

"THE BLESSED HOPE"¹

1. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SECOND ADVENT AN ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE OF THE GOSPEL.

from

Plain Sermons *On Subjects* *Practical and Prophetic*

by Alexander McCaul

*"Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing
of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."*

Titus 2:13

BY the mercy of God we this day commence that period which the church has for centuries dedicated to the consideration of the coming of Christ. His first coming was the object of the church's faith and hope, under the old covenant. His second advent is the object of faith and hope to which the New Testament directs our attention. To those who were bowed down by the ministration of death, remission of sins, and reconciliation of God by the blood of the Saviour, must have been the chief of their most fervent desires. To those whose sins "are put away" by the blood of the new covenant, the second appearance of the Saviour, without sin unto salvation, must constitute the object of longing expectation. Then it is that the Christian's holiness and happiness are to be complete;—then, that his body of humiliation is to be exchanged for a glorious body, like his Saviour's;— then that he is to be re-united to those who have fallen asleep in Christ; to behold his Redeemer face to face, and to be with him for ever. A topic of more engrossing interest, therefore, cannot possibly be found. Let us then consider it as it is brought before us in the text. This doctrine is there presented to us in two points of view, equally practical with reference to the ministers who teach, and the people who are taught. As forming part of that "sound doctrine" which St. Paul especially pressed upon the attention of Titus, it teaches us,

I. That the doctrine of the Lord's second's advent is an *essential* doctrine of the Gospel. And, as constituting one of the duties which the Gospel of the grace of God requires us to fulfil, it shews us,

II. That the practice of waiting for the Lord's second advent is an *essential* feature in the character of a true Christian.

These points, then, let us consider; and "may the Lord the Holy Spirit direct all our hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ."

I. The first point to which I request your attention is, "That the doctrine of the Lord's Second Advent is an essential doctrine of the Gospel." When I say *essential*, I do not mean to insinuate that any doctrine contained in the word of God is non-essential; nor to countenance that rash, censorious, and presumptuous spirit, which animates many professors of religion, and leads them to sit as judges of the ministers of Christ, and too often to decide with the most irreverent levity that one minister does preach, and that another does not preach, the Gospel. I believe, on the testimony of Scripture, that

¹ This and the following Sermon were published anonymously ten years ago, under the title of "The Blessed Hope:" but have been long out of print. The demand for a new edition, and the desire of friends, are the reasons of their insertion in this volume.

“Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning;” and not only for our learning, but that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope;” and am persuaded, moreover, that such hasty judgment is too often the child of ignorance and self-conceit; and that, if we desire to be many masters (or as it is in the original, “teachers,” we shall, as St. James says, “receive the greater condemnation.” (James iii. 1.) By an essential doctrine of the Gospel,—I mean one, the omission of which renders the display of the Gospel incomplete—a doctrine to which the Holy Ghost has assigned a conspicuous place in His word; and which has been considered of such importance as to require frequent repetition, lest it might by any means escape our notice.

In both these senses the doctrine of the second advent is an essential doctrine of the Gospel.

[1.] First, it is a doctrine which we find in every part of the Scriptures of the New Testament; not to refer now to the prophets, whose constant theme it is, and who often preach the second advent without mentioning the first, but who never preach the first advent without mentioning the second. It is a doctrine upon which the Lord himself frequently insisted during the course of his earthly ministry; which angels were sent to preach after his ascension; and to which the Apostles ever recur in their sermons and epistles. The Lord himself, who spake but little about his death, and the benefits to flow from it, and that little to his disciples only, speaks at great length and with minuteness concerning His second advent; and that to all classes of men, to his friends and enemies, his disciples and his judges; so that He evidently considered it as a doctrine requiring frequent notice, and necessary to be known by all the sons of men. His allusions to his sufferings and death are few and short; His descriptions of his second advent are frequent and long. Many of our Lord’s parables—as that of burning the tares, gathering and casting out the bad fish that were in the net, the widow praying for vengeance, the ten talents, the wise and foolish virgins, the marriage garment—do more or less relate to this subject; besides some of his longest discourses which we have on record; as for instance that contained in the 24th and 25th chapters of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Our Lord goes into all the minutiae of the subject, the character of the times, the state of the world preceding his advent, the signs, the manner, the consequences of his appearance.

And it has seemed good to the Holy Ghost to dictate the discourse, in which most of these circumstances are recorded, not once but three times, as we find it in the gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke. Neither did our Lord speak these things only in private and to his disciples, as a doctrine that concerned only advanced Christians; but on all occasions, and to all classes of men. He preached this doctrine to the multitudes, as we can see from the 13th of Matthew, where we read, “Great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.” On this occasion he spake the parables of burning the tares, and separating the good and bad fish. In Luke xii. we read, “There were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trod one upon another;” and this innumerable multitude he taught to “have their loins girded about, and their lights burning, and to be themselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return from the wedding.”

For the proud Pharisees he thought his doctrine as necessary as for the simple multitudes; and therefore, when they asked him about the coming of the kingdom of God, he taught them, that “As it was in the days of Noah, and of Lot, so shall it be also in the days when the Son of man is revealed.” For His disciples he considered it especially important; he therefore not only gives them the fullest instruction concerning it, but enjoins it upon them as a never-to-be-forgotten subject of meditation and of prayer, “Watch ye therefore and pray *always*—not now and then, but *always*—that ye may be counted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.” Indeed with this subject he concluded his preaching upon earth; for, when before his unrighteous judges, He broke his solemn silence only to declare his second advent, “I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” This then is the first

proof which I bring of my assertion. A doctrine, so prominently held forth by the Lord himself, so minutely expounded, and so irrespectively preached before friend and foe, on all occasions public and private, is without doubt and beyond all controversy an essential doctrine of the Gospel.

We now turn to the testimony of the Apostles. To them the command was given, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." If then we would know what the Gospel here intended is, we must examine what constituted the theme of their preaching: and if we would ascertain which doctrines are essential, we must observe those to which they most frequently recur. It is true that we have but few of the apostolic sermons recorded; and that the writings which we possess, under the name of epistles, are by no means systematic summaries of the doctrine which they taught, but practical letters, written for a specific end, to settle some disputed point, or to correct an abuse prevailing in some particular church, or to give directions to an individual in peculiar circumstances. We can, however, by an attentive perusal of these letters, ascertain the doctrines which the Apostles had taught, when amongst the congregations to whom these epistles are addressed.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have a few addresses delivered both to Jews and heathens. And here we shall find that when the Apostles preached to Jews, their grand object was to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, without insisting particularly on the doctrine of his second coming. The reason of this is clear. The Jews all believed in the glorious advent of Messiah. To prove, therefore, to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, was to prove to them that He would come again in glory. Yet they imply this doctrine, even where they do not preach it at length. Thus Peter, preaching to the Jews, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, says of David, "Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins he would raise up Christ to sit upon his throne" (Acts i. 2); in which words the doctrine is implied. In the sermon recorded in the following chapter he is more explicit, and says, "Repent ye, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when 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 heavens must receive until the times of restitution of all things." (Acts iii. 19-21.)

But when Peter preached to the heathen assembled in the house of Cornelius, and Paul preached to the heathen at Athens; they then explicitly teach not only that Christ had suffered and risen from the dead, but that he would return again to judge the world in righteousness. St. Peter says, "And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is He which was ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead." (Acts x. 42.) St. Paul calls upon his hearers to repent, "Because God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained." (xvii. 31.) That they taught this doctrine in all the churches where they preached, is clear from this, that they refer to it in almost all their epistles, not as teaching some new doctrine, but in the way of allusion to a doctrine with which the churches were already well acquainted. That they considered it as an essential and fundamental doctrine, appears from the frequency of these allusions, which are made by all the apostles without exception; St. Paul alone making twenty-seven such allusions, and in two of his epistles mentioning the second advent in every chapter;² and still more so from the manner in which this doctrine is applied. Do the Apostles wish to repress a censorious and judging spirit, the coming of the Lord is the argument thereto: "Therefore judge nothing before the time until the Lord come." (1 Cor. iv. 5.) Do they wish to inculcate the necessity of mortifying the flesh, the coming of the Lord is the motive: "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are on the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, concupiscence, and covetousness which is idolatry." (Col. iii. 4, 5.) Or, as St. Peter says, "Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Pet. iii. 14.) Do they wish to console the church under persecution, the second advent is the ground of consolation: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning

² The two Epistles to the Thessalonians.

the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you; but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that when his glory is revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (1 Peter iv. 12, 13.) Or as St. Paul has it, "If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him." (2 Tim. ii. 12.) Do the Apostles exhort to steadfast abiding in Christ, the second advent is the ground of the exhortation: "And now, little children, abide in him; that when he shall appear we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming." (1 John ii. 28.) Are the Apostles anxious to prevent an unbecoming sorrow for departed friends, the second advent is given as the reason for moderation: "I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, of this mystery, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope: for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." (1 Thess. iv. 13, 14.)

Lastly, When the Apostle Paul instructs a Christian bishop in the Gospel which he is to preach, the second advent is a part of that Gospel, as we see in the text. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." "These things speak and exhort." A doctrine, then, so frequently preached by our Lord, so much insisted upon by the Apostles, of such manifold use for exhortation, for reproof, for sanctification, and consolation, and which forms a part of that Gospel which an Apostle of Christ commands a Christian bishop to preach, is assuredly an essential doctrine the Gospel.

2. But there is another sense in which a doctrine is essential—namely, when a doctrine cannot be omitted without rendering the display of the Gospel incomplete. Thus were we to preach the first coming of Christ to reveal the will of God and set a pattern of perfect obedience, omitting the doctrine of His atoning death and vicarious suffering, we should preach an incomplete Gospel; because the doctrine of atonement is fundamental and essential. In the same way, should we preach the doctrine of atonement perfectly, and yet omit that of the second advent, we should present to our hearers an imperfect and mutilated Gospel; because we leave out an essential part. This I shall now proceed to prove by two considerations presented in the text : the one referring to the glory of the Saviour, the other to our hope.

As it regards the Saviour, the Apostle calls the second advent the *glorious* appearing; as it refers to us, he represents it as "that blessed hope." In both points of view it is necessary to a complete display of the Gospel; for if we omitted the one we should rob the Saviour of His glory; if we omitted the other, we should deprive the church of its object of hope.

When the Apostle speaks here of the great God, and our Saviour, he means one and the same person; for, according to the full import of the words, the passage might better be translated thus: "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ." The sense is, however, perfectly plain, even in the present translation, if we compare the language with that of other passages; for example, with 1 Peter i. 3, "Blessed be the God and Father our Lord Jesus Christ." St. Peter does not speak of two persons, but of one—of God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So St. Paul in the text, when he says the great God and our Saviour, speaks only of one person—our Lord Jesus Christ—and declares that this second advent will be the glorious appearing of the great God; and we assert this doctrine to be an essential doctrine of the Gospel, the omission of which would rob the Saviour of his glory. To conceal the first advent, would be to hide the inconceivable condescension of God; for the mystery of the first advent was God clothed in humanity: to omit the second advent, would be to veil the equally inconceivable wonders of redemption; for the mystery of the second advent is man revealed in the glory of the Godhead. At the first advent God appeared as man; at the second, man will appear as God: for it will be "the glorious appearing of the great God, even our

Saviour Jesus Christ.”

That poor portion of mortal clay with which the great God shrouded his glories when he took upon Him flesh and blood, shall be exhibited before all creation in the majesty of Deity; and that poor fallen race, whom Satan would have destroyed, and did actually pull down from their high pre-eminence, shall be seen not only redeemed, but exalted and inseparably united to the Creator, through Him who is the seed of the woman; who therefore calls us “his brethren,” and whom we worship as our Lord and God. This, brethren, is redemption; this is indeed a gospel, good tidings of great joy. Rebellious man not merely forgiven—mortal man not merely immortal—corruptible not merely clothed with incorruption, but manhood received into everlasting union with God. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”

But without the doctrine of the second advent this mystery is concealed, the display of the Gospel is incomplete, and the Saviour himself robbed of his chief glory. If we preach only the first advent, we do indeed recount many of his glorious achievements; how He redeemed man by the shedding of his blood, and by death overcame him that had the power of death, that is, the devil,—how he led captivity captive, and sent down the gift of the Holy Ghost. But if we do not preach the second advent, we refuse to put the crown upon the Saviour’s head, and exalt the means above the end; for the first advent was only the means, the second advent is the end. The sufferings of Christ were the means, the glory which should follow the end. St. John expressly testifies, “that for this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” (1 John iii. 8.) Sin is a work of the devil: yet until the Lord’s second advent sin and iniquity shall abound. Death is a work of the devil; but, until the Lord come again, death cannot be swallowed up in victory. Curse is a work of the devil; but until the Lord appear in glory, must those blessed words “There shall be no more curse,” remain unfulfilled. In a word, the great end for which the Saviour came—namely, to be a perfect Saviour—must remain an object of faith until the glorious appearing of the Lord: until then, therefore, His glory as Saviour will remain incomplete.

At the first advent of the Lord he was despised and rejected of men; he lived in a state of the deepest humiliation, and died as a criminal. From the first advent until now, he has been, by the majority of mankind, dishonoured and blasphemed. His love is visible only to the eye of faith, and therefore discerned by the fewest. But God hath declared that he will give him a reward for his sufferings; and that because he humbled himself to death, even the death upon the cross, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father:” and “for this joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame:” but this joy is incomplete, this promised glory imperfect, until “he appear in his own glory, and the glory of his Father:” for then, but not until then, will all men honour the Son as they honour the Father.

Whether, then, we consider the glory of Christ, in reference to the restoration of man, to the work of salvation, or as a reward of his sufferings, it is equally imperfect without the doctrine of the second advent: from all which it follows that the doctrine of the second advent is an essential doctrine of the Gospel. If we consider the Gospel in reference to our own salvation, we shall find this doctrine equally essential; for to us it is “that blessed hope,” as the Apostle calls it. Great, inconceivably, great, are the blessings which we enjoy in this world. Forgiveness of sins, peace with, God, sanctification through the Spirit, are blessings which demand in return an unbounded gratitude; so that, had we nothing more to expect, we are bound to consecrate our whole life to the service of God for that which we now enjoy. But it is not to be dissembled, that the enjoyments of the most advanced saint in this life fall far short of that felicity which the word *salvation* holds out to our faith. His present life, however advanced he may be, is a life of struggle, of sorrow, of chastisement. The warfare with sin, with the world, with the devil, never ceases. The sorrows incidental to mortality are unavoidable, for “many are the afflictions

of the righteous." The chastisements of His heavenly Father are sure, and for the present grievous; so that he who came the nearest to the blessed pattern of his Saviour, and enjoyed most of his grace, is forced to declare, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." So that a Gospel which contains not that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ, would leave even true Christians the most miserable of mankind. But let us introduce the doctrine of the second advent, "that blessed hope," or, as St. Paul elsewhere calls it, "the hope of the Gospel;" let us contemplate "the hope that is laid up for us in heaven;" let us lay hold on "the hope that is set before us;" and then, instead of being of all men most miserable, we shall have cause to cry out with St. Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away; reserved in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time."

To say more on this part of the subject, is needless. Without the doctrine of the second advent we are of all men most miserable; with it, we enjoy a foretaste of salvation; for as the Apostle says, "We are saved by hope," even that blessed hope of the glorious appearing of the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the second advent is, then, as essential to the Gospel, considered in reference to our personal salvation, as I have shown it to be when considered with reference to the glory of Christ. Whether, then, we include in the term essential those doctrines which are most frequently taught by the Holy Ghost in His word, or those which are necessary to a full display of the grace of God, the doctrine of the second advent is an essential doctrine of the Gospel.

[II.] Having treated the first topic proposed, I ought now proceed to the second: that is, to shew "that the practice of waiting for the second advent is an essential feature in the character of a true Christian." But for this there is not time to-day: we must, therefore, reserve it for another opportunity, and in the mean time apply what has been already said.

[1.] The subject applies, in the first place, to ministers of the Gospel. If the doctrine of the second advent be an essential doctrine of the Gospel, we are bound to preach it; "for upon us a necessity is laid; yea, woe unto us if we preach not the Gospel." Though we should faithfully and zealously preach forgiveness of sins by the atoning blood of the Saviour, and sanctification by the Spirit; yet are we not thereby excused, if we hold back the doctrine of the glorious appearing of our Saviour. Some persons attempt to justify an exclusive preaching of the first advent, by a text of the Apostle's, in which he says, "We preach Christ crucified;" as if the death of our Lord were the exclusive theme of his preaching. That this exposition is false, has already been shewn in the course of the sermon, where it has appeared that the second advent holds a prominent place in the preaching of St. Paul, as well as in that of the Lord and the Apostles. But it is not only false, it is a gross perversion of the Apostle's words. We know that the word Christ is the Greek translation of Messiah. Let us then substitute this word, "We preach a crucified Messiah," and the perversion will appear evident; for what does Messiah signify? Messiah is the name of our Lord's threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. At his first advent He appeared as Prophet, and before Pilate maintained that the kingdom was rightfully his. But the kingdom itself he had not received, as he himself testifies; for when certain "thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear," he undeceived them, by telling them in a parable that he had not yet received his kingdom; that he could not until he went to the Father; and that the kingdom should not appear until His return. He said, therefore, "a certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return." And St. Paul preaches also that Christ's kingdom is to be contemporary with His appearing, when he says to Timothy, "I charge thee, therefore, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom." If, therefore, we omit the doctrine of the second advent, we leave out one of our Lord's offices; and though we may preach Him as "the crucified," we only preach him partially as the Messiah.

The prophets every where testify of two comings of the Messiah—one to suffer, and one to reign. And if we preach only one of them, we do not preach the crucified Messiah of the prophets, nor of St. Paul, whose doctrine most certainly agrees with that of the prophets; and thereby we give just reason to the Jews to reject our doctrine, and imperfectly explain the offices of our blessed Saviour to Christians. This text, then, of St. Paul will not excuse us. His practice, as well as that of our Lord and the other Apostles, will condemn us. We may indeed, and must, exercise a just discretion in bringing forward the various doctrines of the Gospel: but this discretion must be regulated by the practice of the Prophets and Apostles. Whatever they preached as Gospel, we must preach, and in the same degree and proportion. Did they preach any doctrine but seldom? We must not magnify it beyond its due value. Did they preach any doctrine frequently, and to all classes of mankind, and apply it practically in every possible bearing? We must beware lest we lightly esteem what God hath highly honoured. Our duty then is to take heed to the advice which Paul gives to Timothy, when speaking of the second coming of the Lord. He says, “It is a faithful saying: for if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him. If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he will also deny us. Of these things put them in remembrance. Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

2. But the consideration of this subject is not only profitable for ministers: it also lays open the duties of those who hear the word of God. You, my beloved brethren, have seen that the doctrine of the second advent is an essential doctrine of the Gospel; then you are bound to understand it, so far as the word of God makes it known, and the Spirit of God is pleased to reveal it in your hearts. There can be no doubt but that it is the duty of every Christian to understand the Gospel of the grace of God. He is bound to study the whole word of God, but especially those doctrines which are essential parts of the Gospel. In this view, then, I would say, search the Scriptures diligently as to all that God has been pleased to reveal concerning the second advent; and pray earnestly to Him who opened the understandings of the Apostles, that He would help you to understand all that is written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Him. This is your first duty, with regard to this subject, to understand it; for if you do not understand it, you cannot be edified by it.

Your next duty is to make use of it practically, as the Apostles suggest. Let it rouse you from sloth: let it quicken you in the work of sanctification: let it prevent you from indulging a judging and censorious spirit: let it be your support under persecution; your consolation in affliction; and in all circumstances “your blessed hope.” For the grace of God that bringeth salvation, hath appeared unto all men; teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ.” To whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.