

The Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ

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While all evangelical Christians are agreed upon the basic truth that our Lord is to return, and that his imminent return is the great hope of the Church, there is much variation in thought and opinion concerning the order of events both before his coming and afterwards. Unfortunately, Christians have allowed themselves to be divided, and even their fellowship between one another spoiled, through the elevation of a particular interpretation to the position of a fundamental. Through fear of becoming involved in controversy, others have neglected speaking about the truth of Christ's coming altogether, to the obvious detriment of personal holiness and evangelism.

The indisputable fact that believers do have different views about the order of events, while maintaining an equal and sincere regard for the authority of the Scriptures, ought to convince us that the Scriptures do not provide as precise a timetable as many would have us believe. So much depends upon being able to recognize what is, in fact, symbolic, and what is literally to take place — the great example of this, of course, is the millennium.² There is wisdom in the caution of James Orr when he wrote, "My own opinion is that the distinction between symbol and outward fact must remain more or less an uncertainty till the time itself shall declare it."

Our purpose, therefore, will not be to put forward a particular point of view or interpretation, but to try to draw attention to those truths which it is hoped can be stated without dispute, and where there is doubt as to the order of events or intervals of time, . . . then to state the fact. No preoccupation with detail must allow us to lose the significance and excitement of "the expectation of the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ."

CLEARLY PROMISED

Christ's Second Coming is clearly promised in the Bible. The Lord Jesus himself promised, "I will come again."³ The Old Testament Scriptures which foretold his first coming also [gave] indications of his second.⁴ The apostles bore witness to Christ's coming in their preaching and writing. Men and women were urged to repent and seek salvation in view of this glorious prospect.⁵ Peter [declared] that Jesus will be revealed so that the full truth of his glory will be disclosed.⁶ John likewise [declared] that Christ will appear and Christians will see him; his coming will be clear, distinct, and public; none will have any doubt about it.⁷ Paul preached with urgency, in view of the appearing of our Lord Jesus yet to come; this definite historical event in the future gave a focus to all he did.⁸ The Lord's Supper is intended to be a perpetual reminder of the Lord's Second Coming, for it is an "interim" measure — it is "until he comes." A common greeting among the early Christians seems to have been *Maranatha* — "the Lord is coming."⁹ "It is the cry of the waiting and longing community for his coming again in glory — a cry which is made to the Lord of the community with particular force and fervor at the Lord's Supper — 'Lord, come.'"¹⁰ As we read the New Testament, there can be no doubt that Christ's Second Coming is the central fact in the future which influences Christian activity and morality.

SIGNS

Signs of Christ's coming are indicated in the Bible. We cannot always be sure in the Gospels whether some of our Lord's statements refer to immediate events, such as the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, or to the later events of his coming; sometimes the statements are intertwined, and may even have a dual reference. Certainly, however, his coming again will be preceded by disturbances in nature and distress among the nations; and there will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars.¹¹ It will be preceded by concern and fear over coming events: men will faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming to the world.¹² Furthermore, many antichrists will appear.¹³ Antichrists are essentially adversaries of Christ — men and movements whose teaching is fundamentally against Christ and a denial of Christ. They both counterfeit and oppose Christ. Linked with the fact of antichrists is the warning that many professed Christians will depart from the faith and false teaching will be on the increase.¹⁴

THE TIME

The precise time of Christ's Second Coming is not stated, and all efforts at calculation are to be rejected and repudiated. It is natural for us to want to know the timing of everything, as it was with the disciples themselves; but no one knows the day or the hour of Christ's Second Coming, except the Father.¹⁵ The important truth to recognize is that we are not intended to know the exact time; thus it is utterly foolish to speculate. What we may be sure of is that Christ will be sent by the Father at the appointed time; and that time, so far as the world is concerned, will be at the unexpected moment — in the twinkling of an eye.¹⁶

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The twinkling of an eye is the time it takes to cast a glance, or perhaps to flutter an eyelid. Such an expression emphasizes the unexpected nature of the event, like the suddenness of lightning or a thief breaking into a house.¹⁷ The world will be totally unprepared for the great event, even as it was unprepared for the coming of the Flood.¹⁸ Caught up in time as we are, we need to recognize that there is no delay about the Lord's coming.¹⁹ The only reason for any appearance of delay is his forbearance, in that he does not wish that any should perish, but all should reach repentance.²⁰ But the day of his return draws nearer with the passing of each day. His coming will be soon; we are always to regard his coming as being at hand.²¹

THE MANNER OF HIS COMING

At the time of our Lord's ascension, the apostles stood gazing up into the sky. The angelic messengers gently rebuked them by asking, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."²² We could not have a greater assurance concerning the personal, visible, and historical return of our Lord Jesus Christ; he will come in the same way as he was seen to go into heaven.

Thus he will come *from heaven*.²³ Heaven is the eternal dwellingplace of God and of his angels, the place from which Christ came at his incarnation and to which he returned at his ascension. *Second*, he will come *visibly* — indeed "every eye shall see him."²⁴ *Third*, he will come *openly* — there will be no element of hiddenness as at his first coming: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man."²⁵ *Fourth*, he will come *personally*; his coming will mean his presence after his absence.²⁶ *Fifth*, he will come *in the clouds with power and great glory* — the glory of his Father.²⁷ Finally, he will come with his *angels and with all his saints*.²⁸

THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS COMING

If we ask, "What will happen when Christ returns?" the answer we give depends much upon our views of the millennium, upon whether we feel it portrays what will lead up to the Lord's coming, or what we believe will follow it. Others, adopting the a-millennial view, hold that the millennium is nonexistent as a literal period, and apply it in a spiritual sense to the present experience of Christians, whether in heaven or on earth. Whatever view is held, there would seem to be many indisputable consequences of our Lord's coming upon which all are agreed, although ideas as to the timing of some of the consequences will vary according to convictions concerning the nature of the millennium.

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First and foremost, Christ's glory will be seen. The Second Coming will be an occasion of glory for Christ.²⁹ At his first coming his glory was veiled, and not everyone recognized his identity as the Son of God. But not so at his Second Coming; he will be seen sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. His glory will be revealed to the world, and he will be glorified among his own and adored among all believers.³⁰ The whole universe will see and acknowledge him as Lord. As Phillips expresses [it], "It will be a breath-taking wonder."³¹

Then the resurrection of the dead will take place, and the transformation of all believers. Christ's grace will be revealed to believers in a manner unknown before.³² The completeness of their salvation will be revealed, and a most important aspect of this completeness will be the resurrection of the dead.³³ At his coming, the Lord Jesus Christ will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him to make all things subject to himself.³⁴

Following the resurrection, believers will be gathered together by Christ. He will send out the angels and gather his elect from the farthest bounds of earth to the farthest bounds of heaven. He will gather to himself both those who have died before his coming and those alive on the earth at the time. It will be like the ingathering of a great harvest.³⁵

The Second Coming of Christ is consistently linked with the judgment, although those taking the premillennial view, for example, will place the final resurrection and the judgment at the end of the millennium. We shall . . . limit ourselves to the general principles about the judgment clearly found in the Scriptures. Every man and woman will acknowledge Christ as the Lord and therefore as the supreme Judge.³⁶ His coming will be a time of reckoning.³⁷ The judgment will include all men and women — the small and the great, the living and the dead.³⁸ The perfect justice of God will be

seen, and the judgment will be individual and personal.³⁹ All will be found guilty; no one will have anything to say in self-defense — all excuses will die upon men's lips.⁴⁰ The first part of the judgment will be the separation of those who have accepted God's way of salvation from those who have gone about to gain salvation by dependence on their own effort.⁴¹ Those whose names are in the book of life shall escape the judgment of condemnation on account of sin because, having seen the folly of trusting in their own righteousness, through faith in Christ they have become the righteousness of God in him.⁴²

The final division of men and women will come after the judgment. Men and women without the knowledge of God and who have refused to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.⁴³ The judgment of God will be executed by God's angels on unbelievers. Believers, however, will enter into the full wonder of everlasting life and the enjoyment of God's presence forever.⁴⁴ Christ will take believers to himself, that where he is they may be also.⁴⁵

The end of all things as we know them will then take place. "The heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up." After the dissolution of this world, there will be revealed "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."⁴⁶

The final truth that the New Testament emphasizes is that God the Father will be glorified in all that happens. All that he ever spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets will be established.⁴⁷ As all men and women will be compelled to confess Christ as Lord, that act will have one great end — the glory of God the Father.⁴⁸ After [the destruction of] every rule and every authority and power, there will come the end of all events connected with Christ's coming, when Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father.⁴⁹ When all things are subjected to Christ, then he himself will be subjected to the Father, who put all things under him.⁵⁰

IMPLICATIONS

While believers have tended to preoccupy themselves often with the precise details of the Lord's coming — many of which the Scriptures do not provide — the New Testament preoccupies itself with the moral imperatives which follow upon the sure fact of the Lord's imminent return. Such should be our preoccupation. Our character and conduct should be influenced continually by our glorious hope.

We are to rest the full weight of our hopes on the grace that will be ours when the Lord Jesus returns.⁵¹ The fact of our Lord's coming is to have an influence on the whole of our thinking and activity, causing us to live with our hearts given to heavenly things, not to the passing things of the world.⁵² We are to love his appearing — looking, waiting, and praying for it.⁵³ Having this hope before us, we shall find ourselves stimulated to pursue holiness.⁵⁴ We shall use the apparent "delay" to bring about men's salvation by the preaching of the gospel, at the same time hastening the coming of the Lord by this activity.⁵⁵ We shall aim at being ready for the Lord Jesus when he comes.⁵⁶ We shall always act and live remembering that time is short.⁵⁷

We should not be surprised at the indifference of the world to the proclamation of Christ's Second Coming, for it has always been the case. Men, who prefer to follow their own passions, scoff at the promise of Christ's coming, deliberately ignoring the Word of God.⁵⁸ But they will be overtaken and surprised, nevertheless, by the reality of the Lord's Second Coming.⁵⁹ What should concern us is the indifference of many Christians to this "blessed hope," with the consequent lack of holiness and evangelistic concern. "For yet a little while, and the coming One shall come and shall not tarry."⁶⁰

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