

## Eschatology Part 8

### The Christians Expectation of Christ's Return

#### Introduction: The tension involved

#### A. A Sudden, Unexpected Return of Christ

- Matt. 24:42-44 Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. " But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. " Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.
- Matt. 24:50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of,
- Matt. 25:13 "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.
- Mark 13:32-33 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. " Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.
- Luke 12:40 Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."
- 1 Cor. 16:22 O Lord, come!
- Phil. 3:20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,
- 1 Thess. 5:2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.
- Titus 2:12-13 teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, " looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,
- Heb. 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.
- Jas. 5:7-9 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See *how* the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. " You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. " Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!
- 1 Peter 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.

- 2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night,
- Rev. 22:7 "Behold, I am coming quickly!
- Rev. 22:20 "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

### Implications:

- Clearly to be a prominent part of the Christians outlook.
- Tensions Involved: "Does this mean that we should not undertake long term projects? If a scientist who is a Christian eagerly longs for Christ's return, then should he or she begin a ten year research project?" Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 1093. Should he/she plant a tree?
- Challenge of liberal theology: Jesus and Apostles expected the return in their life times and were disappointed and wrong.

### B. Passages that teach Delay:

- Matt. 24:14
  - Matt. 28:18-20 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. " Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, " teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*" Amen.
  - Acts 1:8 But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
  - Mark 14:8-9 She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. " Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."
- Matt. 24:45-51
- Matt. 25:1-13

➤ Matt. 25:14-30

- Luke 19:11 Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately.

➤ Luke 12:35-48

- Luke 18:7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?

➤ Wheat & Tares, Mustard Seed, Leaven

➤ John 21:20-23

- 2 Thess. 2:1-3 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, 'not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ' Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,

➤ 2 Peter 3

## C. Wrestling with the Tension of the Biblical Witness:

3. **Possible Solutions.** How can we reconcile the passages that seem to warn us to be ready because Christ could suddenly return, with passages that indicate that several important and visible events must take place before Christ can return? Several solutions have been proposed.

One solution is to say that Christ could not come at any time. This position is taken by Louis Berkhof, in the sentence quoted above. Just how long it would be before Christ would return depends on each person's estimate of how long it will take some of the signs to be fulfilled, such as the preaching of the gospel to all nations, the coming of the great tribulation, and the ingathering of the full number of the Jews who will be saved.

The difficulty with this view is twofold. First, it really seems to nullify the force of the warnings of Jesus that we should watch, be ready, and that he is returning at an hour we do not expect. What force is there in a warning to be ready for Christ to come at an unexpected time when we know that this coming *cannot* occur for many years? The sense of urgent expectancy of Christ's return is greatly diminished or denied altogether in this position, and that result seems quite contrary to Jesus' intention in giving these warnings.

<sup>10</sup>The Greek word translated "full inclusion" here is *plērōma*, "fullness." This future full inclusion of Israel among God's people is sometimes also called the "fullness" of Israel.

<sup>11</sup>Louis Berkhof also mentions Matt. 25:19, in which the master returned "after a long time," and Matt. 25:5, which speaks of the delay of the bridegroom's return (*Systematic Theology*, p. 697). But both passages are vague as to the exact length of time, and both would be consistent even with a delay of ten or twenty years after Jesus returned to heaven.

<sup>12</sup>I have not listed "wars and rumors of wars" and "famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matt. 24:6-7) as signs that must precede Christ's return, because they have been present throughout history, and because they are not given by Jesus as signs that immediately precede his return, but as events that come before those signs, as "the beginning of the birth-pangs" (Matt. 24:8). Nevertheless, an intensification of these things may well indicate the beginning of the last days, with other signs soon to follow.

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Second, this position seems to use these signs in a way quite opposite from the way Jesus intended them to be used. The signs are given so that, when we see them, they will intensify our expectation of Christ's return. Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). And the warnings are also given to keep believers from going astray and following false messiahs: "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. . . . And then if any one says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it" (Mark 13:5-6, 21). So the signs are given to keep Christians from being surprised by these remarkable events, to assure them that God knows them all in advance, and to keep them from following after alleged messiahs who do not come in the dramatic, visible, world-conquering way in which Jesus himself will come. But the signs are never given to make us think, "Jesus couldn't come for a few years." There is no indication that Jesus gave these signs in order to provide Christians with a reason not to be ready for his return or in order to encourage them not to expect that he could come at any time! To use the signs that will precede Christ's return in this way (as Berkhof does, for example), is to use them in a way that Jesus never intended. Therefore it does not seem convincing to say that Christ could not come at any time.

The other major solution to this problem is to say that Christ indeed could come at any time, and to reconcile the two sets of passages in various ways. (1) One way to reconcile them is to say that the New Testament talks about two distinct returns of Christ, or two second comings of Christ,<sup>13</sup> that is, a secret coming at which Christ takes Christians out of the world (a coming "for his saints"), and then, after seven years of tribulation have occurred on the earth, a visible, public, triumphant coming (a coming "with his saints") in which Christ comes to reign over the earth. During the seven-year interval all the signs that have not yet been fulfilled (the great tribulation, the false prophets with signs and wonders, the antichrist, the salvation of Israel, and the signs in the heavens) will be fulfilled, so that there is no tension at all between waiting for a coming that could occur "at any moment" and realizing that a later coming will be preceded by many signs.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with this solution is that it is hard to derive two separate comings of Christ from the passages that predict his return. However, we will not discuss this matter here, but will treat it in the next chapter, when considering the pretribulational premillennial view of Christ's return.<sup>15</sup> It should also be noted that this solution is historically quite recent, for it was unknown in the history of the church before it was proposed in the last century by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). This should alert us to the fact that this solution is not the only possible one to the tension presented by the passages quoted above.

<sup>13</sup>Those who hold to this view object to the characterizing of it as two second comings and prefer to speak of two aspects of the same second coming, but since these two comings are separated by an interval of at least seven years, it does not seem inaccurate to characterize the view as holding to two second comings.

<sup>14</sup>This view is the pre-tribulational view, often referred to

as the pre-tribulational rapture view, since those who hold this view often refer to Christ's first, secret return to take Christians out of the world as the "rapture" (from Lat. *rapiō*, "to seize, snatch, carry away"). This view is discussed in chapter 55, pp. 1112–14 and 1132–35.

<sup>15</sup>See chapter 55, pp. 1132–35, for an analysis of the pretribulational premillennial view of Christ's return.

(2) Another solution is to say that all the signs have been fulfilled, and therefore Christ in fact could return at any moment. On this view, one could look for possible fulfillments of these signs in the events of the early church, even in the first century. In some sense, it might be said, the gospel was indeed preached to all nations, false prophets arose and opposed the gospel, there was great tribulation in the persecution the church suffered at the hands of some of the Roman emperors, the man of lawlessness was in fact the emperor Nero, and the full number of the Jewish people who are to be saved has gradually come about through the history of the church, since Paul even gives himself as one example of the beginning of this ingathering of the Jewish people (Rom. 11:1). We will discuss in more detail in the following section the view that the signs preceding Christ's return might have already been fulfilled,<sup>16</sup> but here we can simply note that many people have not found convincing any view saying that they have happened, because these signs seem to them to point to much larger events than those that occurred in the first century.

(3) There is another possible way of resolving these two sets of passages. It is to say that it is unlikely but possible that the signs have already been fulfilled, and therefore we simply cannot know with certainty at any point in history whether all the signs have been fulfilled or not. This position is an attractive one because it takes seriously the primary purpose for the signs, the primary purpose for the warnings, and the fact that we are not to know when Christ will return. With regard to the signs, their primary purpose is to intensify our expectation of Christ's return. Therefore whenever we see indications of things that resemble these signs, our expectation of Christ's return will be aroused and intensified. With regard to the warnings to be ready, advocates of this position would say that Christ could return at any time (since we cannot be certain that the signs have not been fulfilled), and so we must be ready, even though it is unlikely that Christ will return at once (because it seems that there are several signs yet to be fulfilled). Finally, this position agrees that we cannot know when Christ will return, and that he is coming at an hour we do not expect.

But is it possible that these signs have been fulfilled? We can examine them one at a time. In each case our conclusion will be that it is unlikely, but possible, that the sign has been fulfilled already.

a. **The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations:** Has the gospel been preached to all nations? Probably not, since there are many language groups and tribes that have still never heard the gospel. It is unlikely, therefore, that this sign has been fulfilled. However, Paul does speak in Colossians about the worldwide spread of the gospel. He speaks of “the gospel which has come to you, as indeed *in the whole world* it is bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:5–6). He also speaks of “the gospel which you heard, *which has been preached to every creature under heaven*, and of which I, Paul, became a minister” (Col. 1:23). In these verses he certainly does not mean that every creature alive has heard the proclamation of the gospel, but that the proclamation has gone forth to the whole world and that,

in a representative sense at least, the gospel has been preached to the whole world or to all nations.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, though, it is unlikely but possible that this sign was initially fulfilled in the first century and has been fulfilled in a greater sense many times since then.

b. **Great Tribulation:** Once again, it seems likely that the language of Scripture indicates a period of suffering coming to the earth that is far greater than anything that has yet been experienced. But it must be realized that many people have understood Jesus’ warnings about great tribulation to refer to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70.<sup>18</sup> The suffering during that war was indeed terrible, and could be what was described by Jesus in predicting this tribulation. In fact, since the first century, there have been many periods of violent and intense persecution of Christians, and even in our century much of it has occurred over large portions of the globe, with Christians being horribly persecuted in the former Soviet Union, in communist China, and in Muslim countries. It would be difficult to convince some Christians in this century who have undergone decades of persecution for their faith, and have known that persecution to affect thousands of other Christians throughout large segments of the world, that such a great tribulation has certainly not yet occurred. They have longed and prayed for years for Christ to come and rescue them from the tribulation that they are enduring.

Once again, though we may think that Jesus’ words indicate the likelihood of a yet greater persecution coming in the future, it is difficult to be certain of this. It seems appropriate to conclude that it is unlikely but possible that the prediction of a great tribulation has already been fulfilled.

c. **False Christs and False Prophets:** With regard to the false christs and false prophets who will work signs and wonders, any missionary who has worked among people where witchcraft and demonic activity are rampant will readily testify that seemingly miraculous “signs and wonders” have been worked frequently by demonic power in opposition to the spread of the gospel. Certainly demonic miracles and false signs have been done for centuries, at least since the time that the magicians in Pharaoh’s court produced false signs in opposition to Moses’ miracles (Ex. 7:11; 8:7; cf. the activity of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9–11). Whatever the specific form it takes, such working of deceptive miracles is almost always accompanied by false religions, leading many people astray (leaders of such groups could be called false messiahs and false prophets). It seems likely that Jesus’ words predict a far greater manifestation of this kind of activity in the time just prior to his return, but again, it is difficult to be certain that this will be so. It is best to conclude that it is unlikely but still possible that this sign has been fulfilled already.

<sup>17</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 339, says of Jesus’ statement that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations” (Matt. 24:12), the following: “The world is *oikoumenē*, lit. ‘the inhabited area’, a standard term originally for the Greek world (as opposed to barbarians), then for the Roman Empire, and subsequently for the whole of the then known world; it is thus not so much a geographical term that must include every area and community now known

to be on earth, but rather an indication of the universal offer of the gospel to all nations, i.e., outside the confines of the Jewish community. . . In one sense Paul could claim long before A.D. 70 to have ‘fully preached the gospel’ in a large area of Asia and Europe (Rom. 15:19) and at many times since then similar claims could have been made with reference to an area far wider than the *oikoumenē* known in Jesus’ time.”

<sup>18</sup>See description of these events in France, *Matthew*, pp. 340–41, with reference to Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.512–18.

**d. Powerful Signs in the Heavens:** The occurrence of powerful signs in the heavens is the one sign that almost certainly has not yet occurred. Of course, there have been eclipses of the sun and moon, and comets have appeared, since the world began. But Jesus speaks of something far greater: “*The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken*” (Matt. 24:29). Although R. T. France attempts to explain this as symbolic language that refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and God’s judgment on it,<sup>19</sup> he must base this claim on the assertion that Isaiah 13:10 (from which Jesus’ words in Matt. 24:29 seem to be drawn) is also merely symbolic language to refer to the fall of Babylon, whereas it is more likely that both Isaiah 13:10 and Matthew 24:29 speak of a yet future literal falling of the stars and blackening of the sun and moon, something that would be a suitable prelude to the shaking of the earth and heaven and the cosmic destruction that will come after the return of Christ (see Heb. 1:10–12; 12:27; 2 Peter 3:10–11). Moreover, it is significant that this description of cosmic events in Matthew 24:29 is followed in the rest of the sentence with the description of “the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v. 30).<sup>20</sup> Given these facts, it seems unlikely that the descriptions of the falling of the stars from heaven and the darkening of the sun and moon are merely symbolic language. It is better to regard them as literal signs that will occur just before Christ’s return, and as such, they fall in a different category from the other signs, since it seems certain that they have not yet occurred. Nonetheless, they could occur very quickly—within the space of a few minutes or at most an hour or two—to be followed immediately by Christ’s return. These particular signs are not the type that would lead us to deny that Christ could return at any time.

**e. The Appearance of the Man of Lawlessness:** Many attempts have been made throughout history to identify the man of lawlessness (the “antichrist”) with historical figures who had great authority and brought havoc and devastation among people on the earth. The ancient Roman emperors Nero and Domitian, both of whom severely persecuted Christians, were thought by many to be the antichrist. (Many Roman emperors, including these two, claimed deity for themselves and demanded to be worshiped.) In more recent times Adolf Hitler was commonly thought to be the antichrist, as was Joseph Stalin. On the other hand, many Protestants since the Reformation, especially those who were persecuted by the Catholic Church, have thought that one or another of the popes was the antichrist.

But all of these identifications have proved false,<sup>21</sup> and it is likely that a yet worse “man of lawlessness” will arise on the world scene and bring unparalleled suffering and persecution, only to be destroyed by Jesus when he comes again. But the evil perpetrated by many of these other rulers has been so great that, at least while they were in power,

<sup>19</sup>France, *Matthew*, pp. 343–44.

<sup>20</sup>The difficulty in France’s position is seen in the fact that he must take this seemingly very clear prediction of Christ’s return to earth as a prediction of the destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70. He says that Matt. 24:30 speaks of “coming to God to receive vindication and authority,” and therefore indicates not Christ’s return in the flesh, but the vindication of his authority “over the Jewish establishment which has

rejected him” when the temple is destroyed in A.D. 70 (ibid., p. 344).

<sup>21</sup>However, John says, “as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18), and he speaks of “the spirit of antichrist,” which, he says, “is in the world already” (1 John 4:3). Therefore, even if these previous persecutors of the church were not the antichrist, many of them may have been precursors of the final antichrist.

it would have been difficult to be certain that the “man of lawlessness” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2 has not yet appeared.<sup>22</sup> Once again, it is unlikely but possible that this sign has been fulfilled.

**f. The Salvation of Israel:** With regard to the salvation of the fullness of Israel, again it must be said that 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 Romans 9–11 predicts this, and many have argued that no further ingathering of the Jewish people will occur beyond the kind that we have already seen through the history of the church, since Paul gives himself as a primary example of this ingathering (Rom. 11:1–2). Once again, it is unlikely but possible that this sign has already been fulfilled.

**g. Conclusion:** Except for the spectacular signs in the heavens, it is unlikely but possible that these signs have already been fulfilled. Moreover, the only sign that seems certainly not to have occurred, the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars, could occur within the space of a few minutes, and therefore it seems appropriate to say that Christ could now return at any hour of the day or night. It is therefore unlikely but certainly possible that Christ could return at any time.

But does this position do justice to the warnings that we should be ready and that Christ is coming at a time we do not expect? Is it possible to be ready for something that we think unlikely to happen in the near future? Certainly it is. Everyone who wears a seatbelt when driving, or purchases auto insurance, gets ready for an event he or she thinks to be unlikely.<sup>23</sup> In a similar way it seems possible to take seriously the warnings that Jesus could come when we are not expecting him, and nonetheless to say that the signs preceding his coming will probably yet occur in the future.

<sup>22</sup>It might be argued that Paul did not want the Thessalonian church to expect that Christ could return at any time, since he writes them “not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come” (2 Thess. 2:2). He then goes on to say, “Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2 Thess. 2:3). Someone might ask whether Paul is not reasoning as follows: you know that the man of lawlessness has not yet appeared; therefore, you know that Christ has not yet come. And Christ will not come until this man of lawlessness appears on the scene.

But it must be noted that Paul does not tell the Thessalonians that Christ could not come at anytime. He does not tell them that they should fail to be ready or fail to expect Christ’s return. He simply tells them that Christ’s return *has not already occurred*, which is something far different. And the reason he gives is not only the fact that the man of lawlessness must first appear, but also that when Christ returns he will defeat this man of lawlessness and destroy him: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and coming” (2 Thess. 2:8). It is not just that they have not

seen the man of lawlessness—they have not seen him appear and be destroyed by Jesus at his coming. The conclusion is that Christ has not come, because he has not come destroying this man of lawlessness. Yet he certainly could have come at any time, even in the context of 2 Thessalonians, and immediately destroyed the currently reigning Roman emperor (for Roman emperors regularly claimed to be God and to be worthy of worship, and John himself said that “many antichrists have come,” 1 John 2:18).

<sup>23</sup>I thank God that I have driven thirty years without a major auto accident, and I pray and expect that I will not have one, but I still buckle my seatbelt every time I get in the car. I prepare for an event that I think to be unlikely, but nonetheless possible. Similarly, I *think* that many of the signs will have yet greater fulfillment, and that it is unlikely that Jesus will return within the next few days or weeks. In fact, I am writing this book, which will not be published for many more months, on the assumption that Jesus will not have returned by then. Nonetheless, I frequently examine my heart and my life to see if there is anything of which I would be ashamed when Jesus returns, because I want to be ready for him to return at any moment, even at a moment I do not expect.



This position has positive spiritual benefits as we seek to live the Christian life in the midst of a rapidly changing world. In the ebb and flow of world history, we see from time to time events that *could be* the final fulfillment of some of these signs. They happen, and then they fade away. During the blackest days of World War II, it seemed very likely that Hitler was the antichrist. During times of persecution against the church, it can seem more likely that Christians are in the middle of the great tribulation. When we hear of earthquakes and famines and wars, it makes us wonder if the coming of Christ might not be near. Then these events fade into the background and world leaders pass off the scene, and the tide of events leading to the end of the age seems to have receded for a time. Then once again a new wave of events will break on the world scene, and once again our expectation of Christ's return is increased. With each successive "wave" of events, *we do not know* which one will be the last. And this is good, because God does not intend us to know. He simply wants us to continue to long for Christ's return and to expect that it could occur at any time. It is spiritually unhealthy for us to say that we know that these signs *have not* occurred, and it seems to stretch the bounds of credible interpretation to say that we know that these signs have occurred. But it seems to fit exactly in the middle of the New Testament approach toward Christ's return to say that *we do not know* with certainty if these events have occurred. Responsible exegesis, an expectation of Christ's sudden return, and a measure of humility in our understanding, are all three preserved in this position.

Then if Christ does return suddenly, we will not be tempted to object, saying that one or another sign has not yet occurred. We will simply be ready to welcome him when he appears. And if there is great suffering yet to come, and if we begin to see intense opposition to the gospel, a large revival among the Jewish people, remarkable progress in the preaching of the gospel through the world, and even spectacular signs in the heavens, then we will not be dismayed or lose heart, because we will remember Jesus' words, "When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

### Application:

A. All agree Christians should be watchful, discerning, awake and ready.

B. We should be eagerly awaiting Christ's return:

- Phil. 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, " who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.
- This should fill us with: Hope, Anticipation, Confidence, Boldness even in the most difficult and discouraging circumstances.
- PRAY FOR THIS