

WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT THE SECOND COMING?

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Where do we stand after 2,000 years of false alarms and the current “future fatigue”? Should we join those who have thrown in the towel on prophetic study in favor of “more practical, life-related issues”? Or, if we are convinced that nothing is more practical than to look for our Lord’s return, how should we do that? Should we be expecting an any-moment return? Or should we be more concerned about preparing for the coming years of unparalleled trouble that the prophets predicted?

In an effort to answer some of these questions, Herb Vander Lugt and Dave Branon have written this booklet. It is our prayer that their work will lead you to an increased awareness of what the Bible has to say about our Lord’s promised return. *Martin R. De Haan II*

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CHRISTIANS DIVIDED ON THE RAPTURE QUESTION

MILLIONS REPORTED MISSING

News reports arriving from cities around the globe tell of a mysterious disappearance of thousands and thousands of people. In some instances entire families have vanished without a trace

Could this headline and lead paragraph appear in your newspaper tomorrow? Is it possible that Christ could return today and suddenly remove His children from this earth, leaving an unbelieving world to wonder where all the Christians have gone?

This is an extremely practical issue. If Christ could return today, we need to be ready. We cannot afford to take the future for

granted. Just as a child finds the inner strength to pull his act together when he thinks his dad is coming through the front door, so those who live in the expectation that Christ could return at any moment have reason to live a different and better life. It gives husbands reason to love their wives and to spend time with their children. It gives managers incentive to be considerate of their workers and to treat them the way they would want to be treated. It gives everyone who knows the way to heaven urgent reason to introduce others to Christ—before it is too late.

But, having said that, could Christ return today? Church people do not all agree. While all true Christians believe in the return of Christ, many disagree about the details of when it will occur.

Some think that Christ will come back at the end

of the age just prior to destroying and recreating the heavens and the earth. This is termed *amillennialism* because it does not recognize a literal millennium (1,000-year reign of Christ on earth).

The return of Christ represents not only the ultimate sense of accountability but the ultimate sense of hope as well.

Others believe that Christ will return only after a predicted period of unparalleled trouble. This view is called *posttribulationism* because it sees Christ coming for His people after the tribulation.

Still others, however, believe that our Lord will return in two phases—once for the salvation of His church and once for the

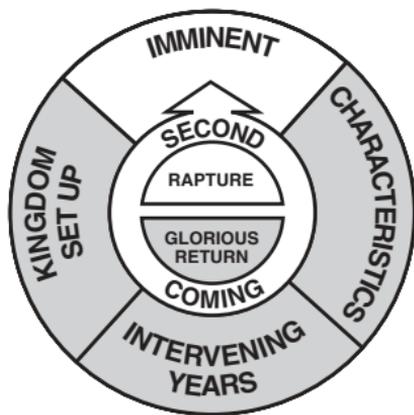
rescue of the nation of Israel. This view includes those who hold to either a *pretribulation* or a *midtribulation* approach to the Lord's return.

But with these options before us, what do we really know about the second coming of Christ? To begin, we know that everyone who looks for Christ's return has reason to live the kind of life that will please the Lord at His coming. The apostle John recognized this when he wrote, "When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

Beyond that incentive for right living, we believe it is very important for us to be ready for a two-part return of Christ, the first phase of which could occur at any moment—maybe even today.

But what is the evidence for such a position?

WHY WOULD CHRIST RETURN AGAIN . . . AND AGAIN?



The main evidence for a two-part return of Christ revolves around (1) God's distinct plans for Israel and the church and (2) prophecies that describe the time of Christ's return as being both knowable and unknowable. The reasoning might seem to be a little involved at points, but the main point to keep in mind is that Scripture teaches us to be always ready for the Lord's return. The following

pages will explain why that seems to signal a two-part return of Christ—one for the church and one for Israel.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Basic to this discussion is our belief that the first of these two returns is for the rescue and removal of the church (1 Cor. 15:51-53; 1 Th. 4:13-18; 5:9). The second relates to God's plan for Israel (Ezek. 36:16-38; Jer. 23:5-6; Rev. 19:11-21). Both have different places in God's prophetic program. Even though both share a common spiritual ancestry that can be traced back to the faith of Abraham (Gal. 3:7), they have different places in God's world plan. Israel represents a nation with whom God has made very earth-centered and geographically related promises (Isa. 2:1-6; Ezek. 36-37). But the church is a

multinational organism made up of all true believers in Christ—Jew or Gentile. The church is at the center of God's program until "the fullness of the Gentiles" is fulfilled (Rom. 11:25) and has been given a hope that is to be realized more in heaven than on earth (1 Th. 4:13-18).

A two-phase return would explain why Israel but not the church is mentioned in the endtime events of Revelation.

The distinction between Israel and the church is basic to understanding prophecy. Many have called it the key to unlocking what the Bible says about the future. When the two are kept distinct, many prophetic details fall into place. Then it

becomes evident that some predictions refer to the Lord's return for the church, while others relate to His return as the King and Deliverer of Israel.

This provides an explanation for why the church is not specifically referred to in most of the book of Revelation. Revelation 6–18 (which describes the "great tribulation" to which Jesus alluded in Matthew 24:15-28) never mentions the church. While an argument from silence is not the strongest, it does seem significant. It gives credence to the idea that Christ will have returned to remove the church prior to all of those endtime events related to the restoration and salvation of the nation of Israel, called the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7). The church will already be with her Lord and will come with Him when He returns to save

Israel and set up His promised earthly kingdom.

That brings us to a second important reason for being ready for a two-part return of Christ. The teaching of the Bible includes (a) prophecies of dramatic events that will occur just prior to the Lord's second coming to earth and (b) predictions of another coming at a time that is not expected. It seems reasonable to resolve this apparent contradiction by seeing them as describing two different phases of the Lord's return.

Just keep in mind that if this discussion seems unrelated to your real needs and problems, you're missing something. Nothing is more practical than the return of Christ. When seen properly, nothing provides more hope. Nothing provides more accountability. Nothing puts the pains and pleasures of life in better perspective

than the promise of our Lord's return.

If the Lord were to return today, all of your worst problems and all of your deepest pleasures

A two-phase return makes sense if the first phase (for the church) could happen at any time and the second phase (for Israel) happens at a definite, presignaled time.

would suddenly look entirely different. For that reason, let's take a closer look at what the Bible has to say about (1) the any-moment return for the church and (2) the final presignaled event climaxing the worst trouble the world has ever seen.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN AN ANY-MOMENT AND A PRESIGNED RETURN

In the Olivet Discourse, delivered only shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus answered questions raised by His disciples after He had predicted the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem. They asked, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Mt. 24:3).

Notice that the disciples’ question has three parts: (1) When? (2) What will be the signs of Christ’s coming? (3) What will be the signs of the end of the age? As we read our Lord’s answer, we find that He began with the sign part of the question. He dealt with the signs of His coming that will alert all generations (vv.3-14), the signs of the end of the age related to Israel (vv.15-35),

and the “when” or time question related to His unannounced coming for the church (vv.36-51).

The signs of His coming—alerting all generations (vv.3-14).

The Lord began by describing seven events that would occur before His return. They will be signs of His coming because their purpose will be to remind His children throughout the age, saying, “Jesus is coming again.” Our Lord talked about false christs (v.5), wars and rumors of wars (v.6), famines (v.7), pestilences and earthquakes (v.7), persecution (v.9), defections from the faith (vv.10-13), and worldwide preaching of the gospel (v.14).

It is a fact of history that all seven of these occurrences took place to some degree during the first century. However, like most prophecies, the near-at-hand and far-off elements were

blended together into one picture. Therefore, Jesus' statements have different applications to different generations. To believers who lived and died under terrible persecution, "the end" in verse 13 is the end of life. But to those who live during the coming tribulation, it will be the end of the age. Similarly, the worldwide preaching of the gospel during the first century was to the Roman world (Col. 1:5-6), while for us today it is to the entire globe. These events portrayed by our Lord served as signs to first-century believers and to those of all subsequent generations that He is coming again.

The signs of the end of the age—related to Israel (vv.15-35). At verse 15, we suddenly find ourselves with a very specific prediction about "an abomination of desolation." This is followed by a detailed

description of a brief, terrible time of trouble that will end when the Lord returns. We might be puzzled by the statement about the "abomination of desolation" in the "holy place." But the Jewish people to whom Jesus spoke understood it. They knew that according to Daniel 9:24-27 a hostile Gentile ruler would someday desecrate their temple and initiate horrendous persecution. While Luke 21:20-24 contains some elements that were partially fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, Matthew 24:15-31 focuses on the endtime. There will be:

- Enough fear to drive the Jews to the hills (vv.16-18).
- Unparalleled trouble and woe (vv.19-20).
- Great tribulation that would threaten all life if the days were not shortened (vv.21-22).

- False christs and prophets (vv.23-26).
- Startling celestial signs and the visible descent of the Son of Man “with power and great glory” (vv.29-31).

These will be the signs that the end of the age is near. Just as the appearing of buds on trees signals the soon onset of the summer season, so do these signs show “that it is near, at the very doors” (v.33). In fact, the generation that sees the beginning of these signs (the desecration of the Jewish temple depicted in verse 15) will not pass off the scene before the Lord has returned (v.34).

The “when” question—related to His unannounced return for the church (vv.36-51). After reminding His disciples that people who see the signs He had spoken of can be sure that the return will be near, Jesus

began to answer the “when” question. He didn’t set a date. He said His second coming would catch people by surprise (see Lk. 12:40).

How can the Lord’s second coming catch people by surprise if it’s going to be presignaled by all the spectacular events described in Matthew 24?

First, Jesus explained that the coming of the Son of Man would be “as the days of Noah were.” In those days, despite Noah’s warnings of danger, the people went about their lives as usual. There was no concern for an imminent flood, because the people didn’t believe it was coming. There were no heavenly signs or unusual events—

only the incessant hammering and sawing by Noah and his sons. When the rains came, the people were caught by surprise.

After giving a couple of examples of what will happen when His unexpected coming takes place, our Lord makes this sobering, yet exciting warning:

Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Mt. 24:44).

How can the Lord's second coming catch people by surprise if it is going to be presignaled by all the striking and spectacular events described in Matthew 24:15-31? That's a key question. The best answer seems to be found in seeing the Lord's second coming as occurring in two stages. First He will come to catch up (or "rapture") His own people. This event will be unannounced. Then He will

return to establish His kingdom over the earth. This event will be clearly presignaled.

Why didn't the Lord spell out the details of His second coming so clearly that we could put them together and know exactly how and when it will occur?

Matthew 24 describes both stages of Jesus' return: the surprise, any-moment rapture of believers (vv.36-44) and the glorious return of Jesus at the close of the tribulation to end the destruction and establish His kingdom (vv.15-35). He began with the glorious return because that was the concern of the disciples

when they asked the question. He introduced the unexpected element to prepare them for the truths about the church age and rapture—truths that would be made clear after His ascension.

PURPOSEFUL AMBIGUITY

If you have read our Lord's prophetic words recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 17 and 21, you probably wish you could find somebody who would give you a crystal-clear explanation of all He said. If so, join the club! Many people have had the same experience and asked, "Why didn't He spell out the details of His second coming so clearly that we could put them together and know exactly how and when it will occur?" The answer is quite simple: He didn't set out to give us this kind of information. His aim was to

teach us that we should live in continual readiness for our meeting with Him.

In blending together into one picture references to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the endtime sacrilege in the temple, the apostolic persecution, the endtime great tribulation, the signs in the heavenly bodies, and an unexpected coming, the Lord followed the pattern of the Old Testament prophets. In their prophecies they also merged, without explanation about sequence, predictions that would occur at four different time periods: (1) in their own lifetime, (2) in the near future, (3) at Messiah's first coming, and (4) at the end of time. For example, the prophecies of Jesus' birth, exaltation, rule, suffering, and death (Isa. 7:14; 52:13–54:17; Jer. 23:5; Mic. 5:4) were written in such a way that they could not be placed in chronological order until they were fulfilled.

We can be thankful that God doesn't tell each of us individually the exact time or manner of our death. Similarly, He didn't give us a precise answer to the what, when, and how questions regarding our Lord's return. It's better for us to live in the tension produced by the realization, "Perhaps today, but maybe not in my lifetime."

IMMINENCY PARABLES

At the conclusion of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus told two parables that shout out the message, "Be ready!"

In the first one (Mt. 24:45-51), the servant is left in charge while his master is away on a trip. He begins thinking that the owner will be gone a long time, so he abuses the people under him and lives it up. But the master returns unexpectedly and punishes him severely.

In the second parable

(Mt. 25:1-13), 10 virgins are invited to attend a wedding reception, but they have to wait for the arrival of the wedding procession. They know it is coming, but they don't know just when. The procession in which each person carries a lighted torch arrives, but five of the girls can't join the group because they have no oil in their torches. However, the five who are prepared become part of the rejoicing company. The message is clear. "We don't know when Jesus is coming back. Therefore, be ready!"

Down through the centuries Bible expositors have applied these parables to the church. The servant who behaved wickedly and the five girls who had no oil represent professing Christians who are not truly saved. When Jesus comes unexpectedly for His own, He will punish them and exclude them from His

banquet hall. What a call to readiness! What a powerful intimation of imminency!

SOME DON'T AGREE

When the Lord appears in the air unexpectedly to take His people to heaven, many Christians will be just as surprised as non-Christians. That is because many believers are not convinced that the rapture of the church could occur at any moment. They know that Jesus is coming back, but they do not see His return in two stages. They don't keep an eye on the sky. Let's look at their objections to an imminent rapture.

OBJECTION:
The Any-Moment Rapture Is A Recent Idea In Church History. A common objection to the any-

moment, pretribulation doctrine of Christ's return relates to its supposed recent origin. Some posttribulationists attempt to show that it began in the 1820s with an unstable Scottish clergyman named Edward Irving. They say that he was the first person to develop the idea that Christ's return would occur in two stages, and that an eccentric named Margaret Macdonald picked up on his teaching during the 1830s. Then, a few years later, J. N. Darby and several other Plymouth Brethren teachers further developed the idea of the two-stage return. Posttribulationists tell us to reject the any-moment rapture idea because it, like the teachings of the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, is of recent and dubious origin.

Before we obey these critics and bid farewell to our belief in the rapture, let's

think through their charge. Was the any-moment teaching really new? Did the two-stage teaching originate with evil, irresponsible people as posttribulationists claim? Did the teaching of the second coming develop differently from other important doctrines? We'll find that each of the above questions can be given a solid answer of no.

1. *The any-moment idea was not new.* The writings of the church fathers are filled with warnings to live in continual readiness for our Lord's return. These men applied the parable of Jesus about the wise and foolish virgins to the people of their age, urging them to keep their lamps burning so they would be ready for Jesus at His return for them. They probably didn't see the need to develop a concept of two stages in the Lord's return because they tended to identify the Antichrist with

the Roman Empire and sometimes thought of themselves as already in the great tribulation.

Christians down through the centuries, mindful of the warning of Jesus that His coming would catch the world by surprise, never felt comfortable saying that Jesus Christ could not come at any moment. Many Christians expected Christ's return during great natural disasters like earthquakes or tornadoes. When the dust storms during the early 1930s caused an eerie daytime darkness in some of our midwestern states, many Christians panicked, thinking that the second coming was at hand.

The idea that the Lord could come at any moment certainly did not originate with Edward Irving. In fact, it didn't even originate with Darby. He simply tried to develop a biblical viewpoint that would explain how the

imminent-return idea could be harmonized with the teaching of the Bible about a tribulation *prior* to the return.

2. *The Plymouth Brethren who developed the two-stage teaching were biblical scholars.*

The claim that Irving and Macdonald clearly taught the two-stage second coming doctrine rests on flimsy evidence. In fact, their writings on this subject are confusing. While Darby and his Plymouth Brethren associates may have picked up some ideas from Irving and Macdonald, they developed their teaching through a careful and systematic study of the Scriptures in the original languages. They were systematic in the application of the Scriptures. They rejected some elements of Irving's teachings and produced a sane and coherent doctrine of last things. These men, like

Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, had flaws and blind spots. But like them, they were also sincere men of God who made tremendous contributions to the church in both leadership and doctrine.

3. *The method of development for this two-stage return idea is similar to that of other doctrines.*

The doctrines of justification, sanctification, and God's sovereignty, though taught by Christian leaders down through the centuries, were never as fully developed as they were by Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. Throughout the years of church history, the Holy Spirit has led the Lord's people into clearer understanding of God's Word in every area of Christian doctrine, including that of the second coming.

In summary, the claim that we should abandon the pretribulation, any-moment doctrine of Christ's return

because of a recent and dubious origin carries no weight. The logic that rejects a teaching on this basis demands that we also reject Luther's teaching on justification, Calvin's insights into God's sovereignty, and Wesley's contributions toward an understanding of sanctification.

The claim that we should abandon the pretribulation, any-moment doctrine of Christ's return because of a recent and dubious origin carries no weight.

OBJECTION:
The Rapture Is Not In Scripture. If we are to consider ourselves people who "go by the Book," we have to be careful that we

never support an argument by adding to the Bible something that isn't there. One of those "somethings" that isn't found in God's Word is the word *rapture*.

When we use this word to designate the time of Jesus' return in the air to take His followers to heaven, though, we are not violating Scripture. For example, the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible, but posttribulationists don't deny its truth.

Where, then, does the term *rapture* come from? In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Paul said that living believers will be "caught up" with the dead in Christ to meet the Lord in the air. The Greek word Paul used here is *harpazo*, which means "to snatch away." When the Bible was translated into Latin, the scholars rendered *harpazo* as *rapturo*. It is just a short step then from *rapturo* to the English word

rapture. Therefore, although it is true that the word itself does not appear in our English translation of Scripture, the sense of the word is surely there. Christians will be snatched away when the Lord descends with a shout.

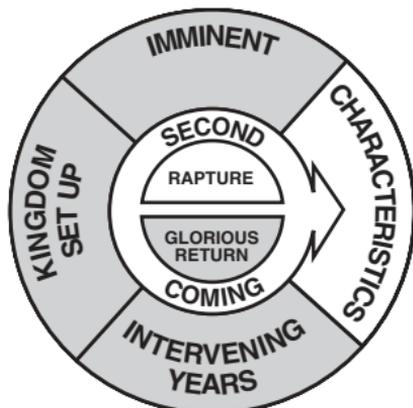
OBJECTION:
Jesus' Prophecy About Peter. Another objection to the doctrine of imminency stems from what Jesus told Peter, as recorded in John 21. He said, "When you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish" (v.18). This prophecy, which we know now indicated that Peter would be arrested and martyred, is used by some to refute the possibility of imminency. The return of Christ could not have been

imminent because Jesus would have had to wait at least until Peter had passed from the scene at an old age.

Age is such a relative term. Does this mean Peter would have to be 75 before Jesus' words would be fulfilled? In the New Testament era, lifespans were much shorter than they are now. Paul, for example, called himself "aged" when he wrote to Philemon, and he was probably in his fifties. Taking into account that Peter was already in his mid-thirties when Jesus spoke those words, it would not be very many years until he too could consider himself old.

Granted, there would have been a few years in the first century during which anyone who knew of this prediction would have known that Jesus' coming was not imminent, but that time was brief. Besides, Peter was "old" by the time Paul wrote his epistles.

NOW YOU SEE THEM, NOW YOU DON'T



Several years ago, David Copperfield astounded a national television audience by making the Statue of Liberty “disappear.” Those who watched the spectacle on TV confessed bewilderment and amazement at such a grand display of illusion. All the while, the audience knew, and Copperfield himself agreed, it was all just a trick. The Lady never left her pedestal.

How that illusion by this

master magician pales in comparison with what will occur when Jesus Christ appears to end this age and usher in the day of the Lord! No mirrors, no stage hands, and no trickery will be needed when the Savior reaches out His arms and makes millions of people—both living and dead—disappear from earth.

Here’s how Paul described the disappearance of millions into the heavens.

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

And in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 he said:

The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of

an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

From these two passages we can learn several things about the rapture.

Who will be raptured? Imagine the thrill of hearing the shout of the Lord, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. Imagine looking up and seeing Jesus with His open arms, ready to hold you for an eternity. Imagine these things, though, only if you are a Christian. In both of these passages, Paul is addressing brethren, a term that denotes fellow believers in Jesus Christ. Also, in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he mentioned that the "dead in Christ" would rise first. This

indicates that all people who trusted in Jesus from the Day of Pentecost (the first time anyone was "in Christ") until the moment of rapture—both the living and the dead—would join Jesus. This is an event solely for Christians.

Will this be a secret event? Some Bible students refer to this "catching up" of the church as a secret rapture. They claim that only Christians will hear the shouts and trumpet blasts. Whether or not this is true, this event will hardly be secret. When whole congregations of people disappear, when employees suddenly vanish, when vital public services are disrupted by mass absenteeism, people will notice. So no matter how blinded the unbelieving world may be to the events in the sky, they'll soon know that something extraordinary has occurred.

What happens to believers? A quick trip to

heaven is just the beginning of the marvelous things that will happen at the rapture. Apparently, the moment living believers are ushered into Christ's presence, they will receive their new bodies. Paul wrote, "We shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. . . . For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

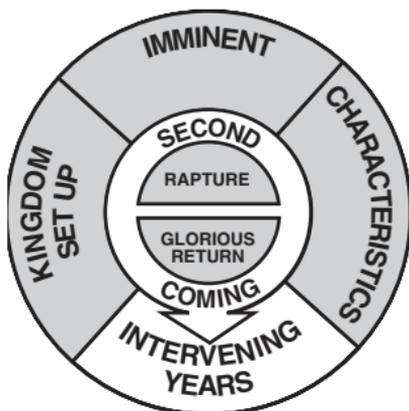
Where will believers go? Posttribulationists teach that when Jesus appears in the sky, Christians will rise to meet Him, make a U-turn, and descend to earth. Then Jesus will set up His earthly kingdom. Besides the obvious strangeness of this up-and-down scenario, this theory has another problem. It seems to contradict John 14. After Jesus had made the Upper Room announcement that He was departing, He reassured His disciples by

telling them that His departure was related to what He was doing for believers—preparing an eternal dwelling place for them. Then He told them He would be coming back to take them to that place. If Jesus does not take us to be

The rapture will hardly be secret. When whole congregations of people disappear, when employees suddenly vanish, when vital public services are disrupted by mass absenteeism, people will notice.

with Him at the rapture, then what happened to His promise of a place in His Father's house?

WORLD OF JOY; WORLD OF TERROR



The rapture will change everything. In addition to calling out the world's population of Christians, it will create a new society of people with glorified bodies far removed from the limits of earth. No longer will this blue marble have a monopoly on the populace. And just as earth and heaven will be composed of entirely opposite groups of people, so they will represent totally variant events. The two

worlds will be as different as any two societies have ever been. Let's see what will be going on in these two divergent worlds in the years that separate the two stages of Jesus' return.

A TIME OF JOY: AN AWARDS CEREMONY

Few scenes are as touching and heartwarming as the awards presentations at the Olympic games. We can all recall specific athletes and their reactions as they received their medal and then proudly turned to gaze upon their country's flag as the national anthem was played.

In a small measure, this can help us see what will transpire for the raptured believers at the event called the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Soon after Jesus has called His people together with a shout and a trumpet blast,

this presentation of rewards will begin in heaven. Christians will stand before Christ the Judge, either to be rewarded with crowns (lit. a winner's wreath) for the good things they have done for God, or to "suffer loss" for their failure or neglect.

To understand what it means to "suffer loss," think again of the Olympic athlete. The medalists earn the prize, while those who lose must step aside with the realization that they have not gained the reward. They are still members of their Olympic teams, of course, but they have suffered loss.

What, then, will be God's means of judging what was worthy of honor and what wasn't? First Corinthians 3:13-15 speaks of a trial by fire. Any works that were done with a selfish motivation will perish in the fire just as wood, hay, and stubble are consumed. But

those things that were done on earth with God's glory in mind will live on. Like gold and silver, they cannot be burned. The key elements in testing these works will be their quality and the

Christians will stand before Christ the Judge and either be rewarded with crowns for the good things they have done for God or "suffer loss" for their failure or neglect.

motivation behind them. What kind of rewards can the Christian work toward? At least five distinct crowns are mentioned in Scripture.

- An incorruptible crown

for overcoming the old nature (1 Cor. 9:25-27).

- A crown of rejoicing for being a soulwinner (1 Th. 2:19-20).
- A crown of life for enduring persecution and trials (Jas. 1:12; Rev. 2:10).
- A crown of righteousness for eagerly looking forward to Christ's return (2 Tim. 4:8).
- A crown of glory for shepherding the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:4).

The glory of the event is only beginning when all the crowns are handed out, for these rewards are not earned for personal gain. When Christians receive their crowns at the judgment seat of Christ, they will give honor to Jesus by casting them at His feet (Rev. 4:10). Imagine the scene as millions of glorified believers offer their heavenly rewards to God for His glory!

A TIME OF TERROR: ANTICHRIST AND JUDGMENT

What a contrast there will be between the best of times in heaven and the worst of times on earth! Although things may at first seem to be tolerable, after Jesus removes the Christians and the restraining power of the Holy Spirit, the situation will deteriorate quickly. Two events during this time will spell trouble, terror, and tragedy for those left behind. The first—the revealing of Antichrist—will precipitate the second—the tribulation.

Referred to as the “man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Antichrist will gain power as the final king of the restored Roman Empire. Of course, a man who achieves the measure of worldwide power that will go to Antichrist cannot do so without first conning his fellowman into following him. How he will do this is

not exactly known, but he will probably show that he can create an orderly society out of one that has been reeling in chaos. In addition, he will work miraculous wonders by the power of Satan. Yet his benevolence will soon turn to malevolence. He will fiercely persecute and attempt to slaughter all who accept Christ and would dare refuse his demand that he be worshiped (Rev. 6:9-11).

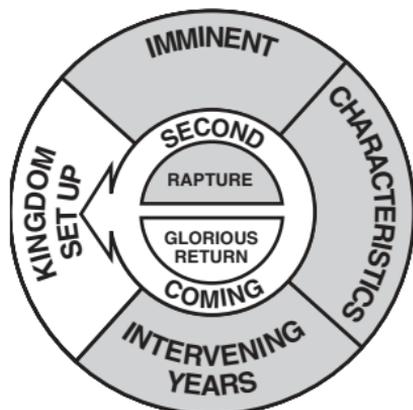
Antichrist will not be the only source of suffering during this time of tribulation. In addition, these days will be marked by great calamity that will come as a result of God's judgment and wrath (Joel 1:15; Rev. 11:18; 16:9). Amid this devastation will be the death of one quarter of the world's population (Rev. 6:8), massive earthquakes (Isa. 2:19), catastrophic fires (Isa.

24:1,3,6), and sudden destruction (1 Th. 5:3).

Antichrist will not be the only source of suffering during this time of tribulation. These days will also be marked by great calamity—the result of God's judgment and wrath.

Near the last part of the great tribulation, Antichrist will unwittingly begin setting the stage for an event on God's prophetic calendar that will be the grandest event of all time—the revelation of Jesus Christ at His glorious return.

THE KING IS BACK—TO STAY!



The tensions that headline the nightly news from the Middle East in our day do not compare with the events that will mark the final months of action during the tribulation. As the clock winds down on the reign of Antichrist, more and more countries will align together against him and do battle with him in Palestine.

At the climax of those hostilities, armies of the “king of the north” and the “king of the south” will attempt to

overrun Antichrist and his troops. Unfortunately for them and for the people of neighboring countries in the Middle East, Antichrist will lead his army to victory. As Daniel described it, “He shall enter the countries, overwhelm them, and pass through. He shall also enter the Glorious Land, and many countries shall be overthrown” (Dan. 11:40-41).

Yet all will not be calm in Antichrist’s camp. Despite his victories, he will hear rumors that new armies from the Orient are ready to attack. Angrily, he will dispatch his troops to Jerusalem. Indeed, the Eastern armies will arrive, spelling trouble for the Jewish people. These new armies will stand against the Jews in Jerusalem—just as Antichrist’s troops will. Here’s how Zechariah described it:

I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled,

and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city (Zech. 14:2).

The scene seems hopeless. The Jews have nowhere to turn as two opposing armies sweep over them. There appears to be no way out for this war-racked people.

THE WARRIOR-KING INTERVENES

Suddenly, the scene will change. The heavens will open and Jesus will return. He is portrayed as clothed in a robe dipped in blood and riding on a white horse as He appears in the air to send his white-clothed army against the armies of Antichrist (Rev. 19:11-21). Victory will be swift and complete as the beast is captured and banished to the lake of fire, and his army is soundly defeated.

This, then, is the second coming of Jesus Christ. The King of the universe, who had appeared in the air just a few years before, will have

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THE JUDGE-KING HOLDS COURT

Among Jesus' first duties as He prepares to set up His 1,000-year reign is to sit in

judgment on several groups of people. Remember that He will have already judged many when He distributed rewards to the raptured saints after they were taken up to heaven. But now there are new people to examine. In the first days after our Lord's return to earth, He will judge three groups:

1. Resurrected believers from before Pentecost, along with martyred tribulation saints (Dan. 12:1-3).

2. Jews who had gone through the tribulation (Ezek. 20:33-44). Some will be allowed to become citizens of the kingdom and some will be cast into Hades. Their destination will depend on whether they chose to accept Christ or to follow Antichrist and his revolt.

3. Gentiles (Mt. 25). What Jesus will do with Gentiles who endured the tribulation will depend on how they treated Christ's

"brethren" during those devastating years. Those who showed kindness to them showed their love for Jesus, so they will enter the kingdom. The rest will be "cast away" either because they worshiped Antichrist or because they mistreated Jews or both.

THE CREATOR-KING RE-CREATES

Shortly after Jesus' glorious return, He will transform this age-old earth, reversing some of the fallout from the curse in the Garden of Eden. These changes will allow the inhabitants of earth to enjoy a time of prosperity and happiness unparalleled in human history. His re-creation will be marked by:

Increased Productivity. Isaiah said that "the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose; it shall blossom abundantly" (Isa. 35:1-2). Evidently, new areas of land will be made

fruitful, and this new source of usable land will lead to a time of great prosperity. Even the fishing will improve (Ezek. 47:9).

Better Weather.

Notice again the words of Isaiah, who wrote, “Then He will give the rain for your seed with which you sow the ground, and bread of the increase of the earth; it will be fat and plentiful” (Isa. 30:23). Jesus’ transforming work will include changes in the climate of earth. The sun will be more radiant, and even the moon will shine brighter (v.26).

Peaceful Coexistence Of

Animals. “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together” (Isa. 11:6-7). Although we don’t know how this will affect such things as the food chain among animals, we can be

assured that His plans for this time will surely cause our lives to be more enjoyable.

THE RULER-KING REIGNS

The millennial kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ will not be a democracy. Rather it will be a benevolent dictatorship. Another way of describing it would be to call it a theocracy—a government led by God. As ruler of the earth during this time, Jesus will be a king who will “reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth” (Jer. 23:5).

As King, Jesus will do what no other leader in history has been able to do. He will govern with absolute authority, righteousness, and justice. Finally, after so many failures on the part of mankind, a utopian world will have arrived. Jesus will rule as we have always desired leaders to rule.

HELPING YOU HELP OTHERS

As you study the second coming with others, try using these questions as discussion starters. You'll find that digging into the Word will create a hunger for clear teaching and analysis of the topic.

EVIDENCE FOR AN ANY-MOMENT RETURN

1. What biblical evidence suggests that Christ's return will be in two phases?
2. Why is the distinction between Israel and the church basic to understanding prophecy?
3. How can the following conflict be resolved?
The Bible teaches that many dramatic events will precede the Lord's second coming, but it also predicts that Christ

- will come unexpectedly.
4. Why is it so important for us to live with the expectation that Christ could return at any moment? (2 Pet. 3:10-14; 1 Jn. 2:28-3:3).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RAPTURE

1. List as many characteristics as you can about the rapture of the church.
2. According to 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, what is in store for Christians who will be raptured?
3. How does Jesus' promise in John 14:1-3 that He would go to prepare a place for His followers fit into the rapture picture?

CHRIST'S RETURN AND YOU

Richard De Haan, former president and teacher of RBC Ministries, used to tell a story on himself that pictures the readiness Christians should have when they think of the rapture. When Richard and his brother Marvin were still living at home, their parents, Dr. and Mrs. M. R. De Haan would often have to go out of town for speaking engagements. The boys enjoyed the independence of being left alone—except for one thing. They detested doing the dishes.

On one such occasion, they put off sticking their hands in soapy dishwater as long as possible. They stacked the grimy plates, glasses, and silverware in the oven after each meal. Soon all the dishes were dirty and

all the spare space was filled. Then, on the night before their parents were to return, Richard and Marvin rolled up their sleeves and had a marathon dishwashing session. Although the young De Haans never got caught with their dishes dirty, Richard commented, “How ashamed we would have been if our parents had come back earlier than we expected!”

The imminent return of our Lord Jesus should lead us to a similar sentiment. How ashamed we would be if He came back and we weren’t expecting Him. Unlike our illustration, we do not know exactly when Jesus will return in the air to take His people to be with Him. As a result, we should live in a continual state of expectancy. We shouldn’t be stacking our “dirty dishes” all over; we should constantly keep our lives clean and in line with what

God expects from us.

That's not the only part of our lives that should be affected by the hope of an any-moment return of our Lord. In addition, we should

***Temporal goals
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have a sense of urgency toward those who don't know Jesus. All too often we live as if we have all the time in the world to convey the message of salvation, when in reality we don't even know if we will have the rest of the day to do so. The prospect of lost opportunities to share the

gospel should propel us into a deeper concern for the lost.

Let's look at it another way. Suppose you knew exactly when Jesus would come back. You would probably have a "To Do" list that would fill pages:

- Write letters.
- Make phone calls.
- Pay back money owed.
- Apologize for wrongs done.
- Tell neighbors about Jesus.
- Pray for unsaved family members.
- Spend more time reaching out to the lost.

And on and on the list could go. More than anything else, we would want to get everything squared away before the big day that was coming closer every second. Although we would be secure in our salvation, we would want to do all we could to further the Lord's work in the time we had remaining.

The fact that we don't

know the day and time of Jesus' return, though, shouldn't deter us from doing exactly that. We may not have the assurance that we can accomplish everything on that "To Do" list, but we should have those kinds of goals—perhaps with more urgency. Temporal goals lose some of their importance when we realize that we might not have as much time as we thought to accomplish things of eternal value.

There is another, even more important, consideration. Everyone who knows that Jesus Christ could come back at any moment must do some serious thinking. Beyond making lists of good things that need to be done, each person must make sure that he knows Jesus Christ as personal Savior. That is the single most important commitment any man, woman, or child could ever make.

After Jesus returns for His

own, those who have never accepted Him will be left behind to face a time of trouble and difficulty this world has never before seen. God's wrath will be poured out over the face of the earth. Death, destruction, deceit, and danger will reign. It's a prospect that should cause every thinking person to consider seriously the claims of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Jesus is coming back. Perhaps He will come today. Are you ready? If not, you can be. Without another second's delay, pray something like this: "Lord Jesus, I admit that I'm a sinner. I believe the Bible and what it says about You. Realizing that You gave Your life for me, that you died for my sins and arose from the dead, I am trusting You and You alone for my salvation."

That is the first and most important step in getting ready for His return, a return that may be today!

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