him; and therefore, since he has not arrived today, I may be more sure of him tomorrow." Every lengthening day would only make you the surer, as well as the more eager in your expectations.

Just so ought the Church reason regarding the Lord's appearing. He came not in the first watch of the night; but what of that? We may more confidently reckon Him in the third. He came not in the third; but what of that? Shall we weary of watching? Shall hope deferred make our hearts sick? Shall expectation give way, and our longings be quenched? Shall we conclude that He cannot come in the *fourth*? In that fourth and last watch of the night we seem now to be. And what shall we say? My Lord delayeth His coming? He has been so long behind the appointed time, and has so often

disappointed us, that perhaps He may not come at all? Shall we give birth to such thoughts, or utterance to such words as these? Nay; let us lift up our heads, knowing that now our redemption must be drawing nigh. We are surer than ever that He is near, even at the doors. If this be the fourth and last watch of the night, then beyond that His stay cannot be prolonged, for He comes as the star of morning, the herald of the dawn. He must be nigh. He was near eighteen hundred years ago. He must be much nearer now. "He that shall come will come, and will not tarry" [Heb. 10:37].

If the warning words, "Behold, I come quickly," sounded with such solemnizing power in the Church's early days, how much more loudly ought they to peal upon us now! If they broke like threatening thunder upon the slumbers of a careless world in these times, how appalling, how overwhelming now! If in the primitive age they carried with them such a potent spell to nerve and animate the Church with more than human vigor and endurance; to fill her soul with more than mortal joy; to bear her far above this earth, as upon eagles' wings; to disenchant the principalities and powers of darkness of all their power to harm; what ought they not to do now, when the revolution of so many centuries has brought us so much nearer the expected time?

Are these words of warning, then, consistent with the fact of so long an interval having to elapse before the coming of the Lord? So far as God is concerned, it is not hard to understand how there should be entire consistency between these two; for "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." But in so far as man is concerned, it may not seem so easy to establish the consistency. Let us consider the difficulty. It is simply this. A far longer interval has taken place than the words of Christ seem to imply. How, then, could He intend to forewarn us, and stir us up to watchfulness?

On this I remark, that though the word "quickly" is used, the time is not fixed. Had the time been precisely given, and had the interval passed over the appointed time, then truly we might have wondered. But no date is given. It is

merely said, "I will not be long." How long He does not say. In like manner the command to "watch" is to be explained. Suddenness of arrival is that which it speaks of; and it is this *suddenness* that is made the motive to continual vigilance. Had a date been given, however, the idea of suddenness would have been entirely withdrawn. When He says, "Behold, I come as a thief: blessed is he that watcheth!" He is calling on the Church to prepare for His unexpected return,—a return which would not be long, and would be very sudden. The words, then, which the Lord used were such as to keep His Church ever awake; to prevent her from saying, "He is not here." There was no deception here. It was simply dealing with man according to his finite nature and his limited knowledge, instead of dealing with him according to God's infinite nature and unlimited knowledge. When, for instance, God speaks of our days as an handbreadth, and warns us by their brevity, he is dealing with us according to our ignorance, and not according to His knowledge. He knows that you little child, whom He is calling to consider life's briefness and uncertainty, is to live perhaps to fourscore years. Yet He sends him the warning, "Thou mayest die tomorrow." Is there deception here? He is speaking to him after his nature. He is turning to good account man's utter ignorance of the future. He is showing us one of the many ways in which it may be made a blessing. This may be called a deceptive warning, founded on our shortsightedness; but who is there that *feels* in his conscience that there is any deception in this matter? Do we not rather feel that this is the only way in which we could be treated, unless we were to be made partakers of Jehovah's omniscience, and thus cease to be capable of human responsibilities, or acted upon by human motives?

It is precisely so with the Church, in reference to the Advent of the Lord. It must be taken for granted that we are ignorant of the future; and the question is, in what way shall that ignorance be dealt with? Shall it be removed, and man let entirely into the secrets of God? That would be impossible, as well as inconsistent with his responsibility. If, then, the

ignorance is to remain, is it not to be turned to profit? Is it not to be acted upon so as to be the medium of blessing? Surely it must be so. And this is what God has done. He has addressed Himself, if one may so speak, to our *ignorance*, and converted that into a mighty lever for acting most beneficially upon our motives and responsibilities.

But could this have been done had a date been given, and a time fixed, on which we could calculate? I answer, No, it could not. A fixed interposing period, made known to us, removes the very *fulcrum* on which this lever was acting. It puts man in possession of a fact which will enable him to make calculations as to the exact time when preparation will be necessary, and meanwhile to say, "Take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry." If it had been said to the primitive Church, Your Lord is to come in the year 1000, would not this have removed all necessity for *watching*? I do not say it would have destroyed the necessity for being *prepared*, though it would have weakened the motive; but it would have taken away all necessity for *watching*. For how is it possible that I can watch for an event which I am positively assured is not to take place for a thousand years hence? It does not remove the difficulty to say that faith can overleap the thousand years. I know that it can, and that it ought. But that is not the question. The point is, Can faith *watch* for an event which, it is assumed, shall not arrive for a whole millennium? Can faith say, "I know that Christ's coming shall not be for a thousand years, but yet I do not know that it may be tomorrow?" If the word *watch* means anything, it must mean that the time is *not* known, that the interval is not ascertained. The moment it is positively ascertained, that moment *watching* ceases. I can *wait* in such a case, but I cannot *watch*. Now, if it is not mere waiting for Christ that is demanded of us; it is not mere preparation; it is not mere looking for it; it is not mere longing for it;—all these, I admit, are quite consistent with an ascertained interval of one thousand years. It is *watching* that is incompatible with such an interval. To bring it into harmony you must alter the meaning of the

word. It is no longer *watching*. It is simply *waiting*, but nothing more.

If so, I ask, How is it possible that the Millennium can precede the Advent? How can I *watch* for that which I positively know to be a thousand years distant? And especially if these thousand years be so marked that I cannot mistake either their beginning or end, there can be no *watching* at all. None just now, for I know that one thousand years must elapse before He comes. None when these thousand years are closing, for I shall know exactly the day when He cometh.

There is but one answer to this. It is founded on the apostle's caution to the Thessalonians in his Second Epistle. He tells them that the day of the Lord shall not come "except there come a falling away first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."¹ It is argued that, as the apostle did not reckon the interposition of this event between him and the Advent to be inconsistent with the command to watch, so the interposition of the millennial age cannot be inconsistent with it.

On this, I remark that the interposition of an *event* is very different from the inter-position of a *period*. The latter seems to be incompatible with watchfulness, but not the former; more especially when that event is declared to be already in progress, as is done by the apostle when he says "the mystery of iniquity doth already work." For thus no *time* is given, and it is the *absence of time* that is the foundation of watchfulness. It is the presence of *time*, as an element, that destroys the possibility of watching; and it is the absence of that element that produces the watchful spirit. The event which the apostle interposes is one which he declares to be already begun. It is an event which might be consummated within a very

short space; so short, that when known to be commenced, no man could say of it that it might not be brought to a crisis without delay. Time is a thing on which a man can calculate with precision; an event or a crisis is a thing on which he cannot pronounce. Its development may be with the unexpected suddenness of the lightning. We have, in our own day, witnessed so many instances of the rapid development of events; events which we should have judged to be the product of ages; that we, of all others, should be cautious in affirming that length of time must be allowed for an event which is frequently alluded to as one of startling swiftness, alike in its "shooting forth" and in its passing away. "Behold at evening-tide trouble, and before the morning he is not."

It is no answer to say to this, that the development of the Antichristian apostasy has already occupied ages, and therefore it is impossible to speak of it as an event of the kind referred to. For Scripture declares that it *is* just such an event of sudden crisis. Apart from this, however, is it not plain that we are measuring the prophetic aspect of the event by the historical one? We are supposing that because so long an interval has actually elapsed, therefore that interval must have been foreshadowed: and that because we now see that the Antichristian leaven has taken so long to develop, therefore the early Christians must have *foreseen* this with equal clearness. If this could be proved to be the case, then the element of time would necessarily be introduced, and my argument overthrown. But I believe this *cannot* be shown; and until it be so, the argument stands good. And does not the apostle's language seem as if intended to exclude the element of time, and to fix attention upon the event itself, as one which was on the very edge of bursting forth, and which, like a pent-up river, would *in an instant burst forth* so soon as a certain barrier should be removed? And further, was it not the intention of the Spirit of God, even in predicting *dates*, to exclude this element as much as possible? Was it not for this end that we read always of times, and days, and months? The shortest periods are selected, as if to prevent man from introducing

¹ This argument of our opponents takes, of course, for granted, that the day of the Lord spoken of is really the Second Advent. If so, then they must admit that this is the same coming that is to destroy Antichrist; for the coming is only postponed, if we may so speak, until Antichrist shall arise. That which was "not to come" until the falling away should take place, must be that very same thing which does come as soon as that apostasy has taken place.

an element which would have the effect of ungirding his loins, and saying, "My Lord delayeth his coming." Are not all the prophecies so worded as to prevent any age of the Church from saying, "The crisis cannot be in our day?" And does not this peculiar construction of prophetic language proceed upon the principle that an interposed *period* must destroy vigilance, but that an interposed *event* does not? That event was so predicted, that being known to be already in motion, its crisis might arrive at any time. And thus, while the church was kept ever watchful for her coming Lord, she was also kept with her eye fixed upon the workings of that apostasy, not knowing but that in a moment the explosive and combustible materials might kindle, and with their hellish blaze wrap Christendom, if not the world, in flame.

Is not this the *position* in which we now stand? The apostasy has been working these eighteen hundred years. It has more than once in successive ages appeared to come to a crisis; yet *the* crisis has not yet arrived. The Papal apostasy is by far the most likely thing to the predicted Antichristianity that the world has yet seen; but there is something beyond it, more fearful than any hitherto: in which shall be concentrated not merely *many* of the elements of the evil that have formerly shot up in other days, but *all* the different forms of evil, apostasy, rebellion, idolatry, superstition, infidelity, that have broken loose upon the earth since the days of Cain. It is for this that we are now looking. We see the intermingling elements. We mark the rapid fermentation. We are startled with the swift career of action in each event, starting from the goal but yesterday, and finishing its race tonight. We are horrified at the giant stature which every form of sin reaches in a single day. It would seem as if some tropic sun of hell were glaring down upon us, ripening evil before its time; and preparing for us a vintage of iniquity, almost before "the sour grape is seen ripening in the flower."

But, besides all this, let us remember, that it is *before* the last mighty crisis that the saints are

caught up to meet the Lord in the air.² Christ's first action after leaving the Father's throne, is to raise His dead saints and change His living ones. He comes no doubt to destroy Antichrist, and to pour out the terrors of fiery judgment upon an apostate and blaspheming earth. But in these acts of final vengeance His saints are associated with Him: for this "honor have all the saints" (Ps. 149:6-9). and this is that to which our Lord refers when He tells us, that "two shall be together in the field, one shall be taken (caught up) and the other left" (Matt. 24:40). These scenes of vengeance we shall behold; but only afar off. Among them we shall not be. We shall have already entered our chambers and have shut our doors about us until the indignation be passed over. Safe hidden in the clefts of the rock, we shall look out and see far beneath us the havoc of the wasting storm, and mark the swellings of the fiery flood as it rolls its red billows over earth, swallowing up city and village, tower and temple, in the advancing current, hushing alike the roar of its tumult and the "noise of its vials," till, as, amid the deep vapor, we discern the smoke of "that great city Babylon," we take up the song of Moses and of Miriam, and call on heaven and earth to rejoice with us over the ruin of that habitation of devils whose power and pomp and glory in one hour have perished, laid waste like Sodom, swallowed up in that abyss out of which no second Babylon shall arise.

If these things be so, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness? [II Pet. 3:11]. For what is there now between us and the coming of the Lord? What is there to lead us to suppose that He is not nigh, even at the doors? If, even before the last crisis bursts upon the amazed earth, we are to be caught up out of it and taken away from the evil to come, then it is high time to awake out of our sleep. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand" [Rom. 13:12]. The Judge standeth before the door. "WATCH, therefore, for ye

² Here Bonar appears to place the rapture prior to the concluding "wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16). B.E.H.

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know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh" [Matt. 24:42; 25:13].

But a few years,—it may be less,—and we shall be beyond the circle where sorrow enters, beyond the ebbing and flowing of human circumstances, seeing Him face to face whom not having seen we loved; our battles fought, our wounds all healed, our toils forgotten, and out tears all wiped away.

Would it not rejoice your hearts if you were sure to live to see the coming of the Lord, and to see His glorious appearing and retinue? If you were not to

die, but to be caught up thus to meet the Lord, would you be averse to this? Would it not be the greatest joy that you could desire? For my own part I must confess that death, as death, appeareth to me as an enemy, and my nature doth abhor and fear it; but the thoughts of the coming of the Lord are most sweet and joyful to me; so that if I were but sure that I should live to see it, and that the trumpet should sound and the dead should rise and the Lord appear before the period of my age, it would be the joyfullest tidings to me in the world.³

³ Richard Baxter, *Works*, XVII, p. 555.

Then, Sion, thou shalt fully know
The King of kings revealed below,
In glorious majesty divine.
Righteous and true and good I am,
Jehovah-Jesus is my name,
Thy God in Christ forever thine.
Expecting me on earth to reign,
My people shall not wait in vain;
But saved and perfected in one,
Shall see me come triumphant back,
My train increase, my joy partake,
And share mine everlasting throne.

*Charles Wesley
on Isaiah 49:23*