**The second coming of Jesus- an error** 18/2/24dkm

Read: Joel 2:28-32, 2Thessalonians 2

Text: 2Thessalonians 1:1-3

Psalms: 23old, 75, 110, 72old

Prophecy about the coming ‘Day of the Lord’ is a feature of OT prophecy. This day is seen as a day of darkness and judgment associated with the coming of the Lord in power and great glory (Joel 2, Zeph 1, Mal 4:5). Isaiah actually speaks of a new heaven and new earth coming to replace the present heavens and earth that will pass away (Isa 65:17). When the disciples asked Jesus about his return and the end of the age, and gave them various signs to look out for, he also warned of deceivers saying, ‘I am the Christ’ (Mat 24:3-5).

The apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians about deceivers who were saying, or implying, that the day of the Lord had already come (2:2, 3). Paul assures them that this was not the case, and gave them signs pointing to the end of the age, much as Jesus did. But keep in mind the clear teaching of Jesus that no one knows the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come (Mat 24:36). Misunderstanding and deceptive teaching concerning the second coming of the Lord was there in Paul’s day, and continues today.

I look at my watch to see what the weather will be tomorrow; I have a smart watch! Farmers watch the weather forecasts closely, some checking different channels. We all want to know what will happen tomorrow, whether it is famers wanting to know the weather or investors wanting to know what the stock market will do, or just families planning a picnic. Some Christians, like the disciples, and the Thessalonians, are eager to know when the Lord is coming again, and the end of the age.

In the last century we have seen a number of men leave a church and start a cult based on false teaching, most often false teaching about the second coming of the Lord. Jim Jones was a Methodist pastor before taking on Pentecostal ideas and becoming a cult leader, who in 1978 led almost one thousand followers to South America and to a mass suicide. In 1993 David Koresh joined the Branch Davidians who came out of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Rev Moon in South Korea was put out of the Presbyterian Church because of his claim to be a prophet, and telling lies about the return of Jesus. All these men claimed to be prophets with new revelation from God. They looked for the kingdom of God on earth, a kingdom in which they would be king, not Jesus. We call these men cult leaders but they did not start out as such; they started as false teachers in the church.

While these cults came to an end with the death of their leader, the Jehovah Witnesses carry on. A man called Charles Russell prophesied the world would end in 1914. This did not happen of course, so Rutherford tried to explain that Christ came in secret, while himself prophesying the end of the world in 1925. Those who believed these prophesies started leaving their jobs and selling their homes in anticipation of the end of the age. The picture we get of this group is of great confusion, not to mention false teaching and lies.

In Thessalonica, in the time of the apostle Paul, some were teaching that the day of the Lord had already come (2:2). It is interesting that he has to rebuke people who would not work and were busybodies (3:10). Paul refutes this false teaching, but not by downplaying the return of Christ, or even by declaring that no one knows the day or the hour, although he refers to this teaching of Jesus in his first letter (1Thess 5:2). What Paul does here is point to things that must happen before the second coming of Christ, which is what Jesus did when the disciples asked him, ‘When will these things be?’ (Mat 24:3).

Paul points to the ‘man of lawlessness’ and ‘the restrainer’, truths that he had personally taught them when he was in this church (2:5), but does not share with us in much detail. All we have is this second letter that he wrote to them. Interpretation of this passage is therefore difficult, as judged by the many and varied comments on it that have been made in the years since it was included in the inspired and infallible word of God. Clearly, it will not be easy to reach certainty as to who Paul is referring to, but we must try. We must always interpret Scripture by Scripture, so must keep in mind what Paul wrote in his first letter.

This letter, like his first, was written primarily to answer questions about the second coming of Jesus Christ- ‘*parousia*’ in Greek. So here at the beginning of chapter 2 we read, ‘Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2:1). Our first point is, ‘Coming and gathering’, and our second, after this lengthy introduction is, ‘Come already?’

**1. Coming and gathering**

From what we have read in Paul’s first letter, and in this letter so far, we have understood the second coming of Jesus or ‘*parousia*’ as Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven with trumpets and angels, on a particular day in history. The dead in Christ will rise from the dead, and living believers will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air (1Thess 4:17). There is no mention of unbelievers in that passage because Paul was comforting the church regarding those who had fallen asleep or died. Here in this second letter he again speaks of the Lord being revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, but in flaming fire to punish and destroy the wicked (1:7-9). Unbelievers or the wicked are now mentioned but still we understand the same coming of Jesus ‘in that Day’ (1:10).

Yet there are men and churches that teach two or more second comings of Jesus, if that makes sense. I heard a lecturer from Moore College speaking of multiple comings, and many Christians speak of two second comings. Such teaching was popularised by J.N. Darby in the 1840’s in what is called premillennial and dispensational teaching- he lead the Plymouth or ‘closed’ Brethren assemblies. This teaching was further popularised in the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. Much of this teaching comes from a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation, the only book in which we find the word ‘millennium’.

Darby also read into this first verse of 2Thessalonians chapter 2, two events rather than one; ‘the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ being distinct from ‘our gathering together with him’. While ‘and’ can join two different ideas, surely ‘gathering together’ is the same as ‘being caught up together’ as in 1Thessalonians 4:17, in which we saw one coming or revelation of Jesus. But Darby, Scofield, and now many today, teach two second comings, firstly the rapture of the church, and then a coming to judge the wicked after a thousand years. There are other matters in the teaching of dispensationalism, like the physical rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, but premillennial teaching comes from here, with the apparent support of Revelation 13.

The Reformers had not heard of this teaching, yet our Confession clearly refers to the Last Judgment as ‘this day’, as ‘the day of mercy, in eternal salvation of the elect’ and of ‘justice in the damnation of the reprobate’ (WCF 33.2). We might also ask why Paul does not answer this false teaching in Thessalonica by answering that the first second coming or the first phase of the second coming may have taken place without our knowing- a secret rapture as it were!

**2. Come already?**

Paul looks into the nature of this error, as well as its source, before refuting it. False teaching sometimes spreads like wildfire; often the more extreme it is the more it is embraced! The church at Thessalonica had enjoyed the apostle’s preaching for just three Sabbaths, but in this time he taught extensively about the second coming of Christ- O, that we could hear what he said! (2:5). There was misunderstanding about how the dead in Christ would rise, the question addressed in his first letter. But here in this letter he teaches them about ‘the man of lawlessness’ by way of refuting an error that had so quickly come into this church (2:5).

This error was promoted as having originated with the apostle Paul. It was teaching that disturbed and troubled the believers, as all false teaching does. It threatened to shake them from the faith. It came by way of ‘spirit, or word, or letter’ supposedly with the authority of the apostle (2:2). Paul preached the gospel with Christ-given authority or apostolic authority. For this reason his letters are included in the canon of Scripture. False teachers have no authority; they have to claim authority via other men. This still happens today. When preachers or teachers claim the authority of men, or of ‘experts’, rather than the Bible, we have cause for caution. If they claim to be ‘experts’ themselves, or claim direct revelation from God, we reject them.

Paul did not want the Thessalonians being deceived, but this is what happens when people in the church listen to men or women without looking to the Bible-remember the Bereans. Men can be very persuasive when they are seeking glory for themselves, but it is our duty not to be gullible. New teaching sounds great but ‘new teaching’ is not always Biblical teaching. It is hard to see how teaching that Christ has already come would attract these believers. They we being persecuted, and expectations of Christ’s imminent return were high. Did this contribute to the rise of this error? It is interesting that false teaching usually arises out of affluence, not poverty or persecution.

Moreover, the demise of a church is more often the result of false teaching and division than it is of persecution. When the foundations are shaken the building collapses. The minds of these believers were being shaken by false teaching concerning the ‘*Parousia*’. They were ‘in a flap, in a constant state of nervous excitement’ writes Stott. The thought of being left behind at the coming of Jesus must have shaken these believers. Paul assures them that they had not missed his second coming. They, like us, needed to hold fast the truth that comes to us with divine authority in the Bible, and only in the Bible.

The false teaching Paul has to address said that the day of the Lord had already come (2:2). Paul, like Jesus, taught that day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night (1Thess 5:2). The Lord would come when people were not expecting, but as believers we should be expecting him all the time. We do not know when, but his coming should not be a surprise to us. Maybe this teaching was twisted to say that Jesus had already come, or maybe someone simply came up with this idea, like the men we mentioned at the beginning- there has been no shortage of false predictions in the church. To say that Christ had already come seems strange, but remember the Jehovah Witnesses, and Darby with his secret rapture. What is clear from the Bible is that Jesus will not come in secret.

No one, believer or unbeliever, will miss the Lord’s coming on the clouds of heaven: ‘Every eye will see him’ (Rev 1:7). And every tongue will confess his holy name (Phil 2:11). Other NT churches became accustomed to the greeting, ‘Maranatha’, ‘O Lord Come’ (1Cor 16:22), and our Bible ends with, ‘Even so, come Lord Jesus (Rev 22:20). Hopefully the church at Thessalonica adopted this greeting after reading this letter, and hopefully no church today teaches the idea that Jesus has already come again, or will come on a certain date, or will come again on multiple occasions.