

Bible History Ends Abruptly

Our last issue (FR 84) dealt with some points of prophecy in Luke's historical record in ACTS. Mention was made of the puzzling abruptness with which he ended his account, and we proposed a further look at that. Since the Bible itself gives a long history of God's dealing with a people through whom the Savior would be brought into the world, it seems unreal that the history would fail to tell of the final downfall of their nation, the fate of their people, and the destruction of their temple which was the icon of their system of worship. Surely, no portion of Scripture could have been written after those happenings without making mention of such a calamity.

Recently I read the preface to the new edition of *THE PAROUSIA* by James Stuart Russell. I have referred often to this book published in 1878. This preface gave some interesting insights concerning the ending of Luke's account. It also offers viewpoints about the so-called "rapture of the saints" which were new to me. I copy here much from that discourse, not contending that he has presented ultimate truth on the subject, but to add another perspective to the mix. As you continue to consider the matter of fulfilled prophecy, you may possibly see how this view may add to your understanding.

Before I begin copying, let me add this preface of my own. Considering that so much prophecy was in veiled, symbolic language, must we conclude unequivocally that the being "snatched up / caught up" ("the rapture") was absolutely literal?

In copying, I shall use some original formatting which will not transfer through email. Lack of formatting makes for more difficult reading of these long and involved paragraphs. But please read patiently. Now we quote:

"Doubtless most readers will shrink from the demand that the predictions of our Lord in Matthew 24, and the kindred prophecy of St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4, had a veritable accomplishment. Many will regard it as an extravagance which refutes itself. Let them consider whether this demand is not made by the most express affirmations of Inspiration. These predictions are bounded by certain limits of time. The time is explicitly declared to fall within the period of the then existing generation. No artifice of logic, no violence of interpretation, can evade or gainsay this undeniable fact. Credible or incredible, reasonable or unreasonable, the authority of Scripture is committed to the affirmation. And why should it be thought incredible? The reply will be, 'Because there is no historical evidence of the fact.' This however, is an assumption. It deserves consideration whether we have not all the evidence which the nature of the case admits. What evidence, for example, may be reasonably required that the most seemingly incredible event predicted in Matt. 24:31, and in 1 Thes. 4:17, commonly denominated 'the rapture of the saints,' actually took place? The principal, if not the only, portion that seems to come within the cognizance of human sense, is the removal of a great multitude of the disciples of Christ from this earthly scene. We might expect, therefore, that there should be some trace in history of this sudden disappearance of so vast a body of believers. It surely must have made a blank in history; a failure, at least, in the continuity of the records of Christianity. Admitting that the predictions do not require an absolute and universal removal of the *whole* body of the faithful (for it is manifest that there is a clear distinction made between the watchful and

the unwatchful, the ready and the unready, and that as many might be shut out of the kingdom as those who went in), yet the language of the prophecy certainly implies the sudden and simultaneous removal of a very great number of the faithful. Is there, then, any vestige in history of such a blank? Most certainly there is, and just such an indication as we might expect. A silence which is expressive. Silence where, a moment before, all was life and activity. The ecclesiastical historian will tell you that the light suddenly fails him. The Christian Church of Jerusalem, of which an apostle could say, 'Thou seest, brother, how many myriads there are among the Jews which have believed,' suddenly dwindles into two wretched sects of Ebionites and Nazarenes. Where are the many myriads of St. James? Where are the 'hundred and forty and four thousand' whom St. John saw, with the seal of God on their foreheads, and standing with the Lamb on the mount Zion? Did they perish in the siege of Jerusalem? Certainly not; for it is universally agreed that, forewarned by their Divine Master, they retired from the doomed city to a place of safety. Yet they seem to disappear and leave no trace behind. Ask the ecclesiastical historian to put his finger on the spot where the records of early Christianity are most obscure, and he will unhesitatingly point to the period when the Acts of the Apostles ends. Of this period the learned Neander says that 'We have no information, nor can the *total want of sources for this part of Church history* be at all surprising.' And, again, he speaks of 'the age immediately succeeding the Apostolic,' of which we have unfortunately *so few authentic memorials* ('Planting and Training,' Ch. 5 and 10.) Hindekoper, a Dutch theologian, in his work entitled, 'Christ's Descent to the Under-World,' remarks that ---

"On leaving the Apostolic age we almost lose sight of the Christians in a historical chasm of sixty or eighty years.'

“Archdeacon Farrar more emphatically dwells upon the fact and probable cause of this unaccountable eclipse ---

"Although we are so fully acquainted with the thoughts and feelings of the early Christians, yet the facts of their corporate history, and even the closing details in the biographies of their very greatest teachers are plunged in entire uncertainty. When, with the last word in the Acts of the Apostles, we lose the graphic and faithful guidance of St. Luke, the torch of Christian history is for a time abruptly quenched. We are left, as it were, to grope among the windings of the Catacombs. Even the final labors of the life of St. Paul are only so far known as we may dimly infer from the casual allusions of the Pastoral Epistles. For the details of many years in the life of St. Peter, we have nothing on which to rely, except slight and vague allusions, floating rumors, and false impressions, created by the deliberate fictions of heretical romance.'

"It is probable that this silence is in itself the result of the terrible scenes in which the apostles perished. It was indispensable to the safety of the whole community that the books of the Christians, when given up by the unhappy weakness of 'traitores,' or discovered by the keen malignity of informers, should contain no compromising matter. But how would it have been possible for St. Luke to write in a manner otherwise than compromising, if he had detailed the horrors of the Neronian persecution? It is a reasonable conjecture that the sudden close of the Acts of the Apostles may have been due to the impossibility of speaking without indignation and abhorrence of the Emperor and the Government, which, between A. D. 64 ad 68, sanctioned the infliction upon innocent men and women, of atrocities which excited the pity of the very Pagans. The Jew and the

Christians who entered on such themes, could only do so under the disguise of cryptograph, hiding his meaning from all but the initiated few, in such prophetic symbols as those of the Apocalypse ("Apocalypse" refers to John's Revelation throughout this treatise. -ch). In that book alone we are enabled to hear the cry of horror which Nero's brutal cruelties wrung from Christian hearts.' ("The Early Days of Christianity," Vol. 2; pp. 82-83)

"Still more vividly and forcibly, if possible, the case is put by the able reviewer of Renan's 'St. Paul' in the pages of *The Edinburgh Review*, April, 1870 ---

"This volume ["The Life of St. Paul"] takes us through the whole period of, what we may call, the ministry of the great apostle, embracing those all-important fifteen or sixteen years (A. D. 45-61), during which his three missionary journeys were undertaken, and the infant Church, with four bold strides, advanced from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch to Ephesus, from Ephesus to Corinth, and from Corinth to Rome. Once arrived there, once securely planted in that central and commanding position, strange to say, the Church, with all its dramatis personae, suddenly vanishes from our view. The densest clouds of obscurity immediately gather round its history, which our eager curiosity in vain attempts to penetrate. It is gone, amid a wreath of smoke, as completely as when a train plunges into a tunnel. In the words of M. Renan, 'The arrival of St. Paul at Rome, giving to the decision taken by the author of the 'Acts' to close his narrative at that point, marks for the history of the Origin of Christianity the commencement of a profound night, illuminated only by the lurid fire of Nero's horrible festivities, and by the lightning flash of the Apocalypse.' The causes of this sudden and confounding disappearance have not, to this day, been thoroughly investigated ... The history of St. Paul's life, and the history of the Apostolic age, together abruptly end. Black darkness falls upon the scene; and a grim and brooding silence---like the silence of impending storm---holds in hushed expectation of the 'day of the Lord' the awe-struck, breathless Church. No more books are written, no more messengers are sent, the very voice of tradition is still. One voice alone, from amid the silence and dread, breaks upon the straining ear; it is the Apocalyptic vengeance-cry from Patmos, 'Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen! Rejoice over her, thou heaven! And ye holy apostles and prophets! For God hath avenged you on her; she shall be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her' (Rev. 18:20)."

"It remains for the reader to consider, whether the causes suggested in the preceding quotations furnish an adequate explanation of this singular phenomenon; or whether the solution of the problem is not to be found in the actual occurrence of the event predicted by the our Lord and His apostles. There, in the written record of Inspiration, stand the ineffaceable words which foretell the speedy return of the Son of Man to judge the guilty nation and avenge His own elect. His coming was indissolubly connected with that same generation. The attendant circumstances of His coming are set forth with marked precision. Everything points to a sudden, swift, far-reaching catastrophe, analogous to that which took place 'in the days of Noah when the flood came, and took them all away,' or in the days of Lot, when the tempest of wrath overwhelmed Sodom and Gomorrah. These are the very images used by our Lord to describe the suddenness and swiftness of His appearing. No wonder that there should be a 'total blank' in contemporary history; that there should be a solution of continuity in the records of the Christian Church; that the pen of St. Mark should be arrested in the midst of an unfinished sentence; that St. Luke should abruptly break off his narrative of the life and labours of St. Paul. Grant that there is no

failure in the predictions of Christ; that His words had a veritable accomplishment; and all is explained. There is an adequate cause for the otherwise unaccountable hiatus which occurs in the Christian history of the time, and for the total obscuration of the Church, and all its greatest luminaries. Is it unreasonable to ask that the plainest declarations of the Lord Himself, and of His inspired witnesses should obtain a candid hearing, and a cordial belief, from all who own His as Lord and Master? Surely that robust faith is not utterly extinct, which once could say, 'Let God be true, and every man a liar.'

"This preface, or rather postscript, for such it is, may fitly close with the impressive caution of a great critic and theologian of the last century (1700s - ch), which, though it has special reference to the Apocalypse, is equally applicable to the whole prophetic portion of the New Testament.

"If it be objected that the prophecies in the Apocalypse are not yet fulfilled, that they are therefore not fully understood, and that hence arises the difference of opinion in respect to their meaning, I answer, that if the prophecies are not yet fulfilled, it is wholly impossible that the Apocalypse should be a Divine work; since the author expressly declares (Ch. 1:1) that the things which it contains 'must shortly come to pass.' Consequently, either a great part of them, I will not say all, must have been fulfilled, or the author's declaration, that they should shortly be completed, is not consistent with fact. It is true that to the Almighty a thousand years are but as one day, and one day as a thousand years; but if we therefore explain the term 'shortly,' as denoting a period longer than that which has elapsed since the Apocalypse was written, we sacrifice the love of truth to the support of a preconceived opinion. For when the Deity condescends to communicate information to mankind, He will of course use such language as is intelligible to mankind; and not name a period short which all men consider as long, or the communication will be totally useless. Besides, in reference to God's eternity, not only seventeen hundred but seventeen thousand years are nothing. But the author of the Apocalypse himself has wholly precluded any such evasion, by explaining (Ch. 1:3) what he meant by the term 'shortly,' for he there says, 'Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein; for the time is at hand.' According, therefore, to the author's own declaration, the Apocalypse contains prophecies with which the very persons to whom it was sent were immediately concerned. But if none of these prophecies were designed to be completed till long after their death, those persons were not immediately concerned with them, and the author would surely not have said that they were blessed in reading prophecies of which the time was at hand, if those prophecies were not to be fulfilled till after the lapse of many ages.. (J. D. Michaelis, 'Introduction to the New Testament,' Vol. 4, pp. 503, 504).'"

Without attempting to draw dogmatic conclusions from the quotations from these studious men of history, I leave their thoughts for whatever consideration you see fit to give them. They bring great meaning to the abrupt ending of Bible history. They seem to make valid claim that Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4 relate to each other and were fulfilled in the lifetime of Jesus' listeners and Paul's readers. We shall make further observations in future visits with you, if the Lord wills. Let me remind again that correct understanding of these matters is not essential to salvation.

(Cecil Hook, August 2001) []

