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"Let us pray." And those gathered around the table bow their heads, or the congregation kneels together. We repeatedly pray together; this uniting in prayer adds an immeasurable dimension to husband—wife relationships, to families, and to congregations. The old maxim "The family that prays together, stays together" is not an empty rhyme. The apostle Paul besought the Romans to "strive together" in their prayers for him (Romans 15:30).

We often unite in prayer as one individual leads out, thus joining our thoughts and minds. While only one is praying aloud, each of us present should be praying with the leader. We unite in prayer by capturing the wandering thought and deliberately following along with the verbal prayer. We unite in prayer when we gather collectively for prayer, following the pattern of an early church prayer meeting at Mary's house (Acts 12:12). Topics and Bible studies at prayer meetings should be kept within the allotted time so that the prayer period is not shortened. If we are striving together in our prayers, we will not have lengthy silences between the audible prayers, even if prayer leaders are not assigned. Meaningful prayer services bind the congregation in much the same way as praying together binds the family.

We are also united in prayer when we each pray separately. When we take the concerns from prayer meeting along home to our own prayer closets, we are each "helping together by prayer" (2 Corinthians 1:11). In this way, we should regularly unite in prayer for each other, for the work of the church, for the furtherance of the Gospel, for our Bible schools and Christian day schools, and for civil authorities over us. Church leaders today echo the plea of old: "Pray for us."

On various occasions we unite our thoughts and voices as we pray in unison. We pray together the model prayer our Lord taught us. Families or schoolchildren may pray memorized mealtime prayers together. Many hymns are prayers or include prayer. If we are thinking about the words, singing meaningfully, we are praying together. While a caution against the overuse of memorized prayers may be in order, prayers prayed or sung in unison do not become meaningless or little more than vain repetition, if the participants are indeed praying and not only saying the prayer.

Does holding hands help us to unite in prayer? Perhaps the newly married couple begins the practice of joining hands for prayer in the home. When young children join the scene at the table, it is only natural to expand the

practice and hold their little hands for prayer. Helping the young child to keep his hands still during prayer is practical. But sometime, long before school age, he should have learned proper prayer-time behavior without the aid of having his hands held.

A practice that might be fitting for one phase of family life might be wisely discontinued for another phase. That which has been acceptable can become a detriment if practiced indiscriminately. If all family members were to join hands for prayer, would it be appropriate for youthful siblings to do so? What would we do when the courting friend joins the family for a meal or when the extended family gathers around our table? Holding hands for prayer should never cross the lines of Christian propriety and reserve.

Being united in prayer can include an earthly dimension—gathering together at one time and place. The primary unity, however, is spiritual, involving much more than a sentimental joining of voices or hands. Spirits and souls join at our Father's throne of grace—offering to Him our praise and our petitions.

There is a place where spirits blend,
Where friend holds fellowship with friend;
Though sundered far, by faith they meet
Around one common mercy seat.

—ISM



The Imminence of Christ's Second Coming *Part 1: The Teaching of the New Testament*

Our confession of faith states the doctrine of Christ's second coming clearly and concisely:

We believe in the personal, imminent coming of our Lord as the blessed hope of the believer; that we who are alive and remain, together with the dead in Christ who will be raised, shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and thus ever be with the Lord.

The word imminent means "about to occur." Something imminent could occur before you finish reading this sentence: no prophesied event must precede it. Ever since the angels announced to the disciples that "this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11), this has been "the blessed hope of the believer."

Reading the Scriptures in a topical Bible under a heading such as "Jesus Christ, Second Coming" makes a worthwhile exercise. New Testament writers referred often to this subject. Many of these references breathe the unmistakable atmosphere that this event is both certain and imminent.

On various occasions, Jesus Himself spoke of His second coming, emphasizing that this event would be imminent for His original audience. His most thorough discourse on the subject is recorded in Matthew 24 and 25. Actually He introduced the discourse following His lament over Jerusalem: "For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (23:39). Note especially the following words from these chapters:

- "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.... Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (24:42, 44).
- "But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; . . . the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of" (24:48, 50).
- "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (25:13).

Luke also records this discourse of Jesus:

But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.... Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: ... Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not. (Luke 12:31-40).

Furthermore, in the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus' messenger said to John, "Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand." And Jesus Himself declared twice, "I come quickly.

Throughout the Epistles, this emphasis on the imminent return of Christ is unmistakable. In reference after reference, the writer took for granted that both he and his original audience needed to be looking for that blessed hope at any moment. Indeed, in some passages, the writer expected to be among the living who would be "caught up" with those who had died. Consider this brief synopsis.

- "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump:

for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52).

- "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

- "I give thee charge in the sight of God, . . . that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 6:13, 14).

- "Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" (James 5:8).

- "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (1 Peter 4:7).

- "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28).

On the other hand, several passages seem to indicate that Christ's return would not occur imminently for the first generation of believers. Some of these are parables, which, though they illustrate truth, never establish doctrine. Do the parabolic illustrations of the nobleman who went on an extended journey "into a far country," for example, indicate that Jesus taught the believers to expect a long interval between His ascension and His second coming? Not necessarily. We do not conclude that the parable of the ten virgins suggests that the company of professing Christians will divide exactly in half between true and false believers. The sound exegesis of parables requires keeping a strong focus on the main theme of the parable, not attempting to draw inferences from each detail.

Other passages are Jesus' words to His disciples, either collectively or individually. Jesus did prophesy the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:2), which did not occur until a generation later. He did tell Peter that he would grow old (John 21:18) And He did give the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), which seems to presuppose the elapse of many years before "the end of the world."

Several passages in the Epistles also may seem to project Christ's return into the distant future from the perspective of the New Testament. Consider these two especially:

- "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; ... For the mystery of iniquity both already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-8).

- "But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts" (Jude 17-18).

God knows and designs that we benefit from the tension between living as though we will be here for many years and yet being prepared to leave momentarily. He desires that we diligently "work with our [own] hands" in the natural things for the benefit of future generations. But He also calls us to remember that "the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Corinthians 7:31) Even more, He desires that we pass on the faith so that "when the Son of man cometh, [he will] find faith on the earth" (Luke 18:8). But He also wants us to live as if the next thing we will hear will be the "trump of God."

This still leaves a seeming contradiction between the emphasis on the imminency of Christ's return and such prophecies as "a falling away first," the mark of the beast, and the loosing of Satan "when the thousand years are expired."

One explanation would be to understand the return of Christ as a two-phase event. At any moment, "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we ... shall be caught up." After coming for His own, He comes in final judgment at the end of the world.

Regardless of how we understand the prophetic Scriptures, ultimately, we all come to the end of our understanding. That which is a seeming contradiction to us is certainly no contradiction to God! He will fulfill His perfect plan in His own way. Meanwhile, we live expectantly. "Behold, he cometh!"

Brother Bruce



THAT DARKENED GLASS

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Most of us have had the experience of attempting to look at objects through a window that is smudged, tinted, or glazed. Clean, clear glass gives the best view through the window. Glancing through a clear glass takes very little effort. We do not need to guess at what we see on the other side, because the view is clear.

Man has a certain inborn curiosity to discover what is beyond easy understanding. He wants to be knowledgeable. When man has a rather limited understanding of a certain subject, he may spend time and energy to study further to broaden his knowledge. As a result, many inventions have been made that greatly benefit mankind.

When we are searching for spiritual truth, the easiest truths to glean are the ones that are recorded in the Word in crisp, clear language. We do not doubt in our minds what the Word is saying. We accept those truths eagerly. Other concepts are not quite as easy to understand at a glance. We need to dig deeper and to meditate to capture the full meaning. Still other things seem to be only partially exposed through the Word. A careful study of the Scriptures from front to back reveals only part of the whole picture. We turn to the writings of Bible scholars to see what they have gleaned in their study. We then draw conclusions based on our limited understanding of the Scriptures and the wisdom of others. Is this wrong? Are there any dangers with this method of Bible study?

When the Word of God does not fully reveal everything (such as the details of heaven), we need to be content to accept what we can know, and let the rest in God's hands. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Some things our finite minds cannot understand; someday they will be revealed. God has blessed man with the needed understanding to comprehend His will for His people here on this earth. The hidden things, the secret things, belong to God. We finally must be content to let those with Him.

Seeing through a glass darkly does not hinder our relationship with God; instead it protects us. God "knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." So He has revealed through His inspired Word all that man needs to know for this life. The full glory and greatness of God would be too

much for this frail body to process.

When the truth is not clearly shown, how much speculation should we do? Some pine away for a knowledge of the unknown; some theorize and attempt to impress others with their supposed knowledge; some are content to let the unknown in the hands of God. As we continue to "walk by faith" and "not by sight," we come to rest with our imperfect knowledge. We focus on the truths that are clearly shown to us in Scripture. We diligently study the Word, but we avoid too much guesswork or the adapting of another's guesses. Rather we need to anchor ourselves on the truth God has revealed to us.

We also realize that this darkened view is temporary. Someday we will see face to face. The part we know now will be superseded by a full understanding of our Creator. Just as God knows all about us now, someday He will reveal Himself fully to His saints. What a glorious day that will be, when our glorified eyes can behold our Lord in all His splendor!

Brother Linford



A God-Honoring Courtship (Part 2)

Laying the Foundation

John's thoughts about courtship were increasingly intertwined with thoughts about a certain sister. His covert observations had led to growing admiration. This certain sister appeared to graciously combine an attractive personality with all that was noble about Christian womanhood.

But the more impressed John was, the more he found himself taking inventory of his own life and character. Was he even worthy of her consideration? How could he prepare himself for the next step? What character traits should he possess before venturing into courtship?

Spiritual Stability. The pleasure of courtship will not satisfy the yearnings of your soul. True fulfillment is found only in yielding to the lordship of Christ. You must find satisfaction in your walk with Christ before you will have anything to contribute to Christian courtship. Does your devotional life provide strength for victory? Mental strongholds of impurity must be soundly defeated. To think that courtship will be "just the help I need" to make the final pull to victory is fallacy.

Submission to Authority. God hates rebellion and He resists the proud. If you are resisting authority, you cannot accurately discern God's will for your life. This is especially dangerous in the context of courtship. If you are at odds with your parents, you are stifling the advantage of their wiser perspective. If you resent your church, you will probably court someone who approves your path away from God. Mutual distrust for authority often leads to regrettable courtship standards and resentment toward one another.

Personal Responsibility. Courtship and married life are filled with problems to solve and needs to be met. You will need to know how to face difficulties and find solutions. Learn to work your way through difficult tasks instead of calling for help too soon. See personal projects through to a reasonable conclusion. Break the habit of looking for a scapegoat when the fault lies mostly on your lap. Consider how your life influences others to succeed or fail. Develop a sense of obligation to help others be their best. Youthful inexperience and idealism tend to embellish your view of courtship and marriage. Courtship would likely add new sparkle to your future, but it will not change who you are. Any girl can dream of being a bride, but only those who learn homemaking skills can be good wives. Any boy can fancy performing gallantly, but only the diligent and thrifty make good husbands. So while you wait for your ideal courtship to materialize, develop the practical skills of respectable adulthood. Observe the godly, secure homes around you. Note the way their commitment to one another is expressed. Evaluate the cause of their happiness. They are real-life models for your aspirations.

Your character will be the foundation of your courtship and marriage. With God's help you can become the noble person you ought to be.

Brother Jesse.

