

Chapter 54: The Return of Christ: When and How?

When and how will Christ return? Could he come back at any hour?

- A. There Will Be a Sudden, Personal, Visible, Bodily Return of Christ (Jn 14:3; Ac 1:11; 1 Th 4:16; Re 1:7)
- B. We Should Eagerly Long for Christ's Return (Re 22:20; Tit 2:11-13)
- 1) Do Christians eagerly long for Christ's return?
 - The more Christians are caught up in enjoying this life, and neglecting genuine Christian fellowship and their relationship with Christ, the less they will long for his return.
 - Many who are experiencing suffering and those whose daily walk with Christ is vital and deep, will have a more intense longing for his return.
 - The degree to which we long for Christ's return is a measure of our spiritual condition at the moment.
 - 2) If Christ could return at any moment, should we undertake long-term projects?
 - Certainly we should commit ourselves to long-term activities.
 - Jesus does not allow us to know the actual time of his return: he wants us to be engaged in obedience to him up until the very moment of his return.
 - To "be ready" is to be faithfully obeying him in the present, engaged in work he has called us to.
- C. We Do Not Know When Christ Will Return (Mt 24:44)
- Anyone who claims to know specifically when Jesus is coming back is automatically to be considered wrong.
 - If people are deceived by such claims, there could be many unfortunate consequences:
- D. All Evangelicals Agree on the Final Results of Christ's Return
- The judgment of unbelievers and the final reward of believers
 - That believers will live with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth for all eternity
 - Father, Son, & Holy Spirit will reign & be worshiped in a never-ending kingdom with no more sin, sorrow, or suffering
- E. There Is Disagreement Over the Details of Future Events
- The nature of the millennium
 - The relationship of Christ's return to the millennium
 - The sequence of Christ's return and the great tribulation period that will come to the earth
 - The question of the salvation of the Jewish people (and the relationship between saved Jews and the church)
 - These differences should be seen as matters of secondary importance.
- F. Could Christ Come Back at Any Time?
1. Verses Predicting a Sudden and Unexpected Coming of Christ (Mt 24:42-44,50; 25:13; Mk 13:32-37; Lk 12:40; 1 Co 16:22; Phil 3:20; 1 Thess 5:2; Titus 2:12-13; Heb 10:25; Jas 5:7-9; 1 Pet 4:7; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 1:3; 22:7,12, 20)
 - We can say Christ's return is "imminent": Christ could come and might come at any time, and we are to be prepared for him to come at any day.
- Question: Were Jesus and the NT authors wrong in their expectations that he would return soon?
- None of the texts above require this interpretation
 - Biblical prophets often speak in terms of "prophetic foreshortening" (2 Pe 3:8-9)
2. Signs That Precede Christ's Return
 - a. The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations (Mk 13:10; Mt 24:14)
 - b. The Great Tribulation (Mk 13:7-8; Mk 13:19-20)
 - c. False Prophets Working Signs and Wonders (Mk 13:22)
 - d. Signs in the Heavens (Mk 13:24-25; Lk 21:25-27)
 - e. The Coming of the Man of Sin and the Rebellion (Re 13:1, 6; 1 Jn 2:18; 2 Th 2:1-10)
 - f. The Salvation of Israel (Ro 11:12, 25-26)
 - g. Conclusions From These Signs that Precede Christ's Return
 - Many Christians have felt that Christ simply cannot return at any moment.
 - It would not take much argument to demonstrate that most of these events have not yet occurred.
3. Possible Solutions
 - (a) Christ could not come at any time. (L. Berkhof)
 - Difficulties:
 - 1) Nullifies the force of Jesus' warnings to watch & be ready, that he is returning at an hour we don't expect.
 - 2) Uses signs in a way opposite from the way Jesus intended them to be used.
 - (b) Christ indeed could come at any time: Three Possible Ways to Reconcile the Two Sets of Passages:
 - (1) "The NT talks about two distinct returns/second comings of Christ."
 - a. A secret coming at which Christ takes Christians out of the world
 - b. After seven years, a visible, public, triumphant coming in which Christ comes to reign over the earth
 - c. During the seven-year interval, the unfulfilled signs will be fulfilled, leaving no tension between a coming "at any moment" and one that will be preceded by many signs
 - 1) It is hard to drive two separate comings of Christ from the passages that predict his return.
 - 2) This solution is historically quite recent: first proposed by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).

- (2) "All the signs have been fulfilled, and therefore Christ in fact could return at any moment."
- In some sense, the gospel was preached to all nations.
 - False prophets arose and opposed the gospel
 - There was tribulation in the persecution suffered at the hands of some of the Roman emperors.
 - The man of lawlessness was in fact the emperor Nero.
 - The number of Jewish people to be saved has come about gradually through the history of the church, with Paul among their number at the beginning.
- Difficulty: Many have not found this view convincing, because these signs seem to them to point to much larger events than those that occurred in the 1st century
- (3) "It is unlikely but possible that the signs have already been fulfilled"
- Takes seriously the purpose for the signs/warnings, & that we are not to know when Christ will return.
 - Advocates of this position would say that Christ could return at any time, and so we must be ready, even though it seems unlikely that Christ will return at once.
 - Agrees that we cannot know when Christ will return and that he is coming at an hour we do not expect.

Question: Have these signs been fulfilled?

- The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations
 - There are many language groups/tribes that have still never heard the gospel.
 - Paul does speak of the worldwide spread of the gospel. (Col 1:5-6, 23)
- The Great Tribulation
 - The language of Scripture seems to indicate suffering greater than anything that has yet been experienced.
 - Many people have understood Jesus' warnings to refer to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70.
 - Since the 1st century, there have been many periods of violent, intense persecution of Christians over large portions of the globe.
- False Christs and False Prophets
 - Seemingly miraculous "signs and wonders" have been worked by demonic powers in opposition to the gospel. (cf., Ex 7:11, 8:7; Acts 8:9-11)
 - Many false religions lead people astray; the leaders of such groups could be called false messiahs/false prophets.
 - It seems likely that Jesus' words predict a far greater manifestation of this kind of activity just prior to his return.
- Powerful Signs in the Heavens
 - One sign that almost certainly has not yet occurred, though it would not preclude a return of Christ "at any time."
 - It seems unlikely that this is merely symbolic language (Mt 24:29-30)
- The Appearance of the Man of Lawlessness
 - Many attempts have been made to identify the antichrist throughout history. (i.e., Nero, Domitian, Hitler, Stalin)
 - All of these have proved false.
 - It is likely that a worse "man of lawlessness" will arise and bring unparalleled suffering and persecution.
- The Salvation of Israel
 - Romans 9-11 seems to indicate that there will be a yet future massive ingathering of the Jewish people as they turn to accept Jesus as their Messiah, but it is not certain that this passage predicts this.
 - Many have argued that no further ingathering will occur beyond what we have already seen, since Paul gives himself as a primary example.
- Conclusion:
 - Except for the signs in the heavens, it is unlikely but possible that these signs have already been fulfilled.
 - The only sign that seems not to have occurred could occur within the space of a few minutes.

→ It seems appropriate to say it is unlikely but certainly possible that Christ could return at any time.

This position has positive spiritual benefits:

 - God does not intend us to know; He simply wants us to continue to long for Christ's return.
 - If Christ does return suddenly, we will not be tempted to object that one sign or another has not yet occurred. We will simply welcome him.
 - If we see suffering, opposition to the gospel, a revival among the Jewish people, even spectacular signs in the heavens, we will not be dismayed or lose heart.

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