

*Coming Events and Present Duties: Being Miscellaneous Sermons on
Prophetical Subjects (1867)*

by
J. C. Ryle

PREFACE

The volume now in the reader's hands requires a few introductory words of explanation.

It contains little that is entirely new. It consists of seven sermons, delivered on public occasions, at various intervals during the last twenty years, and afterwards published in the form of tracts. Of these sermons, one or two have perhaps obtained a greater circulation than they deserved, while one or two, in my humble judgment of more real worth, have received comparatively little notice. They are now brought together in their present form for the convenience of those who wish to have a manual of my views of prophecy in a compact shape.

At the very outset I warn the reader of these pages that he will find here nothing deep or abstruse. I have purposely avoided everything that can be called speculative or conjectural. I have strictly confined myself to a few great prophetical principles, which appear to me written as it were with a sunbeam. I have not attempted to expound such portions of God's Word as Ezekiel's temple or the symbolical visions of Revelation. I have not ventured to fix any dates. I have not tried to settle the precise order or manner in which predictions of things to come are to be fulfilled. There is nothing I dislike so much in prophetical inquiry as dogmatism or positiveness. Much of the discredit which has fallen on prophetical study has arisen from the fact that many students instead of expounding prophecy have turned prophets themselves.

If anyone asks me what my prophetical opinions are, I am quite ready to give him an answer. Cautious and doubtful as I feel on some points, there are certain great principles about which I have fully made up my mind. I have held by them firmly for more than twenty-five years and have never had my opinion shaken about them. I have lived in the belief of them for a quarter of a century, and in the belief of them I hope to die. The older I grow, the more do I feel convinced of their truth, and the more satisfied am I that no other principles can explain the state of the Church and the world.

One thing only I wish to premise before making my statement. The reader must distinctly understand that I do not put forth my prophetical views as articles of faith but only as my private opinions. I do not say that nobody can be saved who does not agree with me about prophecy. I am not infallible. I am very sensible that holier and better men than myself do not see these subjects with my eyes and think me utterly mistaken. I condemn nobody; I judge nobody. I only ask liberty to hold and state distinctly my own views. The day will decide who is right. It is the new heart and faith in Christ's blood which are absolutely necessary to salvation. The man who knows these two things experimentally may be wrong about prophecy, but he will not miss heaven.

The following, then, are the chief articles of my prophetical creed:

1. I believe that the world will never be completely converted to Christianity by any existing agency before the end comes. In spite of all that can be done by ministers, churches, schools, and missions, the wheat and the tares will grow together until the harvest; and when the end comes, it will find the earth in much the same state that it was when the flood came in the days of Noah. (Matt. 13:24-30; 24:37-39.)

2. I believe that the widespread unbelief, indifference, formalism, and wickedness which are to be seen throughout Christendom are only what we are taught to expect in God's Word. Troublous times, departures from the faith, evil men waxing worse and worse, love waxing cold, are things distinctly predicted. So far from making me doubt the truth of Christianity, they help to confirm my faith. Melancholy and sorrowful as the sight is, if I did not see it I should think the Bible was not true. (Matt. 24:12; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1,4,13.)

3. I believe that the grand purpose of the present dispensation is to gather out of the world an elect people, and not to convert all mankind. It does not surprise me at all to hear that the heathen are not all converted when missionaries preach, and that believers are but a little flock in any congregation in my own land. It is precisely the state of things which I expect to find. The Gospel is to be preached "as a witness," and then shall the end come. This is the dispensation of election, and not of universal conversion. (Acts 15:1; Matt. 24:13.)

4. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is the great event which will wind up the present dispensation, and for which we ought daily to long and pray. "Thy kingdom come,"--"Come, Lord Jesus,"--should be our daily prayer. We look backward, if we have faith, to Christ dying on the cross, and we ought to look forward no less, if we have hope, to Christ coming again. (John 14:3; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Peter 3:12.)

5. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be a real, literal, personal, bodily coming; and that as He went away in the clouds of heaven with His body, before the eyes of men, so in like manner He will return. (Acts 1:11.)

6. I believe that after our Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the earth shall be renewed, and the curse removed; the devil shall be bound, the godly shall be rewarded, the wicked shall be punished; and that before He comes there shall be neither resurrection, judgment, nor millennium, and that not till after He comes shall the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. (Acts 3:21; Isa. 25:6-9; 1 Thess. 4:14-18; Rev. 20:1, etc.)

7. I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ. (Jer. 30:10,11; 31:10; Rom. 11:25,26.)

8. I believe that the literal sense of Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches, and is far too much neglected at the present day, and that under the mistaken system of *spiritualizing* and *accommodating* Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning. (Luke 24:25,26.)

9. I do not believe that the preterist scheme of interpreting the Apocalypse, which regards the book as almost entirely *fulfilled*, or the futurist scheme, which regards it as almost entirely *unfulfilled*, are either of them to be implicitly followed. The truth, I expect, will be found to lie between the two.

10. I believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the great predicted apostasy from the faith, and is Babylon and Anti-Christ, although I think it highly probable that a more complete development of Anti-Christ will yet be exhibited to the world. (2 Thess. 2:3-11; 1 Tim. 4:1-6.)

11. Finally, I believe that it is for the safety, happiness, and comfort of all true Christians, to expect as little as possible from Churches or Governments under the present dispensation,--to hold themselves ready for tremendous convulsions and changes of all things established, and to expect their good things only from Christ's second advent.

The student of prophecy will see at a glance that there are many subjects on which I abstain from giving an opinion. About the precise time when the present dispensation will end,--about the manner in which the heathen will be converted,--about the mode in which the Jews will be restored to their own land,--about the burning up of the earth,--about the first resurrection,--about the rapture of the saints,--about the distinction between the appearing and the coming of Christ,--about the future siege of Jerusalem and the last tribulation of the Jews,--about the binding of Satan before the millennium begins,--about the duration of the millennium,--about the loosing of Satan at the end of the thousand years,--about the destruction of Gog and Magog,--about the precise nature and position of the new Jerusalem,--about all these things I purposely decline expressing any opinion. I could say something about them all, but it would be little better than conjecture. I am thankful that others have more light about them than I have. For myself, I feel unable at present to speak positively. If I have learned anything in studying prophecy, I think I have learned the wisdom of not "making haste" to decide what is true.

I am well aware that the views I have laid down appear to many persons very gloomy and discouraging. The only answer I make to that charge is this: Are they Scriptural? Are they in accordance with the lessons of history and experience? To my mind they certainly are. I see human failure and human corruption stamped on the conclusion of all dispensations preceding our own. I see much in the present state of the world to make me expect that the present dispensation will not end better than those which have gone before. In short, there seems an inherent tendency to decay in everything that man touches. There is no such thing as creature perfection. God is teaching that lesson by all His successive modes of dealing with mankind. There will be no perfection till the Lord comes. The Patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the Christian dispensations all tend to prove this. Those words of Scripture shall yet be verified, "I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more, until He come whose right it is; and I will give it Him" (Ezek. 21:27). When the Lord Jesus comes back to earth, and the Tabernacle of God is with men, then will there be perfection, but not till then. God will have all the glory at last, and all the world shall confess that without God man can do nothing. God shall be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

The one point on which I desire to fix the eyes of my own soul is the second personal coming of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To that blessed hope and glorious appearing I wish, by God's help, to direct all who read this volume. God forbid that anyone should neglect present duties! To sit idly waiting for Christ and not to attend to the business of our respective positions is not Christianity but fanaticism. Let us only remember in all our daily employments that we serve a *Master who is coming again*. If I can only stir up one Christian to think more of that second coming and to keep it more prominently before his mind, I feel that the volume will not have been published in vain.

If anyone ask me why I have chosen this particular period for the republication of these prophetic tracts, I think it is sufficient answer to point to the times in which we live. I do not forget that we are poor judges of our own days and are very apt to exaggerate their importance. But I doubt much whether there ever was a time in the history of our country when the horizon on all sides, both political and ecclesiastical, was so thoroughly black and lowering. In every direction we see men's hearts "failing for fear, and for looking for those things that seem coming on the earth." Everything around us seems unscrewed, loosened, and out of joint. The fountains of the great deep appear to be breaking up. Ancient institutions are tottering and ready to fall. Social and ecclesiastical systems are failing and crumbling away. Church and State seem alike convulsed to their very foundations, and what the end of this convulsion may be, no man can tell.

Whether the last days of old England have really come,--whether her political greatness is about to pass away,--whether her Protestant Church is about to have her candlestick removed,--whether in the coming crash of nations England is to perish like Amalek, or at length to be saved, and escape "so as by

fire,"--all these are points which I dare not attempt to settle; a very few years will decide them. But I am sure there never was a time when it was more imperatively needful to summon believers to "cease from man," to stand on their watchtowers, and to build all there hopes on the second coming of the Lord. Happy is he who has learned to expect little from Parliaments or Convocations, from Statesmen or from Bishops, and to look steadily for Christ's appearing! He is the man who will not be disappointed.

J. C. RYLE

*Stradbroke Vicarage,
August, 1867.*

P.S. The reader of this volume will probably observe that some of the thoughts and ideas are occasionally repeated. They will kindly remember that this arises from the sermons which comprise it having been delivered at different places, and at long intervals. I have thought it best and wisest, for many reasons, to reprint them without alteration.