

What We Believe – 12. The Return of Christ

We believe in: “*The personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory.*”

A) Introduction

Eschatology refers to the study of the “end times” or “last things”. Often this is considered under two broad subheadings: general eschatology, which looks at such topics as the return of Jesus Christ and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth; and individual eschatology, which looks at such topics as the intermediate state after death and the final judgement. This study will consider the former.

Sadly, this doctrine is often a battleground for competing views among evangelical Christians, and this has promoted a certain indifference which is easily at home in our highly materialistic culture. However, the Bible has much to say on the subject – we cannot live rightly in the present without thinking rightly of the future.

B) Jesus is coming back: how?

All of the historic confessions and creeds make reference to Christ’s return. It is therefore a truth that is profoundly uniting. Concerning the manner of His return:

1. Jesus is returning, truly. Jesus assured His disciples that if He left, He would return (**John 14:3**). Christ’s return is the culminating point of human history. For Christians, it is our “*blessed hope*” (**Titus 2:13**).
2. Jesus is returning, bodily. Just as we believe in a bodily resurrection, so we believe in a bodily return. The same Lord Jesus that was taken up in glory will return in glory (**Acts 1:9-11**, **Revelation 1:7**).
3. Jesus is returning, triumphantly. At His first coming, Jesus humbled Himself to serve (**Philippians 2:5-8**); At His second coming “*he will sit on his glorious throne*” (**Matthew 25:31**). His reign shall be uncontested.

C) Jesus is coming back: why?

There are several reasons given for the return of Jesus:

1. To fulfil His Word. Jesus has promised that He will return (e.g. **Revelation 22:20**), and He is faithful (and therefore keeps His Word) and also sovereign (and therefore no-one can thwart Him).
2. To reign as King. Our world is filled with the curse and corruption of sin because the King and His reign are rejected. Humans live according to what suits them (**Judges 21:25**). The Old Testament consistently taught the need for God to come and reign (e.g. **Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:6-9**).
3. To judge the world. Jesus will be the Judge on the last day (**John 5:22, Acts 17:31**). This is good news – there will be justice and everything will be put right. However, we can only receive this as good news if our own debt before God is settled through faith in Christ.
4. To renew creation. All creation suffers futility because of sin, and at Christ's return He will liberate the creation (**Romans 8:19-22**).

D) Jesus is coming back: when?

At first glance this may appear a strange question with a rather obvious answer: we don't know! However, it is worth asking in terms of two broader topics.

1. When are the "end times"? Some consider the phrase "end times" or "last days" to be a reference only to the brief period immediately preceding the return of Christ. However, this is not how these terms are used in the Bible.

The Old Testament anticipated a coming end when God would make everything right – this would encompass the establishment of His reign through His chosen anointed King (the Messiah, e.g. **Psalms 2**), and the making of a new covenant with His people (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**), pouring out His Holy Spirit upon them (**Ezekiel 36:22-27, Joel 2:28-29**). When Peter stood up to preach on the Day of Pentecost, he taught not

only that Joel's prophecy was about the "*last days*" but also that it was being fulfilled ([Acts 2:16-21](#)). Thus, according to Peter, the last days were in effect on the Day of Pentecost.

This is the consistent witness of the New Testament (see [Hebrews 1:1](#) "*in these last days*" and [1 John 2:18](#) "*it is the last hour*"). The end times began with Christ's first coming and shall continue until His second coming. The Old Testament saints lived in a period of anticipated eschatology, we live in a period of inaugurated eschatology, and at the Lord's return we will enter a period of consummated eschatology. This is important in terms of our expectations for life today.

2. What of the "signs of the times"? In [Mark 13](#) Jesus teaches His disciples about His return (often called the "Olivet Discourse", also recorded in [Matthew 24](#) and [Luke 21](#)). This passage is challenging to interpret and easily open to misunderstanding. The context is critical for grasping Jesus' intent – the disciples are asking about the destruction of the temple and the return of Jesus. For a Jewish believer the end of the temple and the end of the world had a lot in common!

In this passage, much of what Jesus says (especially concerning the signs, verses 5-23) relates specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. This is, after all, in answer to the primary question asked by the disciples. Jesus' words are also very explicitly practical for those who will experience the destruction of Jerusalem. He then particularises those primarily affected by referring to "*this generation*" (v. 30) – certainly a reference to the generation alive at the time. And other historical sources demonstrate that all that Jesus describes in verses 5-23 did happen in the run-up to AD 70.

In verses 24-27 and 32-37 Jesus speaks of His return, making clear that its timing is unknown and unknowable to us. Our burden is to live in constant readiness, not to speculate as to when it will happen.

E) Jesus is coming back: so what?

A right grasp of Jesus' return has very significant practical outworking:

1. Get your identity right. Paul maintains that due to our union with Jesus Christ we are now part of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our true identity is bound up with the reigning King, and we are therefore to live out the qualities of the age to come, whilst living in this current age (see Colossians 3:1-17). To live in wilful sin is to deny our true identity.
2. Get your expectations right. We live in the overlap of the ages (already, but not yet). Christ is reigning, but His reign is not currently experienced universally here. We should therefore expect this life to be a struggle against sin and Satan. But we should not despair in the struggle because Jesus is returning.

We should also not be overly attached to the good things of this life – even the best things come to an end and do not ultimately satisfy. We're not on the new earth yet!

3. Get your priorities right. We are servants of the King. He is presently in a far country but He will return suddenly to judge and evaluate. Are we living in such a way as to prepare ourselves for our King's return and review of our lives?

F) Conclusion

The return of Christ is the culminating point of history. At His return, Satan, sin and death will be forever banished and God's people will live with their Saviour in perfect joy and contentment for all eternity. There is nothing more thrilling or wonderful!

Recommended Reading

Beynon, Graham, "Last things first: Living in light of the future"