

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XXI. 25–33.

25 And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring;

26 Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

27 And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

28 And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

29 And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees;

30 When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand.

31 So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.

32 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.

33 Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.

THE subject of this portion of our Lord's great prophecy is His own second coming to judge the world. The strong expressions of the passage appear inapplicable to any event less important than this. To confine the words before us to the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans, is an unnatural straining of Scripture language.

We see, firstly, in this passage, *how terrible will be the circumstances accompanying the second advent of Christ*. Our Lord tells us that "there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud."

This is a singularly awful picture. It may not be easy perhaps to attach a precise meaning to every part of it. One thing however, is abundantly plain: the second coming of Christ will be attended by everything which can make it alarming to the senses and heart of man. If the giving of the law at Sinai was so terrible that even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake," the return of Christ, when He comes to earth in power and great glory, shall be much more terrible.—If the hardy Roman soldiers "became as dead men," when an angel rolled the stone away and Christ rose again, how much greater will the terror be when Christ shall return to judge the world! No wonder that St. Paul said, "Knowing the terrors of the Lord we persuade men." (Heb. xii. 21; Matt. xxviii. 4; 2 Cor. v. 11.)

The thoughtless and impenitent man may well tremble when he hears of this second advent of Christ. What will he do when worldly business is suddenly stopped and the precious things of the world are made worthless?—What will he do when the graves on every side are opening, and the trumpet is summoning men to judgment?—What will he do when that same Jesus whose Gospel he has so shamefully neglected shall appear in the clouds of heaven, and put down every enemy under His feet?—Surely he will call on

the rocks to fall on him and on the hills to cover him. (Hosea x. 8.) But he will call in vain for help, if he has never called on Christ before. Happy will they be in that day who have fled betimes from the wrath to come, and been washed in the blood of the Lamb!

We see, secondly, in this passage, *how complete will be the security of true Christians at the second advent of Christ*. We read that our Lord said to His disciples, “When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.”

However terrible the signs of Christ’s second coming may be to the impenitent, they need not strike terror into the heart of the true believer. They ought rather to fill him with joy. They ought to remind him that his complete deliverance from sin, the world, and the devil, is close at hand, and that he shall soon bid an eternal farewell to sickness, sorrow, death, and temptation. The very day when the unconverted man shall lose everything, shall be the day when the believer shall enter on his eternal reward. The very hour when the worldly man’s hopes shall perish, shall be the hour when the believer’s hope shall be exchanged for joyful certainty and full possession.

The servant of God should often look forward to Christ’s second advent. He will find the thought of that day a cordial to sustain him under all the trials and persecutions of this present life. “Yet a little time,” let him remember, “and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” The words of Isaiah shall be fulfilled: “The Lord God shall wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall be taken away from off all the earth.” One sure receipt for a patient spirit is to expect little from this world, and to be ever “waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Heb. x. 37; Isai. xxv. 8; 1 Cor. i. 7.)

We see, thirdly, in this passage, *how needful it is to watch the signs of the times in the prospect of the second advent of Christ*. Our Lord teaches this lesson by a parable: “Behold the fig-tree and all the trees: when they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.” The disciples ignorantly supposed that Messiah’s kingdom would be ushered in by universal peace. Our Lord, on the contrary, tells them that the signs which shall immediately precede it shall be wars, confusions, perplexity, and distress.

The general duty which these words should teach us is very plain. We are to observe carefully the public events of the times in which we live; we are not to be absorbed in politics, but we are to mark political events; we are not to turn prophets ourselves, but we are to study diligently the signs of our times. So doing, the day of Christ will not come upon us entirely unawares.

Are there any signs in our own day? Are there any circumstances in the world around us which specially demand the believer’s attention? Beyond

doubt there are very many. The drying up of the Turkish empire, the revival of the Romish Church, the awakened desire of the Protestant Churches to preach the Gospel to the heathen, the general interest in the state of the Jews, the universal shaking of Governments and established institutions, the rise and progress of the subtlest forms of infidelity,—all, all are signs peculiar to our day. All should make us remember our Lord's words about the fig-tree. All should make us think of the text, "Behold, I come quickly." (Rev. xxii. 7.)

We see, lastly, in this passage, *how certain it is that all our Lord's predictions about the second advent will be fulfilled.* Our Lord speaks as if He foresaw the unbelief and incredulity of man on this mighty subject. He knew how ready people would be to say "Impossible! impossible! The world will always go on as it has done." He arms His disciples against the infection of this sceptical spirit by a very solemn saying. "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away."

We shall do well to remember this saying, whenever we are thrown into the company of those who sneer at unfulfilled prophecy. The sneers of unbelievers must not be allowed to shake our faith. If God has said a thing He will certainly bring it to pass, and the probability or possibility of it are matters which need not trouble us for a moment. That Christ should come again in power to judge the world and reign, is not half so improbable as it was that Christ should come to suffer and die. If He came the first time, much more may we expect that He will come the second time. If He came to be nailed to the cross, much more may we expect that He will come in glory and wear the crown. He has said it, and He will do it. "His words shall not pass away."

Let us turn from the study of these verses with a deep conviction that the second advent of Christ is one of the leading truths of Christianity. Let the Christ in whom we believe, be not only the Christ who suffered on Calvary, but the Christ who is coming again in person to judge the earth.

NOTES. LUKE XXI. 25–33.

25.—[*And there shall be signs, &c.*] The prophecy, from this verse down to the end, takes a very wide range. It describes the last days of the world, the second personal advent of Jesus Christ, the circumstances which will attend that advent, and the duties which the prospect of that advent entail on all Christians.

[*Sun...moon...stars...earth...sea...waves.*] It is not agreed among commentators whether these expressions are to be interpreted literally or figuratively. It is undeniable that in symbolical prophecy the sea is an emblem of nations, and the heavenly bodies an emblem of the rulers of nations. (See Gen. xxxvii. 9. Ezek. xxxii. 8. Joel ii. 10, 30. Rev. xvii. 15.) But it must be remembered that the prophecy before us is not a symbolical one. Its predictions are plain, simple facts, and not clothed in figurative language. It seems, therefore, a high probability that the language before us will receive a literal fulfilment in the events preceding and accompanying the second advent of Christ. The frame of nature was convulsed when

the law of God was given at Sinai, and when Christ died on the cross. It is surely not too much to expect that it will be convulsed when Christ returns to judge the world.

- 26.—[*Failing them.*] The Greek word so translated is only found here in the New Testament. It means literally “fainting.” Schleusner says that it signifies, “to faint from fear: to become not dead, but as if dead.”

[*Looking after.*] The Greek word so rendered means literally “expectation.” (Acts xii. 11.) It seems to signify that state of anxious suspense in which the world will be when it sees the first symptoms of the approaching advent of Christ, and yet knows not, and is unwilling to know, what they mean.

[*On the earth.*] Let it be noted, that the Greek word so translated, in all the other fourteen places in the New Testament where it is used, is rendered, “the world.”

[*The powers of heaven.*] The remarks made on verse 25 apply to this expression. It seems safest to take it literally.

- 27.—[*See the Son of man coming, &c.*] These words appear to me to admit of only one signification. They describe a literal, personal coming of that same Jesus Christ, who ascended up in a cloud before the eyes of the disciples from Mount Olivet. (Acts i. 9-12.)

- 28.—[*When these things begin...come to pass.*] This expression deserves notice. It shows that although the advent of Christ will be a sudden advent at last, it will have been preceded by signs and symptoms which all intelligent and lively Christians may observe, however hidden they may be to the world.

[*Your redemption.*] The word “redemption” is here used in the same sense as in the following passages: Rom. viii. 23; Ephes. i. 14; iv. 30. It signifies that full and complete redemption of the believer which will be accomplished when his body is raised again, and soul and body once more united. From the guilt and power of sin believers are redeemed already; but from all the humbling consequences of sin they will not be completely redeemed until Jesus comes again, and calls them from their graves at the last day.

- 29.—[*Fig tree and all the trees.*] It admits of a question whether our Lord, by this expression, did not mean the Jewish and Gentile Churches. The fig tree, barren, and cursed for its barrenness, was undoubtedly a figure of the Jewish Church. It seems not impossible that this was in our Lord’s mind, when we remember that His curse on the fruitless fig tree had been pronounced the very week when He spake this prophecy before us. (See also Canticles ii. 11-13.)

- 31.—[*The kingdom of God...nigh at hand.*] There is probably a reference in these words to the mistaken ideas of our Lord’s disciples about the kingdom of God. They looked for it to be set up at once, and expected their Master to be its King without delay. Our Lord here teaches them that His kingdom will not be nigh at hand until after a period of fearful wars and tribulation.

- 32.—[*This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled.*] The meaning of this sentence is a point on which commentators differ widely. An excellent summary of various opinions will be found in Gerhard’s Commentary.

1. Some think that “this generation,” means simply “the present generation of men who were living when our Lord was speaking.” This view is a favourite one with many modern protestants, but it is very unsatisfactory. For one thing, nearly forty years passed away before the prophecy before us was even partially fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem. For another thing, it seems a most violent straining of the meaning of words to say that the destruction of Jerusalem at all fulfilled a very large part of the prophecy before us. The coming of the Son of man is surely a totally different thing from the taking of a city.

2. Some think that “this generation,” means, “the heaven and earth” (as in the following verses), and the whole frame of creation. This is the view of Maldonatus.

3. Some think that “this generation,” means, “the whole race of mankind.” This is the view of Jerome and Barradius.

4. Some think that “this generation,” means, “this order of things,” or dispensation; and that our Lord meant to teach us that the present dispensation was the last one: the “last time” of which St. John speaks. (1 John ii. 18.)

5. Some think that “this generation,” should have been rendered, “the same generation;” and that it signifies, “the same generation which sees the beginning of the signs of my second advent, will also see the end of them and my personal appearing.” I venture the remark that this rendering would not be the natural sense of the Greek words.

6. Some think that “this generation,” means, “the faithful, the believers, the company of Christ’s disciples;” and that the general sense is that Christ shall always have a believing people, even at the awful tribulations of the time of the end. The elect shall never be destroyed. This is a favourite opinion of the Fathers. Origen, Chrysostom, Hilary, Euthymius and Theophylact all hold it.

7. The soundest and most satisfactory opinion, to my mind, is that which makes “this generation” mean the Jewish nation. They had been spoken of by our Lord in this prophecy: their captivity and scattering had been plainly predicted. The disciples might naturally wonder how such a prediction could be reconciled with the many promises of glory to Israel in the Old Testament prophets. Our Lord answers their thoughts by declaring that this nation, the “Jewish people,” as a separate people, shall not pass away. Though cast down, they were not to be destroyed. Though scattered, they were yet to be gathered again before all things were fulfilled.

Of course the correctness of this view turns entirely on the question, whether the Greek word translated “generation,” will honestly bear the sense of “nation,” or “people.” My own belief is, that it will bear the sense, and that it does really bear it in many places of the New Testament. I mention as instances, Matt. xi. 16; xii. 39; xxiii. 36. Luke xi. 50, 51. Acts ii. 40. Philipp. ii. 15. In this last text our translators have actually translated the word “nation.”

I will only add that the view I maintain is held by Mede, Flacius, Ravanellus, Aretius, and Bullinger. Mede’s argument in defence of the view will be found in his works, p. 752, fol. 1672.

To point out how strikingly this view of the text is confirmed by the fact that the Jews are still a distinct and separate people all over the world, is of course needless.

33.—[*Heaven and earth...pass away.*] This expression is a peculiarly strong and solemn mode of declaring the certainty of the whole prophecy being fulfilled. The heavens were to pass away like a scroll, at our Lord’s second coming. But His word was to stand for ever. Nothing could prevent its being accomplished.