

The Lord's Coming into the World - Pt. 1: The Prophecies.

Without question, Christmas is, or should be, a time of joy and gladness; a time of joy and gladness for people of all ages everywhere. But if that joy and gladness is to be something deep and lasting our preparation for it needs to be on two planes, and to be of two kinds. Present-buying, family get-togethers, celebrations, and parties are one thing. And, in their way, they can combine to make it a 'happy' Christmas for us. But Christmas holds within it much more than that. Quite apart from the question of whether it is the precise date or not (a matter I am not going to stop over because it is not important) Christmas is the anniversary of the birth of the Lord; a time to contemplate the implications of His Coming into the world, the reason for it, and what He accomplished while He was here. Joy and gladness, wonder and blessing, if based on surface things will be superficial only. Christmas, however, confronts us with issues of deep importance and significance to us which, if thought about, must make our rejoicing so much more real and from the heart.

My talks in this 4 part series will all be on the theme of the Lord's coming into the world. We hope that in some small way they will lead you into a deeper appreciation and understanding of what was involved in that wondrous event, apart from which, and if it had not taken place, the human race could not have survived.

I am going to talk about the prophecies first off. Some of the prophecies you will know well and others of which - for there are a great many - which you may not know at all. For hundreds, indeed, for thousands of years beforehand, the Coming of the Lord was promised and spoken about. In the first and in the last books of the Old Testament, in Genesis and Malachi, there is a looking to His Advent. Some of it makes obvious sense to us. Some of the prophecies puzzle us. Certain of the things promised clearly refer to the Lord and were fulfilled when He came. There are, however, other prophecies which must have awakened hopes which, it seems, were never realised. It may well be that you haven't thought about the use they served or the connection which exists between them. But if you have, there are questions that are bound to have occurred to you. Why were prophecies given at all? And since they were spread over such a long period of time why the delay? What were the factors which determined that the Lord should come when He did?

There is, however, another and more basic question that we need to look at first of all. Why did the Lord come at all? And the answer is that He came to overcome the power and influence of evil from hell which, from the time of man's Fall, had increased to such an extent that there was a very real danger of it overwhelming mankind. Once people began to doubt what had been revealed and to allow themselves to be swayed into states of doubt and denial by the evidence of their senses - as they did - forces were unleashed which would grow in intensity and to such an extent that only God could overcome them. It took hundreds, indeed, thousands of years, for this process to gain momentum and to reach its most dangerous point; and it was during these years that the prophecies were given.

Why, we are bound to ask, didn't the Lord come earlier?

We wonder why He allowed the process to go on for so long. Why the multiplication of evil in the centuries before His Coming? And the answer here is that an earlier Coming would have been of a temporary use only and, in the long term, ineffective, for it was important that He be confronted by, and that He overcome evil, in its worst possible forms. And having overcome those evils He would make it possible for men and women to overcome them in their own lives also. As well as this, although an earlier Coming would have resulted in Him being better received, yet the process of decline would have resumed and people would - to their much greater detriment - have profaned the teaching and values He brought to them.

In the meantime, and until His Coming, there were the prophecies. Indistinct and obscure as they were at first, gradually they became clearer and more definite, each one adding some new piece of information that had previously not been known. For good and righteous people they were something to hold on to. When He came they were there to re-assure people who wanted to believe but who were hesitant and unsure. With those who would reject Him they would reject Him in the face of all these things that had been prophesied about Him. With so much having been said about Him beforehand it would not be possible to reject Him superficially and from ignorance.

The first of all the prophecies which were given concerning the coming of the Lord was given at the time of the Fall, when the process of decline began. Obscure as it is, yet it contained two vital pieces of information which would be elaborated upon in subsequent prophecies - that the Messiah to come was to be born of a woman and that He would overcome evil.

From Genesis, Chapter 3, "And the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.'"

Subsequently, and hundreds of years later on as it must have been when they were given, there are prophecies in the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers. There are many in the Psalms, unfamiliar as they may be. But the best known of them all are found in the books of the Prophets, particularly in Isaiah, where the picture of the Messiah to come is very much filled out.

"Behold", He proclaimed, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall He eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good". (Ch. 7:14,15). And then again,

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulders: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end." (Ch. 9:6) Yet again,

"Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him: behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young". (Ch. 40: 10,11).

Elsewhere, in the prophecy through Micah, Bethlehem is named as the town of His birth; and in Malachi, at the end, there is the promise of the fore-runner, John the Baptist.

Far from all that is said in the prophecies of the Coming of the Lord seems to have been fulfilled, and a classic example of this is the prophecy in Isaiah Chapter 11, taken to refer to conditions on earth which would exist when He came.

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den."

It is an inspiring picture of tranquility which, so far as this world is concerned, never materialised. What must be realised, however, is that prophecies such as these refer, and were always intended to refer, not to the natural but to the spiritual consequences of the coming of the Lord. The wolf and the leopard; the lion and the bear; the asp and the adder, represent evils overcome and rendered harmless as a result of the Lord's victory over the hells. Doubtful as people have been about the prophecy yet it can indeed be shown that it was fulfilled. Where consequences and conditions as at the time of the Lord's Coming, or after it, are mentioned, the fulfilment of such prophecies is to be looked for on the spiritual and not on the natural plane.

It is the same with other prophecies, spiritual and not natural factors being involved, as in Joel, Chapter 3. "The sun and the moon shall be darkened" he prophesied, "and the stars shall withdraw their shining." It was the spiritual state of people, a people groping and in darkness, to which he was referring, And this is precisely as it was when the Lord came into the world.

Remarkably, though only with surprising reluctance ever faced up to, the prophecies of the Advent never speak of the Coming One other than as being God Himself, Jehovah. Isaiah's famous prophecy which I earlier quoted speaks of Him as "The mighty God" and "The everlasting Father". And, elsewhere, also in Isaiah's prophecy, consistent with this, "And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us: this is Jehovah; we have waited for Him, and we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation." (Ch. 25).

It is a mighty statement and one we shall be examining in more detail, but it was the one God who Himself descended to effect the redemption of mankind. Only He could overcome the power of evil. Only He could open up to us again the possibilities of salvation.

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