

Christian Destiny—2 ***Christ our Hope (Part I)***

F. F. Bruce

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Professor Bruce contributes the second article in our series.

The word 'eschatology' has come to bear such a variety of meaning that we have recently been urged by more than one scholar to impose a moratorium on its use. Since it occurs in the subject which has been prescribed for me, I cannot dispense with it completely; instead, I will define the senses in which I propose to understand it. Taking it in its traditional meaning of the doctrine of the 'last things', I apply it here not only to the end of a person's life (death and its sequel) but also, more particularly, to the end of a world-order and therefore, *a fortiori*, to the end of the last world-order of all. Having said this about the word, I will try to get on without it.

1. *The synoptic Gospels*

'The time is fulfilled', said our Lord when inaugurating His Galilean ministry, 'and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent, and believe in the good news' (*Mark 1: 15*). His was not the only voice in Israel at that time which proclaimed the end of the current age and the imminent dawn of a new age which would be marked by the establishment of the kingdom of God. Any one who spoke in those days of the coming kingdom of God was bound to be understood as referring to that kingdom which, according to the visions of Daniel, the God of heaven would set up on the ruins of successive world-empires. This new kingdom would endure for ever; authority in it would be exercised by the saints of the Most High. Mark's summary of Jesus' Galilean announcement is almost an echo of *Dan. 7: 22*, 'the time came for the saints to receive the kingdom'.

The difference between the announcement as made by our Lord and a similar announcement on the lips of others (such as, say, Judas the Galilaeen) lay in the concept of the coming kingdom. Like the Zealots who precipitated the revolt against Rome sixty years after his own rising, Judas the Galilaeen may well have based his conviction that the time was fulfilled on the calculation that the 'seventy weeks' of *Dan. 9: 24-27* were about to run out. Certainly he held that the saints of the Most High should take forceful steps to bring in the new kingdom: the saints whom he had in mind were of the order described in *Ps. 149: 5-9*, with the 'high praises of God... in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to wreak vengeance on the nations and chastisement on the peoples'. The cause of national liberation to which they dedicated themselves was no ignoble one, but their methods were deplored by Jesus as destined to involve themselves and many others in ruin.

'From the days of John the Baptist until now', said Jesus on a later occasion, 'the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force' (*Mat. 11: 12*). He drew a distinction between John and the men of violence, for John was His own precursor. John proclaimed the imminent dissolution of the current order and called on his hearers to prepare, by repentance and baptism, for the judgment which was to usher in the new age. This judgment with wind and fire was to be exercised by the Coming One whom John, in due course, came to identify with Jesus. Afterwards, during his imprisonment, John began to

wonder if Jesus was the Coming One after all, since Jesus' ministry differed so much from the ministry of judgment which he had predicted for the Coming One. But he need not have been in doubt: the message which Jesus sent back to John by his two disciples was designed to reassure him that the works which Jesus was doing were precisely those which the prophets had foretold as features of the new age. Above all, the proclamation of good news to the poor marked Jesus out as the Spirit-anointed speaker of *Isa 61. 1f*. This was the text which Jesus, in his synagogue sermon at Nazareth, claimed to fulfil, and the good news which it spelt out was the good news of the kingdom which Jesus announced.

Nothing was more determinant of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God than His understanding of the God whose Kingdom it was. He appears to have been unique in calling God *Abba*—the term by which children in the family circle addressed their father or spoke about him—and so effectively did He inculcate this usage in His disciples that it was later carried over unchanged into the vocabulary of Greek-speaking Christians. The Heavenly Father revealed His character in acts of undistinguishing mercy to good and bad alike, and therefore His children, the heirs of the kingdom, should be merciful as He was merciful, not only to their friends but to their enemies (*Luke 6: 27-36*). This was indeed a far cry from the teaching of Judas and the Zealots.

The kingdom of God was present in Jesus' acts of healing and power, but present only in a limited degree. The disciples were still taught to pray, 'Thy kingdom come'. Jesus Himself was subject to restrictions until He underwent His 'baptism' of death (*Luke 12: 50*), but one day, before too long, those restrictions would be removed and the kingdom of God would be seen to have come 'with power' (*Mark 9: 1*).

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These two phases of the coming of the kingdom—temporarily under restrictions and subsequently with power—are paralleled in the experience of the Son of Man, who is inextricably bound up with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. 'The Son of Man' probably means 'the (one like a) son of man' who receives world dominion from God in the vision of *Dan. 7. 13 f*. It was not, however, a current designation of some expected figure of the end-time, and Jesus could therefore use it without the risk of His hearers' misunderstanding it because of earlier associations which it had for them. As used by Jesus, the designation pointed to Himself, in companionship with His followers—the 'saints of the Most High' who receive the kingdom in *Dan. 7. 18*. In order to receive the kingdom the Son of Man must 'suffer many things and be treated with contempt' (*Mark 9. 12; Luke 17: 25*), this experience Jesus took upon Himself alone on behalf of His people, 'giving his life as a ransom for many' (*Mark 10: 45*). The suffering Son of Man corresponds to the kingdom under limitations; to the kingdom coming with power corresponds the Son of Man coming in glory (compare *Matt. 16: 28* with its parallel *Mark 9: 1*). During His Palestinian ministry the kingdom of God was in process of inauguration; with His passion and triumph it was fully inaugurated, its powers being now unleashed.

When the Son of Man died and rose again, the kingdom came with power. We may compare Paul's contrast between Christ's being 'crucified through weakness' and now living 'by the power of God' (*2 Cor. 13: 4*), since he was 'declared to be the Son of God with power... by the resurrection from the dead' (*Rom. 1: 4*). In this new phase of His existence He directs the ministry of the kingdom, carried on by His followers in fellowship with Him and by the power of the Spirit, until its consummation in glory.

2. *The primitive church*

The apostles had no doubt that, with their Master's death and resurrection, the time of fulfilment had set in. Their conviction was confirmed by the gift of the Spirit, a long-promised token of the last days. The kingdom of God had come 'with power' in the events of Good Friday, Easter Day and the first Christian Pentecost. In the context of *John 14: 18*, it is with reference to the imparting of the Spirit that we are to understand the Lord's upper-room assurance to the disciples there recorded 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.' 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet', said Peter on the day of Pentecost, explaining the events which attended the descent of the Spirit (*Acts 2: 16*). Perhaps even the accompanying words in *Joel 2: 31* about the darkened sun and the blood-red moon reminded some of Peter's hearers of the phenomena which Jerusalem had witnessed on Good Friday.

The ingathering of the nations was a further feature of the age of fulfilment which the apostles and their colleagues took seriously. James at the Council of Jerusalem invokes the prophecy of *Amos 9. 11 f.* which tells (in the Septuagint version) how on a coming day 'the residue of men will seek the Lord, even all the nations that are called' by His name (*Acts 15: 16 f.*).

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The second part of Professor Bruce's contributions to our series

3. THE MINISTRY OF PAUL

Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles *par excellence*, viewed his special ministry in this light. While the Jerusalem leaders naturally expected that the Jews' acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah would lead to the conversion of the Gentiles through their witness, Paul (by virtue of a 'mystery' revealed to him) looked on the evangelization of the Gentiles as destined to precipitate the latter-day conversion of Israel, provoked to jealousy by the spectacle of the Gentiles' enjoyment of the blessings promised to the patriarchs. He 'magnified' his ministry to the Gentiles because indirectly it would work for the large-scale blessing of Israel and therewith for the consummation of God's gracious purpose for mankind (*Rom. 11: 13-32*).

To Paul, as to his fellow-apostles, the gift of the Spirit was the witness that the age of fulfilment had been inaugurated, but in his eyes it was more—it was the seal, the guarantee or initial 'down-payment' (Gk. *arrabōn*) of the heritage of glory into which believers would enter at their resurrection. The indwelling of 'the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead' was the pledge that their mortal bodies would in due course be quickened into resurrection life; indeed, the inward work of the Spirit was already preparing them for that transformation (*Rom. 8: 9-11*).

From one point of view, the present age is the age of the Spirit; from another, it is the period of Christ's reign at the right hand of God. The 'right hand of God' was as metaphorical an expression to the apostles as it is to us; it denoted the supremacy to which Christ had been exalted by God. It was derived from *Ps. 110:1*, widely invoked throughout the New Testament as a *testimonium* of Christ, who was now reigning until all His enemies had been subdued by God. Then would come His advent (Gk. *parousia*) and the resurrection of His people (*1 Cor. 15: 20-28*).

There are two principal passages in the Pauline writings which deal with this coincidence of advent and resurrection (*1 Thess. 4. 13-18* and *1 Cor. 15: 20-57*), and in both of them the apostle is concerned to deal practically with issues which arose in churches for which he had pastoral responsibility.

During the weeks he spent at Thessalonica in the spring of A.D. 50, preaching the gospel and planting the church of that city, he gave his converts (*inter alia*) instruction on things to come, but was forced to leave before his instruction was completed. When, therefore 'some of their number died not long afterwards, they wondered if these departed friends would miss the blessings in store for believers at the advent of Christ. Paul set their minds at rest by assuring them that those who had 'fallen asleep' would suffer no disadvantage: because Jesus died and rose again, His people who had died would rise again at His coming, and then be united with those still alive to greet the returning Lord and be with Him for ever. This assurance he gave them 'by the word of the Lord', meaning either an utterance of the historical Jesus or a more recent prophetic utterance in the Lord's name which was discerned as vested with His authority.

When Paul moved south to Corinth he stayed there for eighteen months and had ample opportunity to give the church which he founded there all the basic teaching which it required on this and other subjects. But some of the Corinthian Christians were over-influenced by the current climate of thought and came to the conclusion that the hope of bodily resurrection was a superfluous accretion to the gospel—one, perhaps, from which Paul had been unable to emancipate himself because of the strength of Jewish tradition. The body, they held, was irrelevant to true religion: its reanimation was undesirable. Paul himself spoke of believers as having died and risen with Christ in baptism: what further resurrection was needed by those who had already received the Spirit, the gift of the new age?

News of this development came to Paul at Ephesus along with other information about the church of Corinth, and he dealt with it, together with other problems, in the letter we know as *I Corinthians*. First he affirms that the resurrection of the people of Christ is bound up with the resurrection of Christ Himself, an indispensable article of the message on which their salvation depended. The resurrection of Christ was the first-fruits of the great resurrection-harvest to come.

Paul sketches a sequence in his unfolding of this phase of the divine purpose: the resurrection-harvest was to be reaped at the advent of Christ and would mark the destruction of death, the last of all the enemies to be subjugated beneath His feet. This swallowing up of death in victory would be followed by the consummation, when the present mediatorial reign of Christ would be merged in the eternal kingdom of God.

Paul knew, however, that some of his Corinthian friends were asking sceptical questions about the reanimation of corpses. He therefore conveyed new teaching to them in the form of a 'mystery' something now revealed for the first time. At the advent of Christ, not only will the dead be raised in

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immortal bodies but living believers will experience an instantaneous transformation. All of them, to whichever category they belong, will require a new, 'spiritual body', adapted to their new order of existence, that 'kingdom of God' which 'flesh and blood cannot inherit' (*I Cor. 15: 50*). The present mortal body is inherited from the 'man of dust' who was made a living soul (*Gen. 2: 7*); in resurrection believers will wear the image of the 'man of heaven' who, when raised from the dead, became 'a life-giving spirit' (*I Cor. 15: 45*). Or, as Paul puts it more concisely in writing to the Philippians, the awaited Saviour will at His coming 'change our lowly body to be like his glorious body' (*Phil. 3: 20 f.*).

In writing both to the Thessalonians and to the Corinthians on these subjects, Paul associates himself with those who will survive to witness the advent rather than with those who will there have to be raised from death, referring to the former in the first person plural (we, us) and to the latter in the third person (they, them). To the Thessalonians he contrasts 'we who are alive, who are left' with 'those who have fallen asleep' (*I Thess. 4: 15*); to the Corinthians he says that at the last trumpet 'the dead will be raised imperishable and we (the) living shall be changed' (*I Cor. 15: 52*). It is not that he was speaking dogmatically, for he had manifestly received no special revelation regarding his personal state at that future time. It is simply a matter of perspective. He was daily exposed to the risk of death, it is true (*I Cor. 15: 31*); yet in that earlier period it was more natural for him to think of himself as surviving to witness the advent,

although he had no means of knowing when the advent would take place. At a later stage, however, he associates himself rather with those who will be raised than with those who will still be alive: 'he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you (the living) into his presence' (2 Cor. 4: 14). This reflects no additional revelation on the subject, but a change of perspective. Have we any means of knowing what caused this change of perspective between 1 and 2 Corinthians?

We probably have a clue in Paul's account in 2 Cor. 1: 8-10 of the 'affliction' which he had recently undergone in the province of Asia. Whatever the nature of this 'affliction' was, it had brought him face to face with what seemed at the time to be certain death—so much so that when, beyond all expectation, he was delivered, he greeted his deliverance as a restoration to life granted him by 'God who raises the dead'. Perhaps never before had he been consciously so close to death—inescapable death, as he thought—and the experience compelled him to consider very seriously what his personal state of being would be between death and resurrection. On this occasion he cites no 'word of the Lord' as he did to the Thessalonians; he has received no 'mystery' to impart as in 1 Cor. 15: 51. But with confidence in God he says 'we know' (2 Cor. 5: 1)—and what he knows is this: that at death he will not be left in a 'naked' or disembodied state, isolated from all means of communication with his new environment; he already has laid up for him a new 'dwelling' in heaven, ready to be donned at the moment of dissolution, 'so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life' (2 Cor. 5: 4). The fact that this 'dwelling' is described as 'eternal' (verse 1) seems to rule out the suggestion that it is but a temporary integument to be worn pending the putting on of the resurrection body at the advent of Christ. It may be that here Paul goes beyond what he says in 1 Cor. 15: 51 ff. and looks forward to putting on the 'spiritual body', the 'image of the heavenly man', immediately on death. Of this the indwelling Spirit is his present guarantee; by this he will be enabled to enjoy uninterrupted communion with Christ.

Paul did not shrink from the prospect of spiritual 'nakedness' simply because it was so dismal in itself, but above all because it would deprive him of continued fellowship with Christ; he did not so eagerly desire the heavenly 'housing' for its own sake as because it would enable him to enjoy continued fellowship with Christ. His confidence therefore amounts to this: the man or woman who enjoys the presence of Christ in this mortal life will not be deprived of it when this mortal life is past but will rather enjoy it with unprecedented intensity when 'away from the body and at home with the Lord' (verse 8). The believer in face of death may be sure that the next thing he or she will know when the last mortal breath has been drawn is to be the immediate presence of the living Lord—to be, as Paul puts it elsewhere, 'with Christ, for that is far better' (Phil. 1.23).

4. CONCLUSION

It was suggested in *The Harvester* for April and June 1977 that there is, in some Christian groups, insufficient ministry to prepare believers for death, to the point where hymns which are calculated to provide such preparation have their words altered, because of a feeling that nothing should be done or said which would diminish the reality of the hope of surviving to the Lord's return. But, as was said then, death is the lot of every Christian generation except the one that will witness the advent, and it would be a pity in any degree to deprive those who will pass through death of one jot of the comfort and hope which Scripture holds out for them. It is good for Christians to have the blessed hope before them, but the knowledge that, when Christ our life appears, His people 'also will appear with him in glory' (Col. 3: 4, cf. 1 John 3: 2) is as valid for those who have died as for those who will still be alive.

The cosmic significance of the advent of Christ is plainly revealed: that is the time when 'in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord' (*Phil. 2: 10 f.*), when God will accomplish His eternal purpose of bringing the universe into a reconciled unity in

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Christ (*Eph. 1: 9 f.*), 'so that God may be all in all' (*1 Cor. 15: 28*). But what is its significance for individual believers?

We must beware of importing an element of unreality into our thought and speech about the blessed hope, to the point where Christians who have been taught to expect it feel disappointed if it does not come in their lifetime. 'The coming one shall come and shall not tarry' (*Heb. 10: 37*), but His time-table is not ours; indeed, He is not at all subject to our earth-bound sense of time. If He was 'at hand' to His people in New Testament times, if He assured the seer of Patmos that He was coming 'quickly' or 'soon' (*Rev. 22: 20*), what meaning do we today attach to this language?

Several years ago I came upon some words in a sermon by John Henry Newman which seemed to me to express the truth so aptly that I have quoted and requoted them, and do so again:

And therefore, though time intervene between Christ's first and second coming, it is not recognized (as I may say) in the Gospel scheme, but is, as it were, an accident. For so it was, that up to Christ's coming in the flesh, the course of things ran straight towards that end, nearing it by every step; but now, under the Gospel, that course has (if I may so speak) altered its direction, as regards His second coming, and runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ, then is ever at our doors: as near eighteen hundred years as now, and not nearer now than then; and not nearer when he comes than now.

Chronologically, our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, but *personally*, Christ was as near then as He is now. At times the partition between the course of time and the presence of Christ becomes paper-thin—when His people enjoy His real presence at the holy table, for example, or in other moments of such conscious nearness to Him that something like absorption into Him is experienced. For each believer in the moment of death the partition disappears; at the last advent it will disappear on a universal scale. There may have been several events in the history of the Christian era in which partial comings of the Son of Man have been discerned by faith; they will be consummated in that definitive coming. The present order is to be done away; the new order of God in Christ is destined to endure. Let the hope of this be maintained as something to be ardently anticipated and promoted by believers—come death, come life—because it is the hope of Christ's own presence.

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