

THE RETURN OF CHRIST
Philippians 3:20-21
By Andy Manning

The title of this sermon is “The Return of Christ.” Today we’re going to talk about the second coming of Jesus Christ.

A few years ago, in 2011, a Bible teacher by the name of **Harold Camping** predicted that Christ would return on May 21, 2011. His ministry had advertisements everywhere, all over the country – billboards especially, and perhaps other forms as well. I remember seeing billboards even in Lafayette. Many well-meaning Christians believed him. In fact, they put so much faith in his words that many sold everything that had and used their money to get the word out. Many quit their jobs and devoted their time to getting the word out. Well, May 21 came and went, and Christ did not return. Some people lost everything they had worked for and had to start over. I even heard of one person who committed suicide when it didn’t happen. But not only that, this whole thing made Christians look silly. There they go again; those crazy Christians predicting the end of the world.

As your pastor I want to protect you from what I call end-times-mania.

I want to protect you date-setters – from those Bible teachers who seem to have it figured out when Jesus is going to come back. Because if you believe that Jesus is going to come back in six months, or one year, then that changes everything you do. It can ruin your life.

As well, I want to protect you from Bible-prophecy experts who treat the Bible like a crystal ball that explains in detail how geo-political events are going to unfold. The danger of these prophecy-experts is that their entire focus is on the future, on what will happen (according to them), and they lead their viewers to reduce Christianity to Bible-prophecy. Many Christians essentially end up neglecting the rest of the Christian life – spiritual growth, building the church, evangelism, culture engagement, politics, compassion, marriage, parenting, etc. That’s a very unhealthy way to live.

And so today, I want to give you an overview of the Bible's teaching on the return of Christ. And you're going to be surprised at how simple it really is.

ESCHATOLOGY

The return of Christ is just one part of **eschatology**, or the study of last things (the study of the end times). The Greek word **eschatos** means last, and "ology" means "the study of". The study of last things. So today we're talking about eschatology, or the end times.

One time I heard someone say, "Yesterday is history, and tomorrow is a mystery." That's true. The future is a mystery. The Bible is very clear about some things that will happen in the future, but then it is unclear about other things. And that's why there is so much disagreement when it comes to the subject of eschatology.

FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD ORDER DOCTRINES

Here's what we need to remember as we look at eschatology. Remember that it is important to categorize doctrines according to priority – as either first order, second order, or third order.

First order doctrines are those that you have to believe to be a Christian – the deity of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, the Trinity, etc.

Second order doctrines are those that we have to agree on in order to serve in the same church, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, women in leadership positions, and things like that.

But then third order doctrines are those that may be important, but they are not worth dividing over. When it comes to eschatology, the visible, bodily return of Christ is a first order doctrine. All Christians agree on that. All Christians agree that Christ is going to judge the living and the dead, and create a new heavens

and earth where we will live with Him forever. Those are first-order doctrines within eschatology.

Aside from that, things like the antichrist, the signs of the times, the rapture, the tribulation, Armageddon, the millennium – these are all third-order doctrines. We can disagree on these things and still worship and serve together.

You need to remember that when it comes to your particular views on the subject of eschatology, there are some very godly, very intelligent theologians and Bible scholars who agree with you, and some who disagree with you.

All this means that when it comes to eschatology, while it is not irrelevant by any means, there is much need for tolerance and love and acceptance of those with whom we disagree, and at the same time humility, realizing that we may be wrong. These are very difficult matters to understand in Scripture.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT THE END TIMES?

What does the Bible teach about the end times, or the last things, or the future?

The Bible teaches that Christ will return.

Let's look at **Philippians 3:20-21**. "20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself."

Paul writes that we eagerly wait for a Savior from heaven. Jesus is coming back.

This is a major theme throughout the New Testament; in fact, every book in the New Testament mentions the return of Christ except for 3 John.

Matthew 16:27 (CSB) says, "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done."

THREE WORDS FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST

There are **three main words for the second coming of Christ**. Scholars used to believe that each word referred to something different, but now most scholars have come to agree that all three words refer to the same event – the second coming of Christ.

Christ's return is called His revelation or revealing (Gr. *Apokalupsis*; 1 Cor 1:7-8); it is called His appearance (Gr. *Epiphaneia*; 2 Thess 2:8; 1 Tim 6:14); and it is called His coming (Gr. *Parousia*; Jas 5:7).

1 Corinthians 1:7 (CSB) says, “so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here the return of Christ is referred to as the revelation of Christ, or *apokalupsis*, and also “the end,” and “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2 Thessalonians 2:8 (CSB) says, “And then the lawless one will be revealed. The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will bring him to nothing at the appearance of his coming.” Here the second coming is referred to as Christ's appearance, or *epiphaneia*.

James 5:7 (CSB) says, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming.” Here the second coming is referred to as Christ's coming, or *Parousia*.

Christ's second coming is also called the end, the end of the ages, the day, the day of judgment, the day of God, and the blessed hope.

WHEN IS CHRIST COMING BACK?

The short answer: Nobody knows. **Matthew 24:36 (CSB)** says, “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone.”¹

You will often hear about Bible teachers who claim to have decoded the Bible’s prophecies and to have figured when Christ is going to return. Don’t listen to people like that. There’s a word for people like that: Cray-Crays. They’re crazy.

William Miller predicted that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. He went on to found the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

Charles Russell predicted that Christ would return in 1874; he went on to found the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Hal Lindsey wrote a best selling book called *The Late Great Planet Earth* predicting that Christ would return in 1988. He then changed the date to the year 2000.

Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer, wrote a book called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*. He actually predicted that the rapture would occur during Rosh-Hashana of that year, which is between September 11-13. He said, “Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town.” He sold 4.5 million copies of his book.” When the rapture didn’t happen, he changed the date to September 15. When that didn’t happen he changed the date to October 13. Then he changed the date to 1989 and wrote another book to prove it.

Chuck Smith predicted that the second coming would happen sometime before 1981. Then he said that the rapture would occur before the year 2000; then he said the second coming would happen in 2007. He was the founder of the Calvary Chapel denomination.

Even Jerry Falwell couldn’t resist date-setting. He predicted in 1999 that the Second Coming would happen within the next ten years.

¹ 1 Thess. 5:2 (CSB) “For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

When you start studying eschatology you will often hear the phrase “signs of the times.”

It’s funny, because that phrase is only found one time in the New Testament, and it’s not referring to future events. In Matthew 16:1 the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus for a sign from heaven. Jesus rebuked them because they knew how to interpret the weather by looking at the appearance of the sky, but they could not see the signs of the times that point to His identity and mission.

But when people talk about signs of the times they are talking about events that will indicate that Christ’s return is close. Are there any such “signs of the times”?

Most people look at the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 for signs of the times. It talks about false teachers, and false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecution, the abomination of desolation, and the gospel being preached to all nations. But many scholars believe, and I agree, that the Olivet Discourse is not about the Second Coming, but about the destruction of Jerusalem which would happen in A.D. 70. All of those events are not signs of the second coming, but signs of the destruction of Jerusalem.

For example, we know from history that A.D. 33-70 was a very scary time. There were many false prophets and false messiahs. There were many wars, earthquakes, and famines. There was much persecution – you can read about in the book of Acts. The abomination of desolation occurred in A.D. 70 when the Roman army invaded Jerusalem, entered the temple, and offered sacrifices to the emperor and their Roman gods just before they destroyed the city. And in that period of time (A.D. 33-70) the gospel was preached all over the Roman world. **Colossians 1:5-6 (CSB)** says, “... You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. It is bearing fruit and growing all over the world.” Did Paul mean that the gospel was growing in North America, in Scandinavia, in Australia, in China? No. He was talking about the Roman world. By A.D. 70 the gospel had spread all over the Roman world. So I don’t look to the

Olivet Discourse for signs of the times. I believe it is pointing to the destruction of Jerusalem, not the second coming. If you have any doubt about this, read the Olivet Discourse and notice that after Jesus predicts all of these things, He says that all of them will happen within the lifetime of that current generation.

But there are two signs of the times that the New Testament gives us. The rise of the antichrist, and the great apostasy.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 (CSB) says, “3 Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way. For that day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God’s temple, proclaiming that he himself is God.”

What is the great apostasy? An apostasy is an abandoning of the faith. This passage seems to indicate that just before Christ returns there will be a great number of professing Christians who abandon the faith; who reject Christ.

And the text seems to show that they will abandon Christianity in order to follow the antichrist, an end-times leader who will claim to be god, and he will claim that all other religions are wrong except for his, and he will be empowered by Satan to do miracles with which he is able to deceive people.

Revelation 20 seems to say that Satan will use the antichrist to gather a huge following of people who will declare war on Christians.

So the antichrist and the great apostasy seem to be the only two signs of the times.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN JESUS RETURNS?

This is where it gets really controversial. Here is what all orthodox Christians agree about. Christ will return. He will destroy His enemies. He will give believers their new glorified bodies. He will judge the living and the dead; unbelievers, Satan, and demons will be sent forever to hell. Believers will be

given their eternal rewards. And Jesus will create a new heavens and a new earth where we will live with Him forever. All Christians agree on these events, but there is a lot of disagreement as to the timing of these events.

The disagreement surrounds the millennium, a 1000-year period of time only mentioned in one chapter of the Bible – Revelation 20. Revelation 20 speaks of Christ reigning for 1,000 years. There are **four main views of the millennium**.

Pre-millennialism is the view that Christ will come back before the millennium, and he will reign on earth for 1,000 years (may or may not be literal 1,000 years), and then he will destroy the devil, create the heavens and earth, and usher in the final state.

Post-millennialism is the view that the millennial reign of Christ will be ushered in after remarkable gospel progress establishes Christ's reign on earth, not with Christ physically present but with the majority of the world obedient to him, and that the end of that 'millennium' (not literal 1,000 years) Christ will return in bodily form to reign over the new heavens and new earth forever (ESV Study Bible).

Amillennialism is the view that the millennium is the present church age in which Christ is reigning in heaven and on earth through the hearts of believers and the church. At the end of this figurative period of time (not a literal 1,000 years) Christ will return, give believers their new bodies, execute the final judgment, and create the new heavens and earth all at once.

These first three views are very old and have been held by Christians all through the history of the church. The fourth view is new. It's called **dispensationalism**. It was started in the 1800s by a man named John Darby, and then popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible. This view has become so popular that it is the only view that most Christians have ever heard.

Dispensationalism is the view that the church will be raptured out of the world, followed by seven years of tribulation, and then Christ will return, destroy the antichrist, and establish his earthly kingdom in Jerusalem for 1,000 years. During

that 1,000 years, the Jews will be restored to Palestine; many Jews will be converted; the Temple will be rebuilt; and the priesthood and sacrifices will be restored. Then at the end of 1,000 years there will be the Final Judgment, and the creation of the New Heavens and Earth. Dispensationalism also teaches that God has two different peoples – ethnic Jews, and the church – and that God has two different plans – one for the Jews, and one for the church.

I am an amillennialist. And so that's what I'm going to teach. The benefit of amillennialism is that it is the easiest view to understand. Christ comes back, and then that's it; He wraps it all up at His return. There are **five things that will happen when Jesus comes back**.

First, the rapture: Christians will rise to meet Christ in the air as He is descending. Most Christians don't realize that the idea of a secret rapture in which Christians will suddenly be taken out of the earth, and then Christ returning seven years later is a new idea, and it is only held by one of the four views of the millennium – dispensationalism. None of the other views believe this.

The amillennial view of the rapture is that Christians will rise to meet Christ in the air as He is descending. We won't be raptured out of the world; we will rise up to meet Christ as He is descending to the earth, and then continue the descent with Him.

Let's look at **1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (CSB)**. "15 For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."

Notice three things. First, Christ will descend from heaven. Second, as He is descending, we will be caught up together with him in the clouds. And third, we

will be with the Lord forever – the only way that's possible is if we descend with Him.

This is the only place in the Bible that talks about the rapture. So the idea is that Christians will rise to meet Christ in the air as He is descending, not to be taken away, but to continue the descent with Him and be with Him forever.

Second, the resurrection. When Christ comes back, He will give believers their new, glorified bodies. This is also called the glorification. Right when Christ comes back, He will give new, glorified bodies to all those Christians who have died throughout the centuries; and to those of us who are still alive Christ will transform our bodies into glorified bodies – bodies without sin, pain, or death.

Look at **Philippians 3:20-21**. “20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself.”

Third, the final victory. When Christ returns, He will destroy His enemies. When Christ returns, what will He do to the antichrist and the devil and demons? He will destroy them.

Look at **2 Thessalonians 2:8 (CSB)**. “And then the lawless one will be revealed. The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will bring him to nothing at the appearance of his coming.”

Revelation 20:7-10 says that the devil will use the antichrist to gather a huge army to destroy Christians in the battle of armagedon, but before the battle even begins Christ will destroy them and throw them into the lake of fire forever.

Fourth, the final judgment. Christ will judge the living and the dead.

Matthew 25:31-34 says, “31 When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a

shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'

Then skip down to **Matthew 25:41**. "Then he will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!'"

And then also look at **Matthew 25:46**. "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

At this time, if you are a Christian, then this is when Jesus will give you the heavenly treasures that you have stored up through your good deeds.

Matthew 16:27 (CSB) says, "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done."

Fifth, the new heavens and earth. When Christ returns, He will create a new heavens and earth where we will live with Him forever.

2 Peter 3:10-13 (CSB) says, "10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. 11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness 12 as you wait for the day of God and hasten its coming. Because of that day, the heavens will be dissolved with fire and the elements will melt with heat. 13 But based on his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."

Revelation 21:1 says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."

Many believe that we will spend eternity up in heaven, but the Bible teaches that Christ will renew creation and we will live with Him there forever and ever.

CONCLUSION

So here's what we know. Here's what all Christians agree about. Christ is coming back.

When? Nobody knows. But it could be very soon.

But when He returns, Christians will live forever with Christ, while unbelievers will live forever in hell separated from God. The rest of the details are not worth arguing over.

The important thing is to make sure you are ready for Christ's return, and to make sure that everyone you know is ready for Christ's return.