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### The Second Advent

by Bishop J. C. Ryle (1816 - 1900)

***In language that is both uncomplicated and unambiguous, Bishop Ryle deals with a subject that is so relevant for the Church of Christ today. The indifference of many toward the Bible's teaching on the Second Advent, the slumbering and sleeping of many regarding the Saviour's return and the inconsistencies of those who reject a literal interpretation of Scripture prophecies are all dealt ably and graciously by the great man.***

***Readers can but benefit from reading this short epistle.***

***Rev Ivan Foster.***

***July, 2012.***

Of all the doctrines of the Gospel, the one about which Christians have become most unlike the first Christians, in their sense of its true value, is the doctrine of Christ's second advent. I am obliged to say this of all denominations of Protestants. I know not of any exception. In our view of man's corruption, of justification by faith, of our need of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the sufficiency of Scripture — upon all these points I believe we should find the English believers were much of one mind with believers at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, or Rome, in former times. But in our view of the second advent of Christ, I fear we should find there was a mighty difference between us and them if our experience could be compared. I am afraid we should find that we fall woefully short of them in our estimate of its importance: that in our system of doctrine it is a star of the fifteenth magnitude, while in theirs it was one of the first. In one word, we should discover, that compared with them in this matter, *we slumber and sleep.*

I must speak my mind on this subject, now that I am upon it. I do so most unwillingly. I do so at the risk of giving offence, and of rubbing against the prejudices of many whom I love. But it is a cross I feel it a duty to take up And speak I must.

I submit, then, that in the matter of Christ's second coming and kingdom, the Church of Christ has not dealt fairly with the prophecies of the Old Testament. We have gone on far too long refusing to see that there are two personal advents of Christ spoken of in those prophecies: an advent in humiliation, and an advent in glory—an advent to suffer, and an advent to reign; a personal advent to carry the cross, and a personal advent to wear the crown. We have been "slow of heart to believe ALL that prophets have written" (Luke 24:25). The disciples went into one extreme: they stumbled at Christ's sufferings. We have gone into the other extreme: we have stumbled at Christ's glory. We have got into a confused habit of speaking of the kingdom of Christ as already set up amongst us, and have shut our eyes to the fact that the devil is still the god of this world, and served by the vast majority: and that our Lord, like David in Adullam, though anointed, is not yet set upon His throne. We have got into a vicious habit of taking all the promises spiritually, and all the denunciations and threats literally. The denunciations against Babylon and Nin-



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even and Edom, we have been content to take literally, and hand over to our neighbours. The blessings and promises of glory to Zion, Jerusalem, Jacob and Israel, we have taken spiritually, and comfortably applied them to ourselves and the Church of Christ. To bring forward proofs of this would be waste of time. No man can hear many sermons, and read many commentaries, without being aware that it is a fact.

### Unfair Interpretation

Now I believe this to have been an unfair system of interpreting Scripture. I hold that the first and primary sense of every Old Testament promise as well as threat is the literal one—and that Jacob means Jacob, Jerusalem means Jerusalem, Zion means Zion and Israel means Israel, as much as Egypt means Egypt and Babylon means Babylon. The primary sense, I believe, we have sadly lost sight of. We have adapted and accommodated to the Church of Christ the promises that were spoken by God to Israel and Zion. I do not mean to say that this accommodation is in no sense allowable. But I do mean to say that the primary sense of every prophecy and promise in Old Testament prophecy was intended to have a literal fulfilment, and that this literal fulfilment has been far too much put aside and thrust into a corner. And by so doing I think we have exactly fulfilled our Lord's words in the parable of the ten virgins — we have proved that we are slumbering and sleeping about the second advent of Christ.

But I submit further, that in the interpretation of the New Testament, the Church of Christ has dealt almost as unfairly with our Lord's second advent, as she has done in the interpretation of the Old. Men have got into a habit of putting a strange sense upon many of those passages which speak of "the coming of the Son of Man", or of "the Lord's appearing". And this habit has been far too readily submitted to. Some tell us that the coming of the Son of Man often means death. No one can read the thousands of epitaphs in Churchyards, in which some text about the coming of Christ is thrust in, and not perceive how widespread is this view. Some tell us that our Lord's coming means the destruction of Jerusalem. This is a very common way of interpreting the expression. Many find the literal Jerusalem everywhere in New Testament prophecies, though, oddly enough, they refuse to see it in the Old Testament prophecies. Some tell us that our Lord's coming means the general judgment, and the end of all things. This is their one answer to all inquiries about things to come.

Now I believe that all these interpretations are entirely beside the mark. I have not the least desire to underrate the importance of such subjects as death and judgment. I willingly concede that the destruction of Jerusalem is typical of many things connected with our Lord's second advent, and is spoken of in chapters where that mighty event is foretold. But I must express my own firm belief that the coming of Christ is one distinct thing, and that death, judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem are three other distinct things. And the wide acceptance which these strange interpretations have met with, I hold to be one more proof that in the matter of Christ's second advent, the Church has long slumbered and slept.



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### The Truth of Scripture

The plain truth of Scripture I believe to be as follows: Christ will come again to this world with power and great glory. He will raise His saints, and gather them to Himself. He will punish with fearful judgments all who are found His enemies, and reward with glorious rewards all His believing people. He will take to Himself His great power, and reign, and establish a universal kingdom. He will gather the scattered tribes of Israel, and place them once more in their own land. As He came the first time in person, so He will come the second time in person. As He went away from earth visibly, so He will return visibly. As He literally rode upon an ass — was literally sold for thirty pieces of silver — had His hands and feet literally pierced — was numbered literally with the transgressors — and had lots literally cast upon His raiment — and all, that Scripture might be fulfilled — so also He will literally come, literally set up a kingdom, and literally reign over the earth, because the very same Scripture has said that it shall be so.

The words of the angels, in the first of Acts, are plain and unmistakable: "This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). So also the words of the Apostle Peter: "The times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and He shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:19-21). So also the words of the Psalmist: "When the Lord shall build up Zion He shall appear in His glory" (Ps. 102:16). So also the words of Zechariah: "the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee" (Zech. 14:5). So also the words of Isaiah: "The Lord of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before His ancients gloriously" (Isa. 24:23). So also the words of Jeremiah: "I will bring again the captivity of My people Israel and Judah, saith the Lord, and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it". "I will bring again the captivity of Jacob's tents, and have mercy on his dwelling place; and the city shall be built on her own heap" (Jer. 30:3 and 18). So also the words of Daniel: "Behold, one like unto the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before him. And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve Him: His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13, 14). All these texts are to my mind plain prophecies of Christ's second coming and kingdom. All are yet without their accomplishment, and all shall yet be literally and exactly fulfilled.

### Literal Exactitude

I say "literally and exactly fulfilled" and I say so advisedly. From the first day that I began to read the Bible with my heart, I have never been able to see these texts, and hundreds like them, in any other light. It always seemed to me that as we take literally the texts



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foretelling that the walls of Babylon shall be cast down, so we ought to take literally the texts foretelling that the walls of Zion shall be built up — that as according to prophecy the Jews were literally scattered, so according to prophecy the Jews will be literally gathered — and that as the least and minutest predictions were made good on the subject of our Lord's coming to suffer, so the minutest predictions shall be made good which describe our Lord's coming to reign. And I have long felt it is one of the greatest shortcomings of the Church of Christ that we ministers do not preach enough about this advent of Christ, and that private believers do not think enough about it. A few of us here and there receive the doctrine, and profess to love it, but the number of such persons is comparatively very small. And, after all, we none of us live on it, feed on it, work from it, take comfort in it, as much as God intended us to do. In short, the Bridegroom tarries, and we all *slumber and sleep*.

It proves nothing against the doctrine of Christ's second coming and kingdom, that it has sometimes been fearfully abused. I should like to know what doctrine of the Gospel has not been abused. Salvation by grace has been made a pretext for licentiousness — election an excuse for all manner of unclean living — and justification by faith a warrant for Antinomianism. But if men will draw wrong conclusions, we are not therefore obliged to throw aside good principles. We do not give up the Gospel because of the outrageous conduct of the Anabaptists of Munster, or the extravagant assertions of Saltmarsh and William Huntington, or the strange proceedings of Jumpers and Shakers. And where is the fairness of telling us that we ought to reject the second advent of Christ because there were Fifth Monarchy Men in the days of the Commonwealth, and Irvingites and Millerites in our own time. Alas, men must be hard pressed for an argument when they have no better reasons than this!

It proves nothing against the second advent of Christ, that those who hold the doctrine differ among themselves on many particular points in prophecy. Such differences need never stumble anyone, who recollects that unity on great points is perfectly consistent with disagreement on small ones. Luther and Zwingli differed widely in their views of the Lord's Supper: yet who would think of saying that therefore Protestantism is all false? Fletcher and Toplady were both clergymen in the Church of England, but differed widely about Calvinism: yet where would be the sense of saying that all Evangelical religion was therefore untrue? In common fairness this ought to be remembered when people talk of the differences among those who study prophecy. It is possible for men to differ much as to the meaning they place on the symbols in the book of Revelation, and yet on the matter of Christ's coming and kingdom they may be substantially agreed.

It proves nothing against the doctrine that it is encompassed with many difficulties. This I fully concede. The order of events connected with our Lord's coming, and the manner of His kingdom when it is set up, are both deep subjects, and hard to be understood. But I firmly believe that the difficulties connected with any other system of interpreting unfulfilled prophecy are just twice as many as those which are said to stand in our way. I believe too that the difficulties connected with our Lord's second coming are not half so



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many as those connected with His first, and that it was a far more improbable thing, "a priori", that the Son of God should come to suffer, than it is that He should come to reign. And, after all, what have we to do with the "how" and "in what manner" prophecies are to be fulfilled? Is our miserable understanding of what is possible, to be the measure and limit of God's dealings? The only question we have to do with is, "Has God said a thing?" If He has, we ought not to doubt it shall be done.

### The Writer's Testimony

For myself, I can only give my own individual testimony; but the little I know experimentally of the doctrine of Christ's second coming makes me regard it as most practical and precious, and makes me long to see it more generally received.

I find it a powerful spring and stimulus to holy living — a motive for patience, for moderation, for spiritual-mindedness — a test for the employment of time — and a gauge for all my actions: "Should I like my Lord to find me in this place — should I like Him to find me so doing"?

I find it the strongest argument for missionary work. The time is short. The Lord is at hand. The gathering out from all nations will soon be accomplished. The heralds and forerunners of the King will soon have proclaimed the Gospel in every nation. The night is far spent. The King will soon be here.

I find it the best answer to the infidel. He sneers at our churches and chapels, at our sermons and services, at our tracts and our Schools. He points to the millions who care nothing for Christianity after 1,900 years of preaching. He asks me how I can account for it, if Christianity be true. I answer, It was never said that all the world would believe and serve Christ under the present dispensation. I tell him the state of things he ridicules was actually foreseen, and the number of true Christians, it was predicted, would be few. But I tell him Christ's kingdom is yet to come; and although we see not yet all things put under Him, they will be so one day.

I find it the best argument with the Jew. If I do not take all the prophecy of Isaiah literally, I know not how I can persuade him that the 53rd chapter is literally fulfilled. But if I do, I have a resting-place for my lever, which I know he cannot shake. How men can expect the Jews to see a Messiah coming to suffer in the Old Testament prophecies, if they do not themselves see in them a Messiah coming to reign, is past my understanding.

And now, is there one among the readers of this address who cannot receive the doctrine of Christ's second advent and kingdom? I invite that man to consider the subject calmly and dispassionately. Dismiss from your mind traditional interpretations. Separate the doctrine from the mistakes and blunders of many who hold it. Do not reject the foundation because of the wood, hay, and stubble which some have built upon it. Do not condemn it and cast it aside because of injudicious friends. Only examine the texts which speak of it,



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as calmly and fairly as you weigh texts in the Romish, Arian, or Socinian controversies, and I am hopeful as to the result on your mind. Alas, if texts of Scriptures were always treated as unceremoniously as I have known texts to be treated by those who dislike the doctrine of Christ's second advent, I should indeed tremble for the cause of truth.

Is there any one among the readers of this address who agrees with the principles I have tried to advocate? I beseech that man to endeavour to realize the second coming of Christ more and more. Truly we feel it but little compared with what we ought to do, at the very best. Be gentle in argument with those that differ from you. Remember that a man may be mistaken on this subject, and yet be a holy child of God. It is not the slumbering on this subject that ruins souls, but the want of grace! Above all, avoid dogmatism and positiveness, and specially about symbolical prophecy. It is a sad truth, but a truth never to be forgotten, that none have injured the doctrine of the second coming so much as its overzealous friends.