

The Coming Prince - Chapter 1 - Introductory

by Sir Robert Anderson

Sir Robert Anderson's sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding prophetic scripture in the context of faith and the challenges posed by modern skepticism.

Scripture: Psalm 50:3

Topics: "Eschatology", "Prophecy"

Description

Sir Robert Anderson preaches about the importance of understanding the signs of the times and the urgency of the present age, questioning whether we are approaching the end of the world. He emphasizes the need for earnest inquiry into the nature of the crisis and the fulfillment of prophecy, particularly focusing on the Prophet Daniel's vision of the seventy weeks. Despite the rampant evil and injustice in the world, the delay in God's intervention is seen as a display of His patience and longsuffering. The sermon highlights the significance of prophetic study in revealing God's great purposes and the importance of a deep and thorough knowledge of the Scriptures in combating skepticism and promoting faith.

Transcript

To living men no time can be so solemn as "the living present," whatever its characteristics; and that solemnity is immensely deepened in an age of progress unparalleled in the history of the world. But the question arises whether these days of ours are momentous beyond comparison, by reason of their being in the strictest sense the last? Is the world's history about to close? The sands of its destiny, are they almost run out, and is the crash of all things near at hand?

Earnest thinkers will not allow the wild utterances of alarmists, or the vagaries of prophecy-mongers, to divert them from an inquiry at once so solemn and so reasonable. It is only the infidel who doubts that there is a destined limit to the course of "this present evil world." That God will one day put forth His power to ensure the triumph of the good, is in some sense a matter of course. The mystery of revelation is not that He will do this, but that He delays to do it. Judged by the public facts around us, He is an indifferent spectator of the unequal struggle between good and evil upon earth.

"I considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and, behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter." (Ecclesiastes 4:1)

And how can such things be, if indeed the God who rules above is almighty and all-good? Vice and godlessness and violence and wrong are rampant upon every side, and yet the heavens above keep silence. The infidel appeals to the fact in proof that the Christian's God is but a myth. [1]

The Christian finds in it a further proof that the God he worships is patient and longsuffering- "patient because He is eternal," longsuffering because He is almighty, for wrath is a last resource with power. But the day is coming when

"our God shall come and shall not keep silence." (Psalm 1:3)

This is not a matter of opinion, but of faith. He who questions it has no claim whatever to the name of Christian, for it is as essentially a truth of Christianity as is the record of the life and death of the Son of God. The old Scriptures teem with it, and of all the writers of the New Testament there is not so much as one who does not expressly speak of it. It was the burden of the first prophetic utterance which Holy Writ records; (Jude 14) and the closing book of the sacred Canon, from the first chapter to the last, confirms and amplifies the testimony.

The only inquiry, therefore, which concerns us relates to the nature of the crisis and the time of its fulfillment. And the key to this inquiry is the Prophet Daniel's vision of the seventy weeks. Not that a right understanding of the prophecy will enable us to prophesy. That is not the purpose for which it was given. [2]

But it will prove a sufficient safeguard against error in the study. Notably it will save us from the follies into which false systems of prophetic chronology inevitably lead those who follow them. It is not in our time only that the end of the world has been predicted. It was looked for far more confidently at the beginning of the sixth century. All Europe rang with it in the days of Pope Gregory the Great. And at the end of the tenth century the apprehension of it amounted to a general panic. "It was then frequently preached on, and by breathless crowds listened to; the subject of every one's thoughts, every one's conversation." "Under this impression, multitudes innumerable," says Mosheim, "having given their property to monasteries or churches, traveled to Palestine, where they expected Christ to descend to judgment. Others bound themselves by solemn oaths to be serfs to churches or to priests, in hopes of a milder sentence on them as being servants of Christ's servants. In many places buildings were let go to decay, as that of which there would be no need in future. And on occasions of eclipses of sun or moon, the people fled in multitudes for refuge to the caverns and the rocks." [3]

And so in recent years, one date after another has been confidently named for the supreme crisis; but still the world goes on. A.D. 581 was one of the first years fixed for the event, [4] 1881 is among the last. These pages are not designed to perpetuate the folly of such predictions, but to endeavor in a humble way to elucidate the meaning of a prophecy which ought to deliver us from all such errors and to rescue the study from the discredit they bring upon it.

No words ought to be necessary to enforce the importance of the subject, and yet the neglect of the prophetic Scriptures, by those even who profess to believe all Scripture to be inspired, is proverbial. Putting the matter on the lowest ground, it might be urged that if a knowledge of the past be important, a knowledge of the future must be of far higher value still, in enlarging the mind and raising it above the littlenesses produced by a narrow and unenlightened contemplation of the present. If God has vouchsafed a revelation to men, the study of it is surely fitted to excite enthusiastic interest, and to command the exercise of every talent which can be brought to bear upon it.

And this suggests another ground on which, in our own day especially, prophetic study claims peculiar prominence; namely, the testimony it affords to the Divine character and origin of the Scriptures. Though infidelity was as open-mouthed in former times, it had its own banner and its own camp, and it shocked the mass of mankind, who, though ignorant of the spiritual power of religion, clung nevertheless with dull tenacity to its dogmas. But the special feature of the present age - well fitted to cause anxiety and alarm to all thoughtful men - is the growth of what may be termed religious skepticism, a Christianity which denies revelation - a form of godliness which denies that which is the power of godliness. (2 Timothy 3:5)

Faith is not the normal attitude of the human mind towards things Divine, the earnest doubter, therefore, is entitled to respect and sympathy. But what judgment shall be meted out to those who delight to proclaim themselves doubters, while claiming to be ministers of a religion of which FAITH is the essential characteristic?

There are not a few in our day whose belief in the Bible is all the more deep and unfaltering just because they have shared in the general revolt against priestcraft and superstition; and such men are scarcely prepared to take sides in the struggle between free thought and the thralldom of creeds and clerics. But in the conflict between faith and skepticism within the pale, their sympathies are less divided. On the one side there may be narrowness, but at least there is honesty; and in such a case surely the moral element is to be considered before a claim to mental vigor and independence can be listened to. Moreover any claim of the kind needs looking into. The man who asserts his freedom to receive and teach what he deems truth, howsoever reached, and wheresoever found, is not to be lightly accused of vanity or self-will. His motives may be true, and right, and praiseworthy. But if he has subscribed to a creed, he ought to be careful in taking any such ground. It is not on the side of vagueness that the creeds of our British Churches are in fault, and men who boast of being freethinkers would deserve more respect if they showed their independence by refusing to subscribe, than by undermining the doctrines they are both pledged and subsidized to defend and teach.

But what concerns us here is the indisputable fact that rationalism in this its most subtle phase is leavening society. The universities are its chief seminaries. The pulpit is its platform. Some of the most popular religious leaders are amongst its apostles. No class is safe from its influence. And if even the present could be stereotyped, it were well; but we are entered on a downward path, and they must indeed be blind who cannot see where it is leading. If the authority of the Scriptures be unshaken, vital truths may be lost by one generation, and recovered by the next; but if that be touched, the foundation of all truth is undermined, and all power of recovery is gone. The Christianized skeptic of today will soon give place to the Christianized infidel, whose disciples and successors in their turn will be infidels without any gloss of Christianity about them. Some, doubtless, will escape; but as for the many, Rome will be the only refuge for those who dread the goal to which society is hastening. Thus the forces are marshaling for the great predicted struggle of the future between the apostasy of a false religion and the apostasy of open infidelity. [5]

Is the Bible a revelation from God? This is now become the greatest and most pressing of all questions. We may at once dismiss the quibble that the Scriptures admittedly contain a revelation. Is the sacred volume no better than a lottery bag from which blanks and prizes are to be drawn at random, with no power of distinguishing between them till the day when the discovery must come too late! And in the present phase of the question it is no less a quibble to urge that passages, and even books, may have been added in error to the Canon. We refuse to surrender Holy Writ to the tender mercies of those who approach it with the ignorance of pagans and the animus of apostates. But for the purpose of the present

controversy we might consent to strike out everything on which enlightened criticism has cast the shadow of a doubt. This, however, would only clear the way for the real question at issue, which is not as to the authenticity of one portion or another, but as to the character and value of what is admittedly authentic. We are now far beyond discussing rival theories of inspiration; what concerns us is to consider whether the holy writings are what they claim to be, "the oracles of God." [6]

In the midst of error and confusion and uncertainty, increasing on every side, can earnest and devout souls turn to an open Bible, and find there "words of eternal life"? "The rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural is that of skepticism." [7]

Reason may bow before the shibboleths and tricks of priestcraft- "the voice of the Church," as it is called; but this is sheer credulity. But if GOD speaks, then skepticism gives place to faith. Nor is this a mere begging of the question. The proof that the voice is really Divine must be absolute and conclusive. In such circumstances, skepticism betokens mental or moral degradation, and faith is not the abnegation of reason, but the highest act of reason. To maintain that such proof is impossible, is equivalent to asserting that the God who made us cannot so speak to us that the voice shall carry with it the conviction that it is from Him; and this is not skepticism at all, but disbelief and atheism. "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me," was St. Paul's account of his conversion. The grounds of his faith were subjective, and could not be produced. In proof to others of their reality he could only appeal to the facts of his life; though these were entirely the result, and in no sense or degree the basis, of his conviction. Nor was his case exceptional. St. Peter was one of the favored three who witnessed every miracle, including the transfiguration, and yet his faith was not the result of these, but sprang from a revelation to himself. In response to his confession,

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,"

the Lord declared,

"Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17)

Nor, again, was this a special grace accorded only to apostles.

"To them that have obtained like precious faith with us," (2 Peter 1:1)

was St. Peter's address to the faithful generally. He describes them as "born again by the Word of God." So also St. John speaks of such as

"born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13)

"Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth" (James 1:18)

is the kindred statement of St. James.

Whatever be the meaning of such words, they must mean something more than arriving at a sound conclusion from sufficient premises, or accepting facts upon sufficient evidence. Nor will it avail to urge that this birth was merely the mental or moral change naturally caused by the truth thus attained by natural means. The language of the Scripture is unequivocal that the power of the testimony to produce this change depended on the presence and operation of God. Pages might be filled with quotations to prove this, but two may suffice. St. Peter declares they preached the Gospel

"with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven;" (1 Peter 1:12)

and St. Paul's words are still more definite. "Our Gospel came not: unto you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost." [8]

And if the new birth and the faith of Christianity were thus produced in the case of persons who received the Gospel immediately from the Apostles, nothing less will avail with us who are separated by eighteen centuries from the witnesses and their testimony. God is with His people still. And He speaks to men's hearts, now, as really as He did in early times; not indeed through inspired Apostles, and still less by dreams or visions, but through the Holy Writings which He Himself inspired; [9] and as the result believers are "born of God," and obtain the knowledge of forgiveness of sins and of eternal life. The phenomenon is not a natural one, resulting from the study of the evidences; it is supernatural altogether. "Thinking minds," regarding it objectively, may, if they please, maintain towards it what they deem "a rational attitude;" but at least let them own the fact that there are thousands of credible people who can testify to the reality of the experience here spoken of, and further let them recognize that it is entirely in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament.

And such persons have transcendental proof of the truth of Christianity. Their faith rests, not on the phenomena of their own experience, but on the great objective truths of revelation. Yet their primary conviction that these are Divine truths does not depend on the "evidences" which skepticism delights to criticize, but on something which skepticism takes no account of. [10]

"No book can be written in behalf of the Bible like the Bible itself. Man's defenses are man's word; they may help to beat off attacks, they may draw out some portion of its meaning. The Bible is God's word, and through it God the Holy Ghost, who spake it, speaks to the soul which closes not itself against it." [11]

But more than this, the well-instructed believer will find within it inexhaustible stores of proof that it is from God. The Bible is far more than a textbook of theology and morals, or even than a guide to heaven. It is the record of the progressive revelation God has vouchsafed to man, and the Divine history of our race in connection with that revelation. Ignorance may fail to see in it anything more than the religious literature of the Hebrew race, and of the Church in Apostolic times; but the intelligent student who can read between the lines will find there mapped out, sometimes in clear bold outline, sometimes dimly, but yet always discernible by the patient and devout inquirer, the great scheme of God's counsels and workings in and for this world of ours from eternity to eternity.

And the study of prophecy, rightly understood, has a range no narrower than this. Its chief value is not to bring us a knowledge of "things to come," regarded as isolated events, important though this may be; but to enable us to link the future with the past as part of God's great purpose and plan revealed in Holy Writ. The facts of the life and death of Christ were an overwhelming proof of the inspiration of the Old Testament. When, after His resurrection, He sought to confirm the disciples' faith,

"beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." (Luke 24:27)

But many a promise had been given, and many a prophecy recorded, which seemed to be lost in the darkness of Israel's national extinction and Judah's apostasy. The fulfillment of them all depended on Messiah; but now Messiah was rejected, and His people were about to be cast away, that Gentiles might be taken up for blessing. Are we to conclude then that the past is wiped out for ever, and that God's great purposes for earth have collapsed through human sin? As men now judge of revelation, Christianity dwindles down to be nothing but a "plan of salvation" for individuals, and if St. John's Gospel and a few of

the Epistles be left them they are content. How different was the attitude of mind and heart displayed by St. Paul! In the Apostle's view the crisis which seemed the catastrophe of everything the old prophets had foretold of God's purposes for earth, opened up a wider and more glorious purpose still, which should include the fulfillment of them all; and rapt in the contemplation, he exclaimed,

"Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33)

True prophetic study is an inquiry into these unsearchable counsels, these deep riches of Divine wisdom and knowledge. Beneath the light it gives, the Scriptures are no longer a heterogeneous compilation of religious books, but one harmonious whole, from which no part could be omitted without destroying the completeness of the revelation. And yet the study is disparaged in the Churches as being of no practical importance. If the Churches are leavened with skepticism at this moment, their neglect of prophetic study in this its true and broader aspect has done more than all the rationalism of Germany to promote the evil. Skeptics may boast of learned Professors and Doctors of Divinity among their ranks, but we may challenge them to name a single one of the number who has given proof that he knows anything whatever of these deeper mysteries of revelation. The attempt to put back the rising tide of skepticism is hopeless. Indeed the movement is but one of many phases of the intense mental activity which marks the age. The reign of creeds is past. The days are gone for ever when men will believe what their fathers believed, without a question. Rome, in some phase of its development, has a strange charm for minds of a certain caste, and rationalism is fascinating to not a few; but orthodoxy in the old sense is dead, and if any are to be delivered it must be by a deeper and more thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

These pages are but a humble effort to this end; but if they avail in any measure to promote the study of Holy Writ their chief purpose will be fulfilled. The reader therefore may expect to find the accuracy of the Bible vindicated on points which may seem of trifling value. When David reached the throne of Israel and came to choose his generals, he named for the chief commands the men who had made themselves conspicuous by feats of prowess or of valor. Among the foremost three was one of whom the record states that he defended a tract of lentiles, and drove away a troop of the Philistines. (2 Samuel 23:11, 12)? To others it may have seemed little better than a patch of weeds, and not worth fighting for, but it was precious to the Israelite as a portion of the divinely-given inheritance, and moreover the enemy might have used it as a rallying ground from which to capture strongholds. So is it with the Bible. It is all of intrinsic value if indeed it be from God; and moreover, the statement which is assailed, and which may seem of no importance, may prove to be a link in the chain of truth on which we are depending for eternal life.

CHAPTER 1 FOOTNOTES

[1] According to Mill, the course of the world gives proof that both the power and the goodness of God are limited. His Essays on Religion clearly show that skepticism is an attitude of mind which it is practically impossible to maintain. Even with a reasoner so clear and able as Mill, it inevitably degenerates to a degrading form of faith." The rational attitude of a thinking mind towards the supernatural" (he declares) "is that of skepticism, as distinguished from belief on the one hand, and from atheism on the other;" and yet he immediately proceeds to formulate a creed. It is not that there is a God, for that is only probable, but that if there be a God He is not almighty, and His goodness toward man is limited. (Essays, etc., pp. 242, 243.) He does not prove his creed, of course. Its truth is obvious to a "thinking mind." It is equally obvious that the sun moves round the earth. A man only needs to be as ignorant of astronomy as the infidel is of Christianity, and he will find the most indisputable proof of the fact every time he surveys the heavens!

[2] Prophecy is not given to enable us to prophesy, but as a witness to God when the time comes." - PUSEY, Daniel, p. 80.

[3] Elliott, *Horae Apoc.* (3rd Ed.), 1., 446: and see also ch. 3, pp. 362-376

[4] Elliott, 1., 373. Hippolytus predicted A. D. 500.

[5] I cannot refrain from giving the following extract from an article by Professor Goldwin Smith, in *Macmillan's Magazine* for February 1878:

"The denial of the existence of God and of the future state, in a word, is the dethronement of conscience; and society will pass, to say the least, through a dangerous interval before social science can fill the vacant throne... But in the meantime mankind, or some portions of it, may be in danger of an anarchy of self-interest, compressed, for the purpose of political order, by a despotism of force.

"That science and criticism, acting - thanks to the liberty of opinion won by political effort - with a freedom never known before, have delivered us from a mass of dark and degrading superstitions, we own with heartfelt thankfulness to the deliverers, and in the firm conviction that the removal of false beliefs, and of the authorities or institutions founded on them, cannot prove in the end anything but a blessing to mankind. But at the same time the foundations of general morality have inevitably been shaken, and a crisis has been brought on, the gravity of which nobody can fail to see, and nobody but a fanatic of materialism can see without the most serious misgiving.

"There has been nothing in the history of man like the present situation. The decadence of the ancient mythologies is very far from affording a parallel... The Reformation was a tremendous earthquake: it shook down the fabric of mediaeval religion, and as a consequence of the disturbance in the religious sphere, filled the world with revolutions and wars. But it left the authority of the Bible unshaken, and men might feel that the destructive process had its limit, and that adamant was still beneath their feet. But a world which is intellectual and keenly alive to the significance of these questions, reading all that is written about them with almost passionate avidity, finds itself brought to a crisis the character of which any one may realize by distinctly presenting to himself the idea of existence without a God."

[6] *ta logia tou theou* (Romans 3:2). The old Hebrew Scriptures were thus regarded by those who were the divinely-appointed custodians of them (*ib.*) Not only by the devout among the Jews, but, as Josephus testifies, by all, they "were justly believed to be Divine," so that men were willing to endure tortures of all kinds rather than speak against them, and even "willingly to die for them" (Josephus, *Apion*, 1., 8). This fact is of immense importance in relation to the Lord's own teaching on the subject. Dealing with a people who believed in the sanctity and value of every word of Scripture, He never missed an opportunity to confirm them in that belief. The New Testament affords abundant proof how unreservedly He enforced it upon His disciples. (As regards the limits and date of closing of the Canon of Scripture, see Pusey, Daniel, p. 294, etc.)

[7] Mill, *Essays on Religion*.

[8] *alla kai en dunamei kai en pneumati agio* (1 Thessalonians 1:5.) "But also in power, even in the Holy Ghost." There is no contrast intended between God on the one hand, and power on the other, nor yet between different sorts of power. To object that this referred to miracles which accompanied the preaching is to betray ignorance of Scripture. Acts 17 represents the preaching to which the Apostle was alluding.

That miraculous power existed in Gentile Churches is clear from 1 Corinthians 12 but the question is, did the gospel which produced those Churches appeal to miracles to confirm it? Can any one read the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians and retain a doubt as to the answer?

[9] God is omnipresent; but there is a real sense in which the Father and the Son are not on earth but in heaven, and in that same sense the Holy Spirit is not in heaven but on earth.

[10] Such faith is inseparably connected with salvation, and salvation is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). Hence the solemn words of Christ, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matthew 11:25).

[11] Pusey, Daniel, Pref. p. 25

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