

The Coming Day

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the last message in the section of John's epistle on Maintaining Truth. In this section, which began in Chapter 2, Verse 18, the whole problem John has been facing here is how to live as a Christian in the midst of a confused and confusing world – a world no different in his day than it is in ours; no different in ours than it was in his. In this section we learned many things:

We learned that error appears in cycles of deceit throughout history. That is why, proverbially, history repeats itself.

- We learned that error arises first within the church, through church leaders, and then moves out to infect the world. It is most interesting to trace this fact through history. Religious error never originates with worldly, secular thinkers, but within the church.
- Then we saw error always aims at one definitive point, made clear by John in this section. It is an attack, ultimately, upon the person of Jesus Christ; upon the deity of the Son of God. As Joe Blinco put it so forcefully, "The devil is no pimple-squeezer." He does not waste time with trivialities, he is always striking for the jugular vein. Trace this through history and you will see this is always true. The full impact of heresy always comes out at that point, an attempt to destroy the real fundamental teaching of the deity of Jesus Christ.
- We also learned in this section that no lie is of the truth, i.e., there is no such thing as gray areas in moral or doctrinal truth. No lie is of the truth. Relativity in these areas does not exist.
- Finally, we saw that the believer's defense against the deceitfulness of the age in which we live lies in two special things:

1. In his obedience to the word of truth, the apostolic word, the word which we have "heard from the beginning," and,
2. That word as taught to the heart by an abiding Spirit.

The Word and the Spirit – these are always the defenses of the Christian. Not legislation; no forming action groups, not creating voting blocs, but by the Word and in the Spirit. These are our defenses, always have been, and always will be. But these must be held in balance. The Word without the Spirit is dead orthodoxy, lifeless, unappealing, completely repulsive to most people. The Spirit without the Word is wildfire, fanaticism, mysticism. But the two held in balance keeps us to the central truth of God as revealed in his Son.

These are the things John has set before us here.

We close this section with a verse that looks on to the end, when each Christian stands at last face to face with Jesus Christ.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. {1 Jn 2:28 RSV}

I should like to begin our examination of this verse by asking this question: "What is it that lies ahead for each believer?" The answer clearly is, a face-to-face encounter with the Lord Jesus. John uses two phrases to describe this, "when he appears," and "at his coming." "Appears" is the word for "manifestation," when he is manifest, when he is openly evident. The word he uses for "coming" is the word, *parousia*, which is Greek for "presence," the presence of the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps you have recognized in reading your Bible that this is the most frequently mentioned truth in all of the New Testament. This great hope of the appearing again of Jesus Christ underlies every other truth in the New Testament. It is found on almost every page of our New Testament. In the face of that, it is passingly strange that it is one of the neglected doctrines of our day. There are people who are totally unaware that the Bible teaches that Christ is to return to this earth for his church, and of the various aspects of this. Yet this has been the hope of believers in every age, and has sustained Christians in the darkest hours of the persecution of the church.

The truth appears in various ways in Scripture, and I cannot take time to go into it in any detail. I will give only the briefest survey of this because I want to move on to the point John is making. In certain passages, the coming of our Lord appears as an event yet to come, occurring in a moment of time, when Christ shall once again enter into open manifestation in the history of men. We read such a passage in First Thessalonians 4:16-18:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. {1 Th 4:16-18 RSV}

Wonderful comfort is here in these words, especially when you stand at the edge of a grave where you have laid away the body of a loved one. I have used these verses many times on such occasions, and found they speak wonderful comfort to the heart.

But there are other passages that view this encounter with Christ from the standpoint of the experience of the believer who steps out of time into eternity, at death. For instance, in Second Corinthians, Paul speaks of being "absent from the body, present with the Lord," {cf, 2 Cor 5:8 KJV}. Compare that with the message in First Thessalonians, "so we shall always be with the Lord," {1 Th 4:17 RSV}. Paul says this occurs in the experience of the believer at death, "absent from the body, present with the Lord." In writing to Timothy, he

speaks of his own death in this way, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day ["Day" here is not used in reference to a point of time but as a characterization of an event], and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing," {2 Tim 4:8 RSV}. Here he uses the same term that John uses, "when he appears."

If I may just summarize this: In the experience of the believer, this encounter with Jesus Christ occurs at death; in the calendars of men, in time, it is yet an unknown point in the future when the eternal One shall step again into time and reassert himself, manifest himself openly, in the affairs of men. That event may occur today, it may occur this week, it may be next year, it may be fifty or a hundred years from now, who knows? It may be while most of us are yet alive, it may be before this service is over. But at any rate, this meeting with Christ, from the standpoint of every believer in Jesus Christ, is no further away from any of us than the day of our death – and it may be even closer than that!

This is the Day in which, as John says, he will be "manifested." In Chapter 3, John says, "When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," {1 Jn 3:2b RSV}. He will be no longer hidden behind the scenes, no longer invisible to our physical eyes, no longer forcing us to live, as Peter describes it, "whom having not seen, we love" {cf, 1 Pet 1:8}, but now openly evident, manifest, visible, face to face. We will stand in his presence, John says. As the disciples in the Upper Room after the resurrection found that suddenly the Lord Jesus was with them, so, suddenly we will be with him. As then, so with us, with the marks of crucifixion yet upon his body, perhaps he will invite us to touch him, as he did with Thomas, to feel and to see that this is the very one who once was crucified upon a cross outside Jerusalem, and rose again from the dead. With the marks of crucifixion yet upon him he will be readily identifiable to us. Sometimes we sing in that hymn of Fanny Crosby's, "I shall know him, I shall know him, when redeemed by his side I shall stand. I shall know him, I shall know him, by the prints of the nails in his hand." What a day that will be, what a wonderful day.

But let us move on to ask another question about the verse John sets before us. What are the

alternatives awaiting Christians on that day? Well, clearly there are two, and only two. It is possible for us to have “confidence before him,” or “to shrink in shame from him,” one or the other. There is a false teaching that has arisen within Christian circles that suggests that the day of our appearing before the Lord will be a day only of the giving of rewards. There are to be no regrets, no shame, no negative notes at all; it is all sweetness and light. It is hard to understand how such teaching arises in the face of a Scripture like this where John warns that it is all too possible to shrink in shame before him at his coming.

Paul says in Second Corinthians 5, speaking of the same event, “we must all appear at the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body,” {2 Cor 5:8 RSV}. Two possibilities – good or evil – one producing boldness and confidence and one producing a sense of shame. If you look at the Scriptures you will see the reason why it is necessary that there should be these two alternatives. We learn from the Scriptures that this is to be the day when reality is made evident, when things will be seen as they really are. We are aware that illusion blinds our understanding as we view things today. Even looking back in our lives we can see that events were not quite what we thought they were when we were living through them. But there is coming a day, the Lord Jesus says, when that which is hidden shall be revealed, where everything covered will be uncovered, and that which has been spoken in secret will be shouted from the rooftops. It is the day of reality, the day when the secrets of men are judged by the Lord Jesus.

See how Paul describes this in First Corinthians, Chapter 3: Speaking of the foundation which is Jesus Christ himself, Paul says in Verse 12,

Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones; wood, hay, stubble [two classifications of activity] – each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. {1 Cor 3:12-15 RSV}

And then in Chapter 4 of that same book, he says in Verse 5,

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God. {1 Cor 4:5 RSV}

As someone has well put it, “What we weave in time, we shall wear through eternity.”

Every motive is to be revealed, every secret thought to be uncovered before all, every activity laid bare.

In the light of that fact, what will you be? Will you be bold and confident, or will you shrink in shame before him? That is the question John sets before us.

Perhaps some of you are saying, “I hope it will be some of both; there will be some boldness, and some shame.” But think about that for a moment and you will see that it is impossible for it to be both. There is nothing in Scripture that suggests that there will be both; it is either one or the other, as John implies here. It is characteristic of us that one element of shame looms up before our eyes and overpowers all the areas of confidence.

Haven’t you noticed that in your own experience? You have a gravy spot on your tie, and it does not make any difference how impeccable the rest of your dress is, you know that every eye is fastened on that gravy spot and you cannot be comfortable in society because you are so aware of that spot on your tie. Or, with you ladies, it is a run in your stocking. It does not make any difference how beautiful your hair styling is, there is that ugly run that you know is drawing every eye, and you feel a sense of shame. You feel unfit to be with others because of one spot, regardless of the rest. Then, if we are going to be bold and confident before our Lord at his coming, it must be that we should be absolutely without shame. If there is one thing wrong, we will shrink in shame at his coming.

Now look at this matter of shame for a moment with me. What will make us ashamed? Well, what makes you ashamed now?

In thinking this through this week, I took a piece of paper and headed it, “Things Which Make Me Ashamed.” Then I began to think through my own experience, my own life.

- The first thing I put down was, “Indecent Actions.” Someone has said, “Everyone knows that of himself which he would not dare tell his dearest friend.” Indecent things, shameful things, hidden things, cruel deeds, vengeful, spiteful actions. As we think back on them they make us ashamed.
- Then I wrote down, “Hurtful Attitudes.” How many times have I been ashamed at the attitude I have had toward another. Even though I did not express it in words, I felt it. How many times have I been ashamed of my pride, of my jealous, hateful thoughts, of my loveless, callous unconcern for another who was obviously in need of help from me. How many times has my thankless ingratitude made my face flush with shame. I thought back upon how I have taken things from man and from God and never had a thought of gratitude for them.
- Then I wrote down, “Neglected Opportunities.” Who of us does not feel this? Who has not had, at one time or another, a bad case of the *If Only’s*. “If only I had done this.” “If only I had said that.” “If only ...” This week *Decision Magazine* printed the story of the world champion weight lifter, Paul Anderson, a Christian. He told of winning the world’s heavy weight lifting championship, and in his testimony he said these words:

“We go through life looking back and thinking, boy what I could have done. This is the way I remember Russia. I became one of the most popular men in the Soviet Union. I couldn’t go out in public without being mobbed. Radio announcers trailed me when I appeared on the streets. I caught the empty stares of the young people and reflect now that I could have told them about the One who puts a sparkle in the eye, but I failed to lift up our Lord. Not once did I mention the name of Jesus Christ because at that time I was not living for him. A once-in-a-lifetime chance to witness behind the Iron Curtain was lost.”

What is shame! Is it not a sense of unfitness, a sense of defilement, a sense of self-dislike, even contempt, because we feel we are not worthy?

Therefore, its manifestation is a desire to hide. John suggests this in the Greek word he uses, which is rightly translated “shrink in shame,” to hide.

Do you remember the first manifestation of this in the Scriptures? In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, after the Fall, hid from the Lord God as he walked in the Garden in the coolness of the day. God called out “Adam, where are you?” {see, Gen 3:9 ff}. Adam at last acknowledged the call, and the Lord said, “Why did you hide?” And Adam said, “Because we found we were naked.” That is symbolic, suggestive. They were naked, i.e., they had nothing besides themselves, nothing to show for being alive, just them, we they were, that’s all. Unfruitful, unproductive, no purpose beyond themselves, waste. That’s why they hid.

As I thought back through the things that make me ashamed, I realized that this is the common element in all of these factors, a sense of waste, no purpose in them, no good thing coming from them. That is why I am ashamed of my indecent actions. That is why I am ashamed of my hurtful attitudes. That is why I am ashamed of my neglected opportunities. Nothing fruitful, nothing productive ever comes from them. The thing that John makes us face up to in this passage is the terrible possibility that if we do not learn the right basis for living, it is horribly possible for us to fill every day with activity, to achieve what passes for success, but in the only accounting that has any value at all, that accounting before God, to come to the end of our lives and find it all fruitless, wasted, without purpose.

Is that not the charge the Lord makes against one of the churches in the letters to the seven churches of Revelation? In Chapter 3, he says to the church at Laodicea, “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth,” {Rev 3:15-16 RSV}. What was the cause of this condition? “... you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see,” {Rev 3:17-18 RSV}.

It is nakedness that causes shame, and that possibility is set before each of us. The one thing

that is absolutely certain about your existence and mine, as a believer, without any doubt whatsoever, is that one of these days we will stand before the presence of the Lord Jesus.

But I do not want to close on that note, for this verse is not intended to be negative. It is given to show us how to avoid this condition. Its whole purpose is to declare the clear possibility of standing in his presence unashamed, to have boldness, to have confidence before him. Well, then, what can make us bold? What gives boldness now in your life? To answer that for myself, I took another sheet and headed it, "Things That Make Me Bold." What do you think I put down on that?

- First, I am bold or confident when I know what I am doing, when I have complete familiarity with a process:

When I first began to shave I was not very skilled with a razor (electric razors were not very much in vogue at that time) and I used to cut myself so frequently that I looked like a sieve. I leaked at half a dozen points after every shave. But the longer I shaved the more familiar I became with the process until, finally, I was bold and confident. I could shave quickly without cutting myself.

Watch a driver who is just learning to drive – how cautious they are. They grip the wheel tightly and do everything very deliberately. But watch a driver that has become accustomed to driving – how bold he is. We have a skyrocketing accident rate to prove how bold such drivers can get!

But there is a feeling of confidence that comes when you know the process. You are familiar with that.

- Then I discovered that I am bold and confident when I know that the results are guaranteed, some factor gives me confidence that it is going to work out all right. Such confidence in an end result makes anyone bold.

I was riding in a plane not long ago, and a mother and her five-year-old boy sat in the seat opposite me. She informed the stewardess this was their first flight, and this was very evident because she was very nervous. She kept looking out the window, adjusting her seat belt, biting her fingernails, and was very nervous the whole time. But not the little lad. He was re-

laxed and confident, utterly untroubled. Why? Because he trusted adults. His mother had brought him into his situation and he knew that she would not have done it if there had been any danger, so he was trustful and utterly bold. He knew it would all work out – and it did. They arrived safely, and the mother could have saved herself all the worry.

- Now I discovered that I am also bold when I have an undisclosed resource, what is called familiarity, an ace up the sleeve. When I have something I can count on that the other fellow does not know about, it makes me bold.

It does the same for you too, does it not?

Now look at what John proposes as the way to avoid shame and to give confidence in the day of the Lord Jesus, when we meet him face to face:

And now, little children, abide in him
[there it is in three words] **so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.**
{1 Jn 2:28 RSV}

It is all in those three words: "Abide in him." That sums up all that he has previously said about hearing the word, believing it, obeying it, and trusting it; that word as taught to us by the anointing Spirit, etc. This is to "abide in him." It is the same thing exactly as what is called in other places "the walk in the Spirit," or "fellowship with Christ," or "the fullness of the Holy Spirit," or "the victorious life." Do not be confused by these various terms. This truth is so magnificent, so broad, so wide, it takes many terms to describe the full sweep of it, but they are all referring to the same thing.

"Abide in him," he says. Basically that means to give up all confidence in yourself and step out each moment in full dependence on him who dwells within you for everything you do or say, anywhere, anytime. Abide in him, so that your actions are no longer a result of you, mobilizing all your resources to do something for him; but it is him, utilizing all his abundant resources to do everything through you. That is abiding in him, and it involves three specific things:

1. It means that you accept his evaluation of the past. You prepare to change the ideas that you learned from your childhood through tradition or secular education and have accepted as true, but are contradicted by what the Scriptures say. You are prepared to change those ideas, not cling to them. This is the problem with most of us. We take it for granted that what we were taught as we grew up is the truth, and we judge everything by what we learned, even the Word of God. We cling to these ideas. We refuse to set them aside. What we have picked up, when challenged by the Scriptures, we choose to believe rather than to believe what God has revealed to be the truth. As a result we go on clinging to the past and to these ideas from the past, and thus refuse the cleansing and forgiveness of Christ. This results in wide areas of weakness and ineffectiveness, and these we must someday face in all their waste and unproductiveness, in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is these that will make us shrink in shame before him at his coming. But if we face his evaluation of the past, and change our ideas, then the thing is over with now. There is a wonderful verse in First Corinthians 11, Verse 31, "But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged." It can all be over, be settled now.
2. Then, abiding in him means we are to accept his provision for the present. In writing to the Philippians, Paul says "Work out your own salvation," {Phil 2:12 RSV}. That means, work out the solutions to your problems. He is not talking about redemption, but about the every-day problems of life. Work them out "with fear and trembling," i.e., with a consciousness that the deceitfulness of the enemy is so subtle that it can slip up on you without notice, and you need to be very careful not to start relying upon yourself again. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, both to will [he is in the choosing, in the making of decisions, in the choices] and to work, for his good pleasure [to do what is pleasing to him]," {Phil 2:12-13 RSV}. That is the process, and it is said again and again in Scripture. Now, accept that. Operate in that manner, for God knows what he is doing. Well, Jesus Christ knows exactly what

he is doing in you. He was never at a loss for what to do in any situation, and he never will be at a loss for what to do in any situation he puts you into. He does not always tell us in advance what he is going to do. We just have to say, "Lord, here you are. You put me into this, now you have some purpose in it – work it out. I'm confident that you know what you are doing."

3. Also, you and I are bold when we know that the results are guaranteed. Have you not noticed that this is exactly what the Word of God promises? Paul says in Second Corinthians, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph," {2 Cor 2:14a RSV}. He never fails. He guarantees the results. You are fighting a battle that is already won when you rest upon the activity, the wisdom, the responsibility of an indwelling God. It is done – the battle is won. It still must be fought and you are to fight it, but the results are guaranteed, they will come out as God has said they will. He always leads us in triumph in Christ.

Furthermore, we are bold when we have an undisclosed resource, an ace up our sleeve. And is that not exactly what is provided for every Christian who understands the programming of God? We do not rely on our own human weakness, "we have no confidence in the flesh" {Phil 3:3b RSV}, Paul says, we do not think we have the intellectual acumen to figure out all the problems, we are not trying to mobilize all the resources of our powerful personalities to put over something. But we step into every situation, no matter what it may be, at home, at work, or wherever, in the quiet realization that the Son of God indwells us to do this thing through us. Others, looking at us, say "what a self-assured individual; how well he gets things done, how poised, how calm he (she) is in a situation." They do not know the secret we know, that it is not us, it is Christ. "I am crucified with Christ," says Paul, "nevertheless I live (Oh how fully he lived); yet not I, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live I live by faith in that indwelling Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," {cf, Gal 2:20}. That is to accept his provision for the present.

Then, abiding in him means to trust his assessment of the future. What is the result going to be? Perfectly acceptable to God! Well-pleasing in his sight! The record of the Gospels is that Jesus Christ never did a thing that displeased the Father. For thirty-three and a half years on earth, not once did he ever do anything that displeased God. How could it be, since it was the Father in him, who did everything? The miracles occupy only a tiny portion of those thirty-three and a half years; the rest of them were filled with the ordinary events of life, such as you and I have to go through – getting up in the morning, living with people, eating, preparing food, sweeping, cleaning, all the multitudinous details of life – but not once did he ever do one thing that was displeasing to the Father.

That is still true of what he does today – what he does in you. His activity in you is already acceptable to the Father. Not once will he ever do in you that which is displeasing to the Father, not once. Therefore, if you are facing those times in your life which are not lived out of his activity, and these are cleansed and put away, the only possible conclusion to this is that we can stand at last in his presence without shame. All the wastefulness of the past and present is judged and everything else is fulfilled by Christ; therefore, all is pleasing to God. There will be pains. He makes clear that his desire is to live a life that has no waste moments in it, no times when he is reckoning on himself, no seasons when he is acting out of the energy of his own brilliant personality, or from the background of his training as a Hebrew leader, not a single moment. He says, “I am constantly pressing on, pushing on, for the prize – that wonderful prize – then I shall stand in his presence and shall realize that everything worthwhile that has been done in my life since I have come to know him has been done in the activity of his life in me, and everything else has already been settled before I get there.” That is what he is saying.

Have you ever noticed how Jude closes his letter? Look at his last verse:

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, {Jude 1:24 RSV}

Is that not it? John says, “abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.”

It may be that some of you need to settle certain things with the Lord right this moment. Think of the things that make you ashamed; the attitudes you harbor toward someone else, the habits you cling to that are unsightly, unseemly, unwholesome, the long-standing disagreements that you have had with another which makes you avoid them. These are the things that need to be settled now. Abide in him now, so that you will not have to shrink in shame before him at his coming.

Prayer:

Our Father, we confess our lovelessness, we confess our unconcern, we confess our foulness before thee. We confess our failure to live together in peace and sweetness and harmony. We confess to you, Lord, any aspect of our life that has been displeasing, and receive from you now that wholesome cleansing of the blood of the Lord Jesus, that we might be what we are intended to be, men and women, so possessed by an indwelling Lord that all that we do or say is a reflection of his image, and not of ours. Thank you for this.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time now and forever, Amen. {Jude 1:24-25 RSV}

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