J.C. Ryle:

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

The subject of this portion of our Lord's great prophecy is His own second coming to judge the world. The strong expressions of the passage appear inapplicable to any event less important than this. To confine the words before us, to the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans, in an unnatural straining of Scripture language.

We see, firstly, in this passage, how terrible will be the circumstances accompanying the second advent of Christ. Our Lord tells us that "there will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

This is a singularly dreadful picture. It may not be easy perhaps to attach a precise meaning to every part of it. One thing however, is abundantly plain. The second coming of Christ will be attended by everything which can make it alarming to the senses and heart of man. If the giving of the law at Sinai was so terrible that even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake," the return of Christ when He comes to earth in power and great glory shall be much more terrible. If the hardy Roman soldiers "became as dead men," when an angel rolled the stone away and Christ rose again, how much greater will the terror be when Christ shall return to judge the world. No wonder that Paul said, "Knowing the terrors of the Lord we persuade men." (Heb. 12:21; Matt. 28:4; 2 Cor. 5:11.)

The thoughtless and impenitent man may well tremble when he hears of this second advent of Christ. What will he do when worldly business is suddenly stopped and the precious things of the world are made worthless? What will he do when the graves on every side are opening, and the trumpet is summoning men to judgment? What will he do when that same Jesus whose Gospel he has so shamefully neglected shall appear in the clouds of heaven, and put down every enemy under His feet? Surely he will call on the rocks to fall on him and on the hills to cover him. (Hosea 10:8.) But he will call in vain for help, if he has never called on Christ before. Happy will they be in that day who have fled beforehand from the wrath to come, and been washed in the blood of the Lamb!

We see, secondly, in this passage, how complete will be the security of true Christians at the second advent of Christ. We read that our Lord said to His disciples, "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draws near."

However terrible the signs of Christ's second coming may be to the impenitent, they need not strike terror into the heart of the true believer. They ought rather to fill him with joy. They ought to remind him that his complete deliverance from sin, the world and the devil, is close at hand, and that he shall soon bid an eternal farewell to sickness, sorrow, death and temptation. The very day when the unconverted man shall lose everything, shall be the day when the believer shall enter on his eternal reward. The very hour when the worldly man's hopes shall perish, shall be the hour when the believer's hope shall be exchanged for joyful certainty and full possession.

The servant of God should often look forward to Christ's second advent. He will find the thought of that day a cordial to sustain him under all the trials and persecutions of this present life. "Yet a little while," let him remember, "and he that shall come will come and will not tarry."

The words of Isaiah shall be fulfilled, "The Lord God shall wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall be taken away from off all the earth." One sure receipt for a patient spirit is to expect little from this world, and to be ever "waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Heb. 10:37. Isaiah. 25:8. 1 Cor. 1:7.)

We see, thirdly, in this passage, how needful it is to watch the signs of the times in the prospect of the second advent of Christ. Our Lord teaches this lesson by a parable--"Notice the fig tree, or any other tree. When the leaves come out, you know without being told that summer is near. Just so, when you see the events I've described taking place, you can be sure that the Kingdom of God is near." The disciples ignorantly supposed that Messiah's kingdom would be ushered in by universal peace. Our Lord, on the contrary, tells those who the signs which shall immediately precede it shall be wars, confusions, perplexity, and distress.

The general duty which these words should teach us is very plain. We are to observe carefully the public events of the times in which we live. We are not to be absorbed in politics, but we are to mark political events. We are not to turn prophets ourselves, but we are to study diligently the signs of our times. So doing, the day of Christ will not come upon us entirely unawares.
Are there any signs in our own day? Are there any circumstances in the world around us which specially demand the believer's attention? Beyond doubt there are very many. The drying up of the Turkish empire—the revival of the Romish church—the awakened desire of the Protestant churches to preach the Gospel to the heathen—the general interest in the state of the Jews—the universal shaking of governments and established institutions—the rise and progress of the subtlest forms of infidelity—all, all are signs peculiar to our day. All should make us remember our Lord's words about the fig-tree. All should make us think of the text, "Behold, I come quickly." (Rev. 22:7.)

We see, lastly, in this passage, how certain it is that all our Lord's predictions about the second advent will be fulfilled. Our Lord speaks as if He foresaw the unbelief and incredulity of man on this mighty subject. He knew how ready people would be to say "Improbable! impossible! The world will always go on as it has done." He arms His disciples against the infection of this skeptical spirit by a very solemn saying. "Heaven and earth shall pass away—but my words shall not pass away."

We shall do well to remember this saying, whenever we are thrown into the company of those who sneer at unfulfilled prophecy. The sneers of unbelievers must not be allowed to shake our faith. If God has said a thing He will certainly bring it to pass, and the probability or possibility of it are matters which need not trouble us for a moment. That Christ should come again in power to judge the world and reign, is not half so improbable as it was that Christ should come to suffer and die. If He came the first time, much more may we expect that He will come the second time. If He came to be nailed to the cross, much more may we expect that He will come in glory and wear the crown. He has said it, and He will do it. "His words shall not pass away."

Let us turn from the study of these verses with a deep conviction that the second advent of Christ is one of the leading truths of Christianity. Let the Christ in whom we believe be not only the Christ who suffered on Calvary, but the Christ who is coming again in person to judge the earth.