

Major Bible Themes

BY

LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER

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CHAPTER XI

GOD THE SON: HIS COMING FOR HIS SAINTS

The doctrine chosen for this chapter is one of the most important themes of unfulfilled prophecy. The student should be reminded that prophecy is God's pre-written history and is therefore as credible as other parts of the Scriptures. Almost one-fourth of the Bible was in the form of prediction when it was written. Much has been fulfilled, and in every case its fulfillment has been the most literal realization of all that was prophesied. As pre-announced many centuries before the birth of Christ, He, when He came, was of the tribe of Judah, a son of Abraham, a son of David, born of a virgin in Bethlehem. In like manner, the explicit details of His death foretold in Psalm 22, a thousand years before, were precisely fulfilled.

The Word of God also presents much prophecy which at the present time is unfulfilled and it is reasonable as well as honoring to God to believe that it will be fulfilled in the same faithfulness which has characterized all His works to the present hour.

The fact that Christ is to return to this earth as He went -- "this same Jesus," in His resurrection body, and on the clouds of heaven (Acts 1:11) -- is so clearly and extensively taught in the prophetic Scriptures that this truth has been included in all the great creeds of Christendom.

However, the doctrine of the return of Christ demands most careful and discriminating consideration.

In common with Bible students generally, distinction is made between two yet future events. We therefore assign the study of one -- Christ coming for His saints -- to this chapter, and the study of the other -- Christ coming with His saints -- to the following chapter. Though but one aspect of truth is indicated by each of these titles, the Scriptures reveal that much more will be accomplished in each of these events than the titles suggest. Conforming to the incomplete statement of truth proposed by these titles, we observe that in the body of Scripture assigned to this chapter, Christ is seen descending into the air and there receiving to Himself the saints who are caught up from the earth to meet Him -- some of these to be raised from the dead and some to be translated from the living state (1 Cor. 15:22, 23, 51, 52). However, in that body of Scripture assigned to the next chapter, He is seen descending to the earth (Zech. 14:4-7) with His glorified saints as His bride attending (Rev. 19:7, 8, 14; Jude 1:14), to sit upon the throne of David (Luke 1:32), which is also "the throne of His glory" (Matt. 25:31). Though these two events differ in every particular, they are often confused, and for this reason this chapter should be closely compared with the one which is to follow.

In contemplating the prophetic doctrine of Christ's coming for His saints, it should be noted:

First. -- The order of these two events is obvious: Christ cannot come to the earth with His saints until He shall have come for them. They must be gathered together "unto him" (2 Thess. 2:1) before they can "appear with him" in glory (Col. 3:4). Though these events are probably separated by only a brief period of time, according to prophecy, there is much to be fulfilled between these events which is world transforming (2 Thess. 2:3, 4; Rev. 4:1 to 19:10).

Second. -- The long predicted second coming of Christ to this earth will be completely fulfilled when He comes with His saints, and, therefore, the coming of Christ for His own sustains no relation to it whatsoever. The two events are not two phases or aspects of one divine undertaking. The Scriptures present the coming of Christ for His own as a mystery or sacred secret (1 Cor. 15:51) -- meaning something hitherto unrevealed, but to be understood after it is divinely disclosed (Deut. 29:29; Matt. 13:35). The New Testament revelation concerning Christ's coming for His own could not have been seen in the Old Testament since it is only one aspect of truth (God's way of taking His people out of the world) related to the Church; which Church is a sacred secret, having been nowhere directly anticipated in the Old Testament. Likewise, the Church could not have been revealed in the Old Testament since it is only one of the divine purposes in the present age; which age is itself a sacred secret, not having been revealed in the Old Testament (Matt. 13:11). In contrast to all this, the second coming of Christ is in no sense a mystery or sacred secret, since it is one of the most important themes of the Old Testament (Deut. 30:3; Psa. 2:1-9; 24:1-10; 50:1-5; 96:10-13; Isa. 11:10, 11; Jer. 23:5, 6; Ezk. 37:21, 22; Dan. 7:13, 14; Zech. 2:10-12).

Third. -- As revealed in the Scriptures, His coming for His saints is the next event in the order of the fulfillment of prophecy, and is, therefore, that for which the child of God should be waiting (1 Thess. 1:9, 10), and looking (Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:11-14; Heb. 9:28), and which he should be loving (2 Tim. 4:8).

The Scriptures bearing on the coming of Christ for His own are explicit: In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 it is revealed that when Christ comes the "dead in Christ" will rise first and the living saints, together with them, will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord and to be forever with the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, the same fact of the resurrection of the "dead in Christ" and the transformation of the living is set forth; but with the added revelation that the translation and transformation of the living saints will be as suddenly as "the twinkling of an eye," and at the sounding of the "last trump." In John 14:1-3, it is disclosed that Christ will receive His own unto Himself: not into the mansions, but into the place which He has gone to prepare. Again, in Philippians 3:20, 21, it is stated that at His coming "he shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself." In like manner, the time of Christ's coming for His own will be the time when they shall appear before His judgment seat to receive their rewards for service (1 Cor. 3:11-15; Matt. 16:27; Luke 14:14; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Cor. 5:10).

As certainly as the coming of Christ for His saints is not revealed in the Old Testament, so certainly it has no relation to the unsaved. To the Christian, however, it is, in the purpose of God:

1. A Comforting Hope. -- Comfort is derived from the fact that Christ may come at any time and that there is not a whole lifetime, necessarily, or until death, before the believer may see his Lord, and also from the fact that when He shall come the child of God will be instantly in the presence and fellowship of those loved ones who were saved and who have gone on before (1 Thess. 4:18).

2. A Purifying Hope. -- No one can contemplate the fact that Christ may come at any moment and not have his conduct affected by that belief (1 John 3:1-3).

3. A Blessed Hope. -- There is nothing comparable to the expectation that, through riches of grace, the saved one will see his Lord face to face, be with Him, and be like Him (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 4:17; 1 John 3:3).

QUESTIONS

1. a. What portion of the Scriptures was prophecy at the time it was written?

b. Is prophecy as credible as history?

c. In what manner has prophecy been fulfilled?

2. What may we conclude as to the literal fulfillment of unfulfilled prophecy?

3. What are the major differences between the events prophesied to accompany the coming of Christ for His Church and His coming to this earth with His Church?

4. a. Why must one of these predicted events precede the other?

b. Are they separated by an extended period of time?

5. What relation do these events sustain to each other?
6. What is the meaning of the word mystery as used in the Scriptures?
7. Why is the coming of Christ for His own a mystery while the coming with His saints is not?
8. According to prophecy what is the next event to be fulfilled?
9. What attitude should the child of God sustain toward the next event?
10. What is predicted to take place when the Lord comes for His own?
11. Is the coming of Christ for His saints a doctrine of the Old Testament?
12. What relation do the unsaved sustain to the coming of Christ for His own?
13. Name three impressions this truth should make on each believer.
14. What practical effect does this truth have on your own life?