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?
      - 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.”
   a. In some sense, the gospel was preached to all nations.
   b. False prophets arose and opposed the gospel.
   c. There was tribulation in the persecution suffered at the hands of some of the Roman emperors.
   d. The man of lawlessness was in fact the emperor Nero.
   e. 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”
   a. Takes seriously the purpose for the signs/warnings, & that we are not to know when Christ will return.
   b. 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.
   c. 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?
   a. The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations
      1. There are many language groups/tribes that have still never heard the gospel.
      2. Paul does speak of the worldwide spread of the gospel. (Col 1:5-6, 23)
   b. The Great Tribulation
      1. The language of Scripture seems to indicate suffering greater than anything that has yet been experienced.
      2. Many people have understood Jesus’ warnings to refer to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70.
      3. Since the 1st century, there have been many periods of violent, intense persecution of Christians over large portions of the globe.
   c. False Christs and False Prophets
      1. 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)
      2. Many false religions lead people astray; the leaders of such groups could be called false messiahs/false prophets.
      3. It seems likely that Jesus’ words predict a far greater manifestation of this kind of activity just prior to his return.
   d. Powerful Signs in the Heavens
      1. One sign that almost certainly has not yet occurred, though it would not preclude a return of Christ “at any time.”
      2. It seems unlikely that this is merely symbolic language (Mt 24:29-30)
   e. The Appearance of the Man of Lawlessness
      1. Many attempts have been made to identify the antichrist throughout history. (i.e., Nero, Domitian, Hitler, Stalin)
      2. All of these have proved false.
      3. It is likely that a worse “man of lawlessness” will arise and bring unparalleled suffering and persecution.
   f. The Salvation of Israel
      1. 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.
      2. Many have argued that no further ingathering will occur beyond what we have already seen, since Paul gives himself as a primary example.

   g. Conclusion:
      1. Except for the signs in the heavens, it is unlikely but possible that these signs have already been fulfilled.
      2. 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:
   1. God does not intend us to know; He simply wants us to continue to long for Christ’s return.
   2. 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.
   3. 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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