

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
(Isaiah 2:1-4; John 14:1-6)
“A Neglected Perspective: Christ’s Second Advent”

Introduction

We are examining these two crucial verses, and asking why the themes found here are so very neglected in the church today: a neglected message, a neglected perspective, and a neglected promise. In the middle of these verses, we find the prayer that we may “be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:23). No explanation of the meaning is given, because none was required by the first readers. For the first Christians, living under the oppression of a hostile and powerful empire, their blessed hope was in Christ’s promise that he would one day return and consummate human history by destroying God’s enemies, and rescuing God’s people.

Somehow this message, treasured by the church throughout its history, has been virtually lost in the daily life and preaching of the church in the west. Of course, biblical Christians believe that Christ will come again to usher in the new age, but it seems to have little effect on the daily living of our lives. We think of it as something out there “bye and bye,” but not of great practical importance in the living of our lives. The early Christians, and Christians facing persecution in our day, would strongly disagree. Why has this theme of Christ’s second coming, once so encouraging to God’s people, become a neglected perspective on life?

There are several reasons that come immediately to mind: first, most of us are quite comfortable, enjoying lives of prosperity and peace. We love life most of the time, and as we grow old are tempted to think that our best days are behind us. We mourn the passing of this life as if death were the end. Our focus, therefore, is on succeeding today in whatever we are doing, and we are tempted to think that living with an eye on the future may make us impractical and unattractively other-worldly.

And, of course, many of us are embarrassed by the TV preachers with charts and pictures and the assumption that their particular school of prophetic interpretation has it all figured out, even though the overwhelming majority of godly Bible students throughout history held different views of prophetic interpretation. I was delighted recently to read that when Roy Taylor, stated clerk of the PCA, was asked about his views of the end times he said, “I’ve quit the planning committee and joined the welcoming committee.” My view exactly!

We also may, in our desire to see the gospel transform culture here and now, tend to neglect the importance of living from the perspective of Christ’s second advent. This morning, I will try to make clear in the simplest terms I can what is the meaning and the practical importance of this hope that formed the perspective from which Paul ministered, and from which he wrote these words that we are studying.

Body

1. What does the Bible teach about Christ's second coming?

Restoration of a redeemed humanity: It is the promise that what we have, through our rebellion, lost as people made in God's own image for intimate friendship with God and with each other, will one day be fully and completely restored. The great commandment to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love one another as Christ has loved us, will at last be fulfilled in a redeemed humanity. These bodies, diseased and decayed, will be raised up new and glorious like that of our Lord Jesus after his resurrection from the dead.

Justice for the oppressed: It is the promise that those whom this world has despised and mistreated, who have cried to God for justice and relief, who have suffered deeply and cast their hope on him, will one day be vindicated, welcomed as children of the King, and see those who have mistreated, abused and oppressed them, be judged and cast away from the presence of God. Remember the contrasting values of man's city as depicted in Revelation 18:11-13, where gold is on top and human souls on the bottom, versus God's city, seen in 21:21, where the streets are made of gold and humans trample it underfoot.

Renewal of the cosmos: It is the promise that this cosmos and this planet earth on which we live and move and have our being, which has also suffered the consequences of our rebellion by being delivered over to suffering and death, will one day be made new, as heaven and earth are joined and God makes his home with a renewed humanity. It is misleading to say merely that heaven is our final home when the Bible depicts the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, and God making his home with men (see Revelation 21:1-4). God will restore a redeemed humanity to a redeemed earth and join heaven and earth as one.

2. What difference should it make in the way we live our lives today?

Our sanctification is a taste of what is coming and a reason for people to believe the gospel: The greatest living proof of the gospel is the transformed life of someone who is being changed by God's grace from the self-centered mess he once was into a person of maturity who is learning to love others with the love God has poured out on him. It is the once unforgiving, judgmental woman being transformed by grace into a person who now forgives as freely as Christ has forgiven her. It is a person once uncompassionate toward the poor and broken, now finding ways to become compassionately involved with the poor and oppressed because the Lord

graciously found him, an undeserving sinner, spiritually impoverished and deserving nothing but God's wrath, forgave him and is pouring into him all of the riches of glory in Christ Jesus.

Our lives are to depict in living color the beauty of the coming Kingdom, when God will wipe away every tear and make all things new. Nothing is more practical for our daily choices, for the dreams we dream and the plans we make, for the way that we relate to God and man, than the fact that Christ will come again at last, as he came in the fullness of time to redeem us, in order to consummate human history and make all things new.

Our work for justice and mercy is a taste of what is coming and a reason for people to believe the gospel: People are indignant at the Casey Anthony trial because there is a sense that her little girl will never get the justice she deserves. But that is not true. God knows what happened to that little girl, and he will one day deal justice to her killer. Incredibly, as many have pointed out, we now live in a culture that holds at the same time two completely incompatible expectations, two mutually exclusive views: People ask how God can permit wickedness and injustice if he is both all-good and all-powerful. But when you tell them that the day is coming when God will judge the wicked and destroy the oppressor, people ask how a God of love can possibly judge the wicked and cast them from his presence. You cannot hold both views with any consistency. Either admit that you don't care about final justice as long as everyone gets home free, or admit that justice demands divine punishment and thank God that one-day he will destroy the wicked and proclaim freedom to captives.

Our care of God's creation is a taste of what is coming and a reason for people to believe the gospel: If this cosmos will one day be destroyed and give way to the new heaven and new earth, why should we care for the creation? Because God made it and called it good, because it displays his glory for all to see, and delights his children with glimpses of our Father's artistry and majesty, and because he placed us as stewards to care for it and offer it back to him in worship. In caring for the creation, we depict the age to come when at last creation is restored to its intended pristine beauty.

Conclusion

All of this should be a profound incentive for our passionate engagement in the mission of the church, beginning in our own hearts and lives, our families and communities, and extending to the ends of the earth. *Because* Christ is coming again to make all things new, and *because* he has entrusted to us his children the mission of calling those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, we should long to meet him in that day surrounded by those who first saw in our lives and heard from our lips the great good news of the gospel of grace. As we increasingly live

from the perspective of Christ's return, our longing should increase exponentially, not merely to know Bible truth, but to experience the presence of the Kingdom as God's Spirit enables us to live the story of salvation for all to see.

May God call many of us here today to yield ourselves as never before to the truth of the gospel and the power of God's Spirit, as we cry out "to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

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