

The Lord's Return

Part 1

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[00:00:01] I suppose we will all have read what my remit is, and it is as well known to you as it is to me.

That is the truth much to the forefront 160 years ago.

Has it lost a great deal of its practical impact today?

What you don't know is that part of my remit is to speak for an hour, so you had better brace your muscles. I'll try to keep well within that, as a matter of fact. And I believe there is to be no discussion, no time set aside for discussion, general discussion, this time.

I want to begin with the concept of the testimony, which occupied quite a considerable place in the various parts of the guidance laid down for our meetings.

The testimony.

[00:01:02] And I have to confess that since I was quite a lad, I've had some difficulty with this expression, the testimony, wondering exactly what it means. And when you find the case, which sadly can occur, when there is a very tiny gathering, and there's very little indeed, by the way, of any outreach or any sounding out, that then there is always somebody said, well, we want to preserve the testimony.

Now I feel sure that when that is said, it does very definitely betray a very inadequate idea of what the Brethren meant from the beginning when they spoke about the testimony.

Since I had this remit, I've searched the letters of JND, believing that if anybody knows what the testimony means, he must know what the testimony was meant, as the word was used from the beginning, to see what it means. [00:02:14] And it means very definitely that he felt since the beginning of the meetings was a definite call out from the Lord, come ye apart, that there was a testimony which he desired to be raised.

And the particular testimony which they believed was given them to maintain was a testimony to the true nature of the Church, its relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, its preciousness in his sight, and above all, the power of the Holy Spirit in maintaining its unity. And they had a very real idea that although they turned aside from other Christians, that there was with them, in a very important sense, a testimony to unity. [00:03:05] Now all I will say at the present time is that there can be no question

that a very important part of the content of that testimony was the imminence and the heart-searching quality of the expectation of the Lord's return.

A very central and important part of the testimony, and I hope that we shall be awakened to see that this is so.

Now, it's not quite clear to me which is the best time to say this, but the fact that this was the testimony raised by the First Brethren is a matter which seems to be admitted by almost everyone.

If we come to consider the simple facts, the succession of events concerning the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to receive his own to be with himself, [00:04:06] then it's admitted on all sides that the first person to see in the scripture and to teach that before the coming in power and glory, there will be a coming for Christ to receive his own to be with himself, to fulfill the promise, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.

People who were the enemies of the testimony, I don't regard Tregellus myself as being a very sympathetic person to this, but he quite plainly said, I've searched Christian literature all my life and there is no trace in Christian literature of such an idea as a separate coming of Christ before his coming in power and glory until J. N. Darby found it in scripture and taught it.

[00:05:06] And many of us are aware of the writings of the brother F. R. Code, and he also quite plainly admits, admits of course with hostility, but nevertheless admits the fact that the truth about the Lord's coming for his own, and it was to be their immediate expectation, there was no other prophecy to be fulfilled until it happened, that this was a special testimony that was discovered and others accepted it and that is how the meetings began. Now, in order to begin with that angle on the truth, I want to read a familiar passage about the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25.

Matthew 25, Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins which took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

[00:06:05] And five of them were wise and five were foolish.

They were foolish, took their lamps, and took no oil with them. But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom carried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so, lest there be not enough for us and you. But go ye rather to them that sell and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came.

And they that were ready went in with him to the marriage, and the door was shut.

[00:07:09] Perhaps it's necessary to say in speaking about this, that when we think of the fully developed doctrine of Christ as the bride of the church, I think I've already quoted the passage in prayer, it's not just exactly that that we have here. These ten virgins may be the attendance upon the true bride, but we know nothing about that. It's not just exactly the coming of Christ for the bride. But the fact that he is called the bridegroom indicates, if we may put it in that way, that the truth being revealed is edging over to the full truth in the New Testament, that Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, and he's going to come and take it, that it may be with himself. But the story here is of

the bridegroom, which undoubtedly, of course, must be the Lord Jesus, [00:08:07] and there are five virgins, five wise and five foolish.

And the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

Now, I'm not going to attempt to stop and explain the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins. I'm not going to try to apply what happened exactly when the bridegroom came and some were found to be foolish. I don't think it would be wise for me to do so, I don't fully understand it. But we can go on without the slightest difficulty to say, while the bridegroom tied, they all slumbered and slept. Now, that's a thing that you can read and not notice. They all slumbered and slept. The whole Christian profession was asleep to the wonderful hope of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. [00:09:03] We can easily understand that it's not surprising that the figure of sleep relative to the saints is a very striking figure indeed.

Think, for example, of the passage that says, Awake, thou that sleepest, and rise from amongst the dead, and Christ shall shine for thee. In other words, the saints were asleep. To the glory of Christ, where he is there at the right hand of God, with all glory upon his brow. And, putting these things together, we can see that the idea is very easy to seize.

It means that the people were insensible. A person who's asleep can have all kinds of tremendous things happening around him, good, bad and indifferent. But he's asleep, he's insensible, he hasn't got the alarm, he hasn't got the surprise, he hasn't got the joy, he's insensible to what is happening. [00:10:01] And that's what happened here. While the bridegroom tied, over all the centuries of the history of the church, they slumbered and slept. They were insensible to the tremendous hope of the coming of Christ. One thing that has struck me is the fact that, which I've observed, and I'm sure you'll find it as striking as I have found it. We all know the hymn, The Sands of Time Are Sinking. Written by a sister, and based upon words that Samuel Rutherford uttered upon his deathbed. The sands of time are sinking, the doors are closing. Written by a sister, and based upon words that Samuel Rutherford uttered upon his deathbed. The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks, and so on. The bride has not her garments, but her dear bridegroom's face. Not at the crown he give us, but at my king of grace. The lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land. [00:11:02] We can't conceive of a person who gives expression to being so enraptured with the person of the Saviour, Samuel Rutherford. And yet, in that long poem, of which we happen to know about half a dozen verses, there's not a single suspicion that he's expecting to meet the Lord by the second coming. It's all about meeting the Lord at death. You can check that, the few verses we know, and the many verses that are extant. He's talking with tremendous delight about the expectation of seeing the Lord when at death he's taken to be with the Lord.

But there's not a slightest suspicion that he's expecting the second coming. And I don't know a fact of personal history of Christian men that more firmly tells us what the slumber meant.

Well, then we read, after all slumber had slept, at midnight there was a cry made.

[00:12:06] Now that midnight cry is a phrase which is electric, because it really does give you the impression of something that was expected and some folks forgot it. Our good French brethren, in their church history, are not afraid to call the chapter, dealing with the beginning of the meetings, le cri de minuit, the midnight cry. They had no doubt at all about what was the midnight cry. It was when the brethren first began to anoint the fact, the Lord Jesus Christ said, if I go away, I will come again

and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Now I've already mentioned the witness of such people as Tregellus, a very, very famous Bible scholar, and a modern brother whose writings will be known to some of us, wrote a history of the brethren as a matter of fact. [00:13:08] I cannot but say that in my view it's a travesty that he did write a history of the brethren. But he also admits that the very first person who realized that the Lord Jesus Christ was going to come before his coming in power and glory, he was going to come and receive his own to himself. And that is the fulfillment of this word in the parable, the midnight cry. And we'll hear it again and again, and it's a phrase worth laying hold of. The midnight cry has gone out. Where do we stand in this story of these ten virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom? Where do we stand? We stand after the midnight cry that says, behold the bridegroom. I think my memory serves me correctly in that the original text doesn't say, behold the bridegroom, come us. It says, behold the bridegroom, and it's the person that we are speaking about. [00:14:07] That cry went forth, a midnight cry, and they were told to go and meet him. Well, when that midnight cry went out, then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

Now I want to stop still further at that point and point out here that the midnight cry meant there wasn't some whispering between people in secret here. There was really a testimony. And if we talk about the testimony and the preservation and the intensification and the rebuilding of the testimony, then the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the expectation of seeing him, for our hearts, in all his beauty and glory, must take a first place. That's a central part of the testimony. The cry went out, behold the bridegroom, and how we ought to pause and how we ought to allow to speak to our hearts this wonderful truth.

[00:15:15] The bridegroom is at hand, at the very door, the one who has loved us even unto death. In all his unapproachable beauty and glory, he is at the door to receive us to himself.

It's the midnight cry, and it is since we live after the midnight cry, then it is all the more important that we should be preserved in this personal expectation. The rest of what I have to say, I hope that bit by bit it will move our hearts, you see, to be expecting his coming. Move our hearts to be enraptured by the beauty and glory of the Savior, who's going to gladden every eye when that day comes. That's what we want to do for each other, I think, at this last moment. [00:16:04] The cry went out, and in the end we read that the bridegroom came.

I think that there are some very interesting side passages of Scripture which cast a great deal of light upon what it means to have received this promise of the Lord Jesus.

In, I think it's the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John, in his, what we might call, disputation with the Pharisees, and they withstood and refused to believe and accept what he said, and they wanted to know where he was going, if he was going away. And this is what he said, Where I am, ye cannot come.

More desperately disastrous words couldn't be spoken over human beings. That where the only true fountain of life and joy is, they cannot come. [00:17:03] And that's the word that's spoken over not only these Pharisees, but all unbelievers. Where he is, they can never come.

And we are left for several chapters with those sounds ringing in our ears. Where I am, ye cannot come. But when we get to chapter 14, In my Father's house are many mansions, to the inner circle of

his own disciples who loved him and hung upon his words. In my Father's house are many mansions, many dwelling places. If it were not so, I have told you, I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go, I will come again.

That's, I suppose, one of the earliest and most specific promises of the Lord Jesus to his own. I will come again and receive you unto myself. But where I am, let your heart go on such a concept, that where I am, there ye may be also.

[00:18:05] All kinds of descriptions of delight and joy and happiness might be made to human beings. But nothing can come anywhere near this. He's going to come again and take us to be with himself, so that where I am, there ye may be also.

And that's a very wonderful sideline, a sidelight upon the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ made this promise.

Now it says that when the bridegroom came, they already went in with him to the marriage and the door was shut. And I repeat, I do not intend to attempt to interpret or apply what happened to the virgins without the oil.

But in the end of the paragraph it says, Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh.

[00:19:07] The word watch really means keep awake, you see.

It's really saying they all went to sleep. And the purpose for which I'm telling you this is don't go to sleep. I want you to keep awake.

I want you to be looking and watching for my return again. In the Yorkshire town of Ripon, where many of us used to go for a conference, the town official is called the wakeman.

And it has the wakeman, if the wakeman sleepeth, then all kinds of disasters come.

And that of course is the exact equipment for the watchman. The wakeman is the same as the watchman. And we must see in this last expression, watch therefore, he's saying exactly they all went to sleep. [00:20:02] What they did I'm most earnestly urging you not to do. So feed your mind and your heart and your spirit upon these words addressed to yourself, that you don't go to sleep. And if you and I feel any feeling of lack in this matter, then the way is wide open to us by prayer and meditation upon the words of Holy Scripture to have our hearts awakened more and more than ever to the personal expectation of the Lord Jesus Christ. I've had a good deal of exercise of recent times about the concept of spiritual exercises. If you've heard those expressions from me before in the last fortnight or so, please forgive them coming again. Because it might very well be said that one of the prime purposes of ministry is to awaken spiritual exercises. [00:21:01] Just as bodily health requires exercise, so spiritual health requires exercise.

And we've got to go away from a feast like what we're having this week. I'm going to go in for these exercises. What are they? I don't remember, but I like to specify three, and I'll come back to the third one a bit later. They are obviously, everyone would put first, prayer. Unless you and I go away from this ministry and this discourse and this fellowship with each other, and we turn it all into prayer,

seeking the Lord to make it good to us, it will not really benefit us, as the word of ministry is intended to do. Well, the first then, I would say, is prayer. The second is meditation on scripture. Now, I think it would be rather difficult to find a Christian who has never set aside time for prayer. But there must be many Christians who do not set time apart for meditation upon the word of God. [00:22:05] For example, such a subject as Christ in glory. Contemplation of Christ in glory. That's one of the things that's set before us. And it's the matter of contemplation, setting time aside, to spend time with our hearts and minds with Holy Scripture before us. It's an excellent thing to take a central verse of Holy Scripture and keep it before the mind and think over it and pray to the Lord to make it good to us. That would produce results from the ministry of the words which we may not have known before. And personally, I cannot, of course, quote any kind of scriptural authority for the number or the order, but I have been lately very much impelled to the idea that that's a spiritual exercise, the absence of which is responsible for regretting the slackness of our Christian life and testimony.

[00:23:01] The word of God reminds me, somebody said it this afternoon, I've been saying it myself a lot recently, but it's not just exactly the same. We ought to be tough with ourselves and we ought to be fairly considerate for other people.

But we aren't tough with ourselves. And when you think of some of the words that Holy Scripture use in order to awaken us to the action that should be taken when we're in danger of slipping away to other things, if thy eye offend thee, pluck it out. If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off. It is better to enter into life maimed than to enter it not to enter it at all.

And therefore, this toughness with ourselves about the various influences which divert our attention [00:24:07] from these great central facts of the personal presentation of the Lord Jesus to ourselves and our hearts, they do need that we should take the sword to ourselves. And when you think of such passages as you have in Colossians and Ephesians about the gross sins that possibly affect the saints, it says, what does it say? Mortify them. Kill them. Not something to be slack about. Not something to ignore, but the sword of the Spirit and the word of God to cut them off. And therefore, this exercise comes before us. If we feel that we have not been sufficiently occupied with this tremendous promise, it is likely because other things have taken the place. And it is the recognition of the other things that are likely to take the place in heart and life and aspiration that the expectation of the personal coming of Christ ought to have. [00:25:02] It is the recognition of that that will bring us to that self-examination and the correction of our ways. Well, I want to turn now, having tried to apply this story of the midnight cry, and the story of the two sayings of the Lord Jesus about some who cannot be with him, and some, and I trust everyone here is of that number, have heard him say that there ye may be also with him. I want to look at the account of the second coming in, we keep our Bibles open, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, but since we know Scripture fairly well, we could perhaps refer to other things. I have spoken about the danger of being asleep.

And I have spoken also about the fact that this being awakened to the realization of the personal return of the Lord Jesus [00:26:09] is a very important part of the testimony about which we hear so much. But the remit that I had says a truth much to the forefront 160 years ago, I think I have underlined that fairly firmly, has it lost a great deal of its practical impact today. Practical impact! What is the practical impact of the hope of the Lord's coming intended to be? Well, a great deal might be said, but there are some things that we can easily quote. For example, the first epistle of John, chapter 3, He that hath this hope in himself purifies himself, even as he is pure. Now that's where this self-judgment comes in again. Those things that take away our appetite for the word of God, [00:27:02] those things that come between our hearts, and the single-hearted love and devotion to the Saviour,

they need attention, they need judging, and therefore that is the kind of purification and other expressions that are used when it says that he that hath this hope in him, that is in the Lord Jesus Christ, purifies himself, even as he is pure.

Now a second, very explicit, I want to make it quite clear that I'm not making up these things, they're there in the scripture. Another explicit intention of the Spirit of God in bringing before us the personal coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is that we might be doing certain things.

For example, it says that the result of the coming of Christ should be that we should labour for him.

[00:28:03] One of the key texts is Luke, chapter 19, the parable of the noble man who went into a far country to receive a kingdom and to return, and he gave talents to his servants, and he said to them, Occupy? How long? Until I come.

Have you ever felt like giving up?

The work's hard, I don't get much result. Occupy, the Saviour said.

Be busy with my business, be busy with my things, until I come again.

And if we take this to ourselves, we can be sure that the Lord promised to these men that he equipped them with all that they needed to occupy until he came again. So let us go away from here, being determined that that work for him, [00:29:01] that the Lord Jesus Christ has given to do, that we get on with it and never get up until he comes again. He said to them, and he says to us, Occupy till I come. The service I have may seem to me to be a very small one, but if I have any impression that it is a service given to me by the Lord, then this word is for me. Occupy till I come.

So we are to be workers. And we are also, as I said already, to be purified by the word relative to those things that are displeasing to the Lord. And of course, the most familiar, that every person who knows the Scriptures knows, comfort one another with these words.

Comfort one another with these words. And with that, I would like to turn to that passage, to look at it in some detail. First, Thessalonians, the very most familiar of all such passages, which tells us about the second coming of the Lord Jesus. [00:30:02] I'll read the passage, and I'll just speak about it for a few minutes before I close.

But I would not have you ignorant, verse 13, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even at others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so then also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain until 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. [00:31:02] And so shall we ever be with the Lord. Another repetition of that wonderful thing that the Lord said to the disciples, that where I am, there ye may be also. Wherefore comfort one another with these words. Well, there's not very much need to amplify, except to keep reminding ourselves that this is the word of God. And whenever we need comfort in the rupture of earthly relationships, in fact I think we should say whenever we need comfort, let us ever remember that there is for the saint, for the

person who loves the Lord, there is comfort for it in the word. Wherefore comfort one another with these words. There are just one or two things I would like to explain which I think are often misunderstood. Verse 13, I would not have you ignorant concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope. Now, that's a very comforting statement, [00:32:02] because that's not the slightest indication that the saint is behind any others in feeling the sorrow of the rupture of earthly relationships. We hear nothing at all about this, is that they may not sorrow. But the fact is that they do not sorrow like those who have no hope. If in the end we're all going to be there in the position I've described, forever with the Lord, then the sorrow that divides us until that takes place is of a different quality altogether, with the hopeless black despair of those who are parted and lost forever. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. I think that verse is very much misunderstood. It is not talking about saving faith. It is not talking that if we believe in Jesus as our saviour, then God will bring those with him.

What he's saying is this, [00:33:02] if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then those who died, we can believe they will rise again. He's talking about the parallel between the fact that we know, we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and the point of the verse is, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. Why? Because though they have died, they will rise again, and then they will be with us forever with the Lord. We know a meaning, the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep, but the Lord himself, no one ever reads this I think without giving a very special bit of attention about the Lord himself. There's something very sweet about it. I've often heard the thing ever stated, and I'm not ashamed to repeat what I've heard many times, and I'm sure you have. [00:34:02] You imagine a person who's in that most desperately objectionable of all things, and that's a moving house, and packing up furniture and taking it somewhere else. But you can imagine a person who's giving the whole job over to a removal contractor, and he takes everything. But when he comes to get instructed he says, that, don't touch it. I'm going to come for that myself.

Now what does he mean by that? It means it's so valuable to him that he's not going to entrust it to a servant however experienced or clever he may be. I'm coming myself. I place such a value upon it, and I'm sure that the Lord Jesus intends us to understand just that, when he says, the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. It's the most charming and heart-moving way of describing the preciousness that every individual sent in all time [00:35:01] to the one who loved them and gave himself for them. The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. Tremendous event in those few words. With the voice of the archangel. Now I think we have a guide as to what that means, because we read about the archangel disputing with the devil about the body of Moses. In other words, the archangel is the guardian of the bodies of the saints. And it's that fact that it's the archangel that's the divinely appointed guardian of the bodies of the saints that comes in here. It's not the archangel, it's the voice that carries out the function of the archangel, the one who has care of the bodies of the saints with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God and the living Christ shall rise first. We all remember that I suppose it's in 1 Corinthians 15 that it says the last trump, and it's perfectly plain that this is a reference [00:36:01] to the striking of a Roman camp. The first trumpet would awaken them. The second trumpet would get them armed and ready. And the third trumpet, they would pack up the tents and they would march away. And at the third trump, the saints will be taken up to meet the Lord in the air and so forever with him. And then the third of the effects that we are supposed to understand from the realization in our hearts of the coming of the Lord is that it should be comfort for us. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words. And we all know that comfort is a particular kind of strengthening.

And that's what the word really means, a particular kind of strengthening. At the time when with earthly ties we feel the weakness of our human condition, then the strength will come to us from the words of the Lord. Comfort one another with these words. [00:37:02] I do pray that we may all be enabled to go away with a fresh realization and a fresh determination to make ours the wonderful blessing and the wonderful joy that comes from the expectation of being forever with the Lord. Amen. Now I'd like to sing number 361.

Oh, Lord, in Jesus' name [00:38:04] Thy soul may glory ever be Thy power may love thee ever be Our God is love, our God is peace Our God, our God, our God, our God, our God Forever he may guide me No one shall turn me down My shadow is beside him And I know him now, my God [00:39:03] This is the man of Israel His sight is ever near He knows the way, he knows the hour I know I will walk with him He watches lovingly for me With care I have not seen But time will soon be over me Forever I will bow down before him [00:40:05] My hope, my power, my pleasure My power to love is with him My savior, my treasure And he will walk with me We'll see him soon, Lord Jesus Love is the house of God His glory, joy, and truth Is where the heav'nly sound [00:41:07] O ye of wondrous promise That by truth and the right Are seen in glory evermore Forever shall it shine