



The Return of Jesus

Lesson 10

The great hope for the Christian throughout the centuries is that Christ has left but he will return. It was the hope of the Christian condemned to die in the colosseums. It was the hope of Christians climbing onto a boat knowing they would likely never see their family again. It is the hope of the marginalized, the forgotten, the persecuted, and the sorrowing. For believers today who find themselves weary and discouraged the good news remains the same for them... Christ is returning!

But there are many questions that surround this simple statement: Jesus is coming again! Theologians lock heads over the details of how all of this will play out, and although this not the place for a full-blown class on eschatology (the doctrine of end times) it is important as we study Jesus to ask when he is coming back and how that should affect us.

I. The stages of Jesus's return

If we are supposed to be looking for Jesus' return, then when will Jesus return? As we mentioned earlier, theologians strongly debate this question. In this lesson, we will assume and argue for a pretribulational view of the rapture, that is, the rapture comes before the tribulation.

A. The rapture and tribulation.

Working through all the questions of “when” becomes a challenging issue when we look at the return of Christ. It is especially challenging because teaching about the end of time is scattered throughout our Bibles, and so pulling it all together into a coherent whole requires a careful reading of many different passages and a piecing together of the many issues.

1. Statements about the imminence of Christ (Matthew 25:36-44).

The teaching of the New Testament tells us that when Jesus comes, it will be unexpected. In fact, if people did know when it was going to happen, then they would have been prepared for it. In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that not even he himself knows when his return will be, but rather that this is in the domain of the Father (Mark 13:32).

Sadly, many people have ignored this clear Scriptural teaching and have tried to attach dates and times to the return of Christ. For example, Wayne Grudem shares the story of one such sad example:

In the summer of 1988 a former rocket scientist with impressive academic credentials circulated a booklet claiming that Jesus would return on September 12, 1988, and tens of thousands of copies of the book found their way around the United States and to various parts of the world. I was surprised to find that some otherwise sober Christian friends had read it and were alarmed, and to hear that some Christians in our community had pulled their children out of

school in order to be together as a family when Christ came back. When the prediction failed, the author, Edgar Whisenant, revised his prediction, saying his calculations were one year off and Christ would return instead on September 1, 1989 (or one day earlier or later), or, if not then, on Rosh Hashanah 1990 or 1991 or 1992, or, at the latest, September 15–17, 1993. Of course, those predictions also failed.¹

The question then becomes, what about all of those passages that describe great and terrible events that lead up to the coming of Christ? The New Testament describes the coming of the antichrist, a seven-year period of testing, great signs and wonders and tragedies like the world has never seen. If these things come before Christ's return, then one likely solution is that there are two returns of Christ – one secret and unannounced, the other at the end of God's judgment upon the earth.

2. The focus on Israel during the tribulation.

Another factor that suggests a pretribulational rapture is the focus on Israel during the tribulation. Jeremiah describes the tribulation right before the coming kingdom at the end of time as “the time of Jacob's trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7). Revelation talks about the church much in Revelation 2-3, and then we never really hear about the church again

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, [*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*](#) (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004).

throughout the rest of the book. Instead, we find a lot of language describing Israel. Daniel 9 describes a period of seven years that has yet to happen and that likely refers to the tribulation period, and Daniel's prophetic calendar deals with the question of Israel's future (Daniel 9:24-27).

Why would God once again focus on Israel? What is left to be done for his relationship with the nation?

3. The promise of preservation from God's wrath (Revelation 3:10).

Finally, the New Testament assure believers over and over that they will not face the wrath of God which is poured out upon the earth. Revelation 3:10 in particular assures believers that God will spare them "from the hour of temptation[trial, testing], which shall come upon all the world, to try [test] them that dwell upon the earth." 1 Thessalonians assures believers that Jesus "[delivers] us from the wrath to come." Believers will be spared God's judgment on the earth, and the most natural way for this to happen is to remove them from the place where they judgment will be poured. During the tribulation, this judgment will be poured out over all the earth (Revelation 3:10; 8:3), and so a removal of the church before this tribulation makes the most sense.

B. The second coming and Armageddon (Revelation 19:11-21)

If Jesus comes in a secret rapture for his church, then when will the bold, big, hard to miss signs take place? The best answer to this question appears to be: these

signs will take place at the second coming of Christ. This is what happens at the end of our Bibles, when Christ comes back on a white horse and destroys once and for all those who rebel against him and persecute his people.

How can knowing the final end of the universe help believers today? Why should the picture of Christ as a fierce warrior comfort the hearts of his followers?

II. The preparation for Jesus' return

So, what difference does the return of Christ make? The return of Christ should matter very much in our personal lives because the recognition that Christ is returning should both motivate us to live rightly and provide us with hope when the world seems to be crashing and burning around us. As we study the return of Christ, it should impact us in two ways: it should motivate us to be ready for when he comes back, and it should give us hope when we feel hopeless.

A. The imminence of Christ's return should motivate holy living (Matthew 24:36-25:13).

The fact that Christ could return at any moment should be a thought on all our minds a lot more often than it is. The thought that Christ could return today or before I write these next few words should dramatically impact our behavior and choices.

Several passages make this point. For example, Christ gives instruction that no one but God knows when he is coming, and that people will be going about their normal life. He then challenges people to live in such a way that

when Christ comes they are ready (Matthew 24:36-44). He goes on to illustrate this with a story of a servant who does what is right now knowing when the Master will show up to reward and/or punish him for his behavior (Matthew 24:45-51). He then tells another story about those ready to celebrate a wedding but don't know when the bridegroom will show up and so aren't ready when he appears (Matthew 25:1-13). Paul also talks about the return of Christ and the impact that has on believers (Philippians 1:6, 10; 1 Corinthians 1:8; Titus 2:11-13).

What can we as believers do to more intentionally remind ourselves of Christ's second coming? How do we keep from forgetting?

B. The hope of Christ's return should motivate right living.

There is a certain sense of healthy fear that should come with thinking about Christ's return, and the fact that it could be at any minute. But fear should not be our only response. Pondering the return of Christ should also bring hope because at the return of Christ two very important things will happen: we will be freed from our sin and we will be free from our suffering.

1. The hope for freedom from sin (1 John 3:2-3).

Our battle with sin is long and ugly this side of heaven. We feel burdened down by our failures, wrongdoings, and traitorous flesh. We long for the day when the reflex of our heart is obedience, and not pride. The good news is that when Jesus comes back, we will receive our glorified bodies and will no longer have a "bent to sinning."

The goal of Christianity is for us to be like Christ (cf Romans 8:28-29; Philippians 3:21). Every day of our life we should be striving to live like him more by thinking like him, talking like him, and behaving like him. As we do, we will find that a grueling and difficult process as we strive to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. But the good news is that when he comes, and we see him, that process will be over.

According to 1 John 3, what should be the result of our realizing this wonderful truth? Why would the hope of a glorified body have this kind of affect?

2. The hope for freedom from suffering (Romans 8:18-23).

Being a Christian in the first century wasn't easy. It meant giving up your old way of life, and with it many of your friends, family, and perhaps even your livelihood. It meant signing up for a life of being misunderstood, rejected, mocked, and in some cases even killed.

But it's not just the suffering of persecution that we face. Life is full of suffering, and we groan with that suffering. We groan over cancer diagnoses and lost jobs and friends who abandon the faith and college rejection letters. We groan with the disappointments, frustrations, and sorrow of living on a planet ravaged by the consequences of our sin.

Suffering is universal. But suffering ends when Jesus comes back. For this reason, when tragedy strikes

and we find ourselves low on hope, we can remind ourselves of the wonderful truth that Christ is returning and when he does he will end our sorrows.

What about the saints throughout the years who have waited for Christ's return and died after a life of suffering?

Why does Christ wait and not simply come back now?

The second to last verse of our Bible concludes with a prayer "He that testifieth these things saith, Surely, I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20). May the prayer of all of our hearts be for Christ's return, and may the hope of his coming fuel our worship, our holiness, and our joy. Hopefully, after ten weeks of studying Jesus we all have a slightly more intense desire to see this one who has done more for us than we could ever repay. May we all join the apostle John and in our hearts cry out "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

What should we do if we find ourselves uninterested in the return of Christ? If instead, we find ourselves a little too comfortable here on earth?

In what ways will a hope for Christ's return practically show up in our lives?