

8. The Return of the Lord Jesus Christ

Only One Return

When the lawless one has been fully revealed and the great tribulation comes to its inevitable conclusion, Christ will return in glory. Every believer is more or less convinced that Christ will return, however, there rages a debate about the time(s) and manner of this return.

We must therefore be very clear on this point: the Lord Jesus will return only *once*, at the very end of history, and his coming will mean that a new era has definitely begun. The return of the Lord will put an end to the earth as we know it and will mean the complete *restoration* of all things.

It is important to understand that the Bible speaks of only one return of the Lord. The speculations of many millennialists like LaHaye and Jenkins simply cannot stand in the light of Scripture. It is sad that many people are confused about the end of all things because of speculations. The last thing we need in the millennium with its terrible delusion is speculation and confusion.

Where Does the Bible Speak of Christ's Return?

There are many passages in the Bible where Christ's return is mentioned. We can only select a few passages, and we choose them with respect to their clarity about *one* return.

One of the most important passages in this respect is found in Acts 1 where the ascension of Christ is described. Just before Jesus is taken up into heaven, the disciples ask him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They have a typical Old Testament expectation of the last age. They believe that the messianic era

will include the delivery of the people of Israel from foreign occupation and dominion.

But the Lord answers them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Christ is about to ascend, but the time of his return and the restoration of Israel is not for his disciples to know.

After the Lord has ascended, the disciples meet two men dressed in white, who we may conclude are angels. They say to the disciples, “Men of Galilee...why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

The appearing of angels at this point should not surprise us. Angels appear at *crucial* times in the history of salvation. They appear when Christ is born (Luke 2:8-14). They appear on the day of his resurrection (Luke 24:4). And now they deliver a decisive message on the day he ascends (Acts 1:11).

Just as Christ’s birth and resurrection are one-time events, so his ascension is a single occurrence. It follows, then, that his return will happen only once, too. The key events in the history of salvation are not repeated.

Once For All

In this respect, it is helpful to consider a passage from Hebrews 10 where the Old Testament worship is contrasted with the New Testament worship. The priests of old constantly had to offer sacrifices, but of Christ’s sacrifice it is written, “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool...” (Heb 10:12-13).

Christ died once for all. His sacrifice need not and cannot be repeated. The foundation under the Romanist mass crumbles completely for it is based on the erroneous notion that Christ needs to be sacrificed *daily*. Christ died once. He also ascended once. Clearly, he remains in heaven

until the one day on which he descends. It says in Hebrews 10 that, “since that time” (i.e. his ascension and being seated at God’s right hand), our Lord *waits* for his enemies to be made into his footstool.

The verb “to wait” is not meant here in a passive sense. The Lord Jesus is not just sitting around in heaven, doing nothing. His waiting means that he *stays* there until all his enemies have been defeated and then he will return in glory. This passage in Hebrews reminds us of Psalm 110, where also the eternal priesthood and royal victory of Christ are prophesied.

There is no passage in the Bible that speaks of two returns of Christ. Even in Revelation 20, where we read about the thousand years or the millennium, there is no explicit or implicit reference to Christ coming twice. The millennium begins with the binding of Satan and ends with his release, just as Paul writes to the Thessalonians, but a first and second coming of the Lord is mentioned nowhere.

The resurrection coincides with Christ’s return in glory. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father...” (1 Cor 15:22-24). I would like to emphasize the words “when he comes.” Christ has risen long ago. All others who have died will be raised when he returns. There is only one return, as there is only one resurrection. For a further explanation of the terms “first resurrection” and “second death” as found in Revelation 20, see my book *Celebrating Salvation* to which I have referred before.

The Bible is very clear about the order of things. Christ ascended once, and he will return once at the *end* of the age. The end is when all final acts take place and Christ’s mission is fully completed. That is when Christ “hands over the kingdom to God” (1 Cor 15:24). The mission will be accomplished, Satan and death will be removed, and God will be all in all. Revelation 21:4 tells us that “the old order of things has passed away.” What has passed away does not come again. The return of Christ means the restoration of all things. This restoration happens only once because there is only one return of the Lord.

The Manner of Christ's Return

As people who are accustomed to hearing about complex space travel and the exploration of far-away planetary systems, the manner of Christ's return may seem simplistic.

First, we must note that Christ will return physically, that is, in the body with which he left. Some prefer to use the word "personally" rather than "physically" for the resurrection body is spiritual. Whatever the case may be, on Ascension Day, the angels say, "This *same* Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back..." (Acts 1:11) Christ departed with a glorified body and he will return with that body.

While he is in heaven, he does not undergo some kind of transformation. He remains the same. We have our flesh now in heaven, as we confess in Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The word "flesh" in the Bible often means the sinful flesh that succumbs to temptation. It can also mean, as it does in Lord's Day 18, the human flesh, a true human body and soul. In the case of Christ, it means the *glorified* body. It is not without reason that the apostle Paul, facing a possible death sentence, writes to the Philippians, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his *glorious* body" (Phil 3:20-21).

Christ left and will return with a glorified body. This has immense consequences for us, for we, too, will share in the glory that he has merited by the death on the cross. When Christ returns we will either be resurrected or transformed, but all will have a new body.

Second, we must note that while Christ is in heaven and when he returns, he does not change towards us in any way. He remains the same in his love and care for us. Whatever may change in the last days through the great tribulation, our Lord does not change towards us.

Romanist theology teaches that Christ after his ascent became so high and mighty that he cannot be directly approached anymore by sinful and mortal

human beings. We now have to go via Mary, his mother, and via the saints. But the Bible teaches us that we may also now directly go to the Father in Christ's name. When Christ addressed Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, he told her, "Go to my brothers and tell them: I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17) We address our heavenly God and Father in the name of our only Mediator Jesus Christ.

There will be great upheavals and terrible disasters in the final age and especially in the great tribulation, and it will become apparent that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). But we are also assured that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). We do not have to fear the coming of our great and gracious Savior. He has not changed in his great love for us.

Christ Will Return Visibly

When our Lord ascended into heaven, the angels said that he would come back in the same way in which he went. This means that he went visibly and will also return visibly. His return to earth will be seen by all. This is important because it underscores Christ's victory over all his and our enemies. The return of Christ will be a glorious event that all people must and will witness.

Christ's first coming into this world on Christmas Day went largely unnoticed. He came in true humility, even though there was at that time a manifestation of heavenly glory (for further reading on this, see my book *Celebrating Salvation*).

At his first coming, the emphasis was on suffering. Christ came to serve. The apostle Paul reminds the believers of this: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant (literally "slave"), being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:5-7). There was no glory at the manger.

It will be quite different when he returns from heaven. Paul continues this segment of the letter to the Philippians with the assurance, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11). There will be glory at the return of Christ.

The fact that he will come visibly is also specifically mentioned in Revelation 1:7, where we read, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” Notice the emphatic “every eye will see him”, which is even followed by an oath formula (the use of the “Amen”). The NIV speaks about a double affirmation, and that is an understatement.

When Christ returns in glory, it will be quite different than when he first came into the flesh. For this reason already, it is unbiblical and illogical to state that Christ will return twice. He came once in Ephrata’s fields; he returns once before the eyes of all. This decisive redemptive event cannot be repeated. There is no encore.

The fact that there is no encore is underscored by the description of the manner in which Christ returns. It says in Revelation 1 that he is coming “with the clouds.” This means that he will come from *above*, where heaven is thought to be, and it also indicates that his descent from on high will be visible to all. As we can all look up and see the clouds, so we will look up and see the Lord in his return.

Mourning at His Return

Why does he come visibly? He does so because it is his triumphal return to the earth that rejected him. He will be gloriously vindicated. It will become clear to all that he truly is the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

Notice that not everyone will be happy at his return. Every eye will see him, but not every eye will welcome him. It even says in Revelation 1 that

“all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” Why would *anyone* mourn, much less all the people of the earth?

This passage may be a reference to Zechariah 12:10, where it says, “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.” Many therefore see the “mourning” in Revelation 1:7 as a sign of widespread repentance in Israel.

We have considered the place of Israel in the teaching about the millennium and the return of Christ. For many millennialists, the repentance of Israel is seen as a key factor at the beginning of the millennium. Christ returns and Israel repents, we are told. At this point we note only that things must be kept in their proper context.

In Zechariah 12, the emphasis is different than in Revelation 1. Zechariah speaks about the house of David, while John writes about all the peoples of the earth. A *theocratic* element in Zechariah becomes a *catholic* perspective in Revelation. It would lead too far afoot to deal extensively with Zechariah 12.

Later in the book of Revelation, the element of mourning again comes to the fore. This is at the fall of Babylon, as described in Revelation 18. Many whose goal and joy in life was to serve the kingdom of man will cry out in anguish when the city of man falls.

People will say, “Woe! Woe, O great city...” (Rev 18:19). Those who will rejoice are the saints, apostles, and prophets (Rev 18:20). The rest will mourn.

The peoples of the earth will mourn when Christ returns. We can understand this because the world of sin comes to an end and will disappear. The verb “to mourn” (original: *koptomai*) used here means to engage in *public* mourning, demonstrated by hitting oneself repeatedly on the chest. Certainly, the peoples of the earth will not rejoice at Christ’s coming. For unrepentant sinners, it will be more like a funeral than a wedding feast.

It is remarkable that certain millennialists (who also tried to discern the time of Christ's return) declared that Jesus' first return was invisible. *One error always leads to another.*

Jehovah's Witnesses, who follow the teachings of Rutherford and Russell, once figured out that Jesus would return in 1874. Then the millennium would start. They also decreed that Christ would actually come into power later, in 1914, to rapture his church and destroy the kingdoms of the world.

When the year 1914 passed without visible manifestations of the Savior, the Witnesses adopted another scenario and stated that Christ had come but *invisibly*. Because of the hardness of heart of many people, Christ was discouraged from manifesting himself visibly and remained undercover. This is how the Witnesses sought to escape the folly of their own system.

The coming of the Lord never depends on people's readiness to accept him. He will come when people least expect it. And certainly he will come *visibly*, so that all will know and confess that God has highly exalted him. The Jehovah's Witnesses not only rob believers of their certainty, but, what is worse, rob Christ of his glory.

How Can the Returning Christ Be Seen Everywhere?

The above is a serious question. Someone once asked me how it can be that all resurrected people will see Christ as he returns. One person lives in Alaska, at the top of the earth, while another lives down under, in Australia. How can people from different continents and time zones witness the same event?

Logistically, it does not seem possible. What is visible during the day in China is not seen at night in Europe. How can everyone everywhere witness the return of Christ?

The Bible itself gives an answer to this question. In Matthew 24:27, we read, "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west,

so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” Lightning is visible for miles around. So will be the coming of the Lord Jesus: visible to all, wherever they live. It is a little thing for God to make the return of Christ visible to all people.

There will be other cataclysmal signs. “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (Matt 24:29). It is inconceivable that anyone would not notice that the great day has arrived. Christ’s return will be visible to all.

The Return of Christ: An Ending and a Beginning

Another reason that the return of Christ happens only once is that it marks the definite end of the old world and the wondrous beginning of the new. It is a single event because it is a monumental moment in time.

Those who teach that Christ will return twice and who haggle about the exact timing of each return fail to grasp a central biblical truth: the glorious return of Christ brings an end to the world as we know it and marks the beginning of an eternal era of peace and joy. I refer again to I Corinthians 15:24, which says, “Then the end will come...” The original indeed has “the end.” Not “an ending” but “the end” (original: *telos*). That word *telos* means the final and definitive end.

As there is only one end, so there is only one new beginning. This world will come to its end, but Christ will immediately recreate the heavens and the earth. In Revelation 21:1, we read, “*Then* I saw a new heaven and a new earth...” John did not see it a long time later, but right then. The word “new” (*kainos*) here means *totally* and radically new. It will be a matter of final restoration and complete re-creation. This, too, happens only once.

After Christ’s return and the re-creation of heaven and earth, there is no other new beginning to be expected. Christ’s return means the end of the battle, not the beginning of a new battle. It is not a shifting of scenes, but the creation of a whole new world.

Those who teach that there are two returns of Christ rob the saints of their great certainty and true hope: when Christ returns, the end of the old world will come and the new world will arrive. All this has a great impact on how we view the rapture and get ready for it.