

Christ is Coming

Bible Teaching About His Return

IT WAS once fashionable in religious circles to say that Jesus Christ would never return to the earth. There are still plenty of professing Christians who believe that. But there are now many others who have come to believe that the Second Coming is a very important event.

Christadelphians have always taught that the return of Jesus Christ to the earth is vital to the fulfilment of the purpose of God. This booklet reviews Bible teaching about the Second Coming, both the events that will lead up to that miracle and the reason for the Lord's return.

New Testament teaching

Someone has counted the New Testament references to this great event, and they number 318 occurrences! If you reflect that the number of times the word for Christian love occurs is only 115, you will begin to see the importance of this topic. Nor is it simply the case that only one or two New Testament writers refer to the matter in their writings. Treatment of the subject is widely spread.

Jesus spoke often about the kingdom of God and his Second Coming. His parables, for example, were told to those who thought the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He was like a nobleman who had to go "into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return" (Luke 19:12). More than once he spoke of the "coming of the Son of man" (e.g. Matthew 24:27,30,37,39,48; 25:27; 26:64). And when he assured his disciples of his continuing spiritual, but invisible, presence "even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20), he inferred that then he would be visibly present with them for ever.

The testimony of the apostles was equally plain. They had been clearly taught by the risen Lord who, during the forty days before his ascension into heaven, instructed them about the kingdom of God, the restored kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:3,6). It was the opening theme of his post-resurrection appearances that all the Old Testament promises were coming to their fulfilment in him (Luke 24:27). At the time of his ascension, as he was being taken up from the Mount of Olives into the clouds, God sent His angels to explain:

"Ye men of Galilee", they said to the watching apostles, "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

It is not therefore surprising that when the apostles began to teach in the streets of Jerusalem, they said that their Lord Jesus Christ was to return to the earth as king. Peter gave the lead when he boldly announced that the grave could not keep Jesus imprisoned. He referred his hearers to a statement in Psalm 110:1, used also by his Lord, to show that he had gone to heaven only until his enemies have been subdued (2:34,35). Note the authoritative use of the Old Testament.

But also note a vital point. Bible teaching is never given just for the sake of informing us what happens next. It always has a deeper intention, for we are meant to use the knowledge it confers to prepare ourselves for those coming events:

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ ... Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." (Acts 2:36,38)

It should follow that our consideration of Bible truth concerning the return of the Lord should also cause us to search our hearts.

Other New Testament writings

But what of the writings of other New Testament authors? Let us look at just one of the New Testament letters, the first written by Paul to the Thessalonians. Notice how he centres his entire message on the truth of the personal return to the earth of the Lord:

"Wait for his Son from heaven ... which delivereth us from the wrath to come." (1:10)

"What is our hope or joy? Are not ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (2:19)

"He may stablish your hearts unblameable ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." (3:13)

"The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout." (4:16)

"The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." (5:2)

"I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (5:23)

You could try extending this investigation, if you wish. The emphasis on the Lord's coming continues in all the New Testament letters, but it is always related to practical Christian living. Because the Lord is coming again, there were matters in their lives that required attention! And it is so for us.

Old Testament teaching

The same person who counted 318 references in the New Testament extended the search to the Old Testament, and discovered 1,527 such references to an event in God's purpose which can be no other than the coming of Christ as king. Let it be clear that the exact number is unimportant; there is always room for some difference of opinion about the occasional passage. But it is perhaps startling to some readers to consider that there could be five times as many references to the Second Coming in a part of the Bible which has suffered widely from neglect over the years.

The fact of the matter is this: the New Testament can only be understood once the Old Testament has also been studied. The two Testaments belong together as interdependent parts of God's revealed truth. What the Old Testament foretells the New Testament fulfils, in part. But a very large amount of Old Testament prophecy remains unfulfilled.

Consider these promises of a king who will reign over God's kingdom on earth, and ask yourself whether they have ever been fulfilled:

Genesis: "Thy seed (a descendant of Abraham) shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." (22:17,18; see Acts 3:25; Galatians 3:16)

2 Samuel: "And when thy days (David) be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed (descendant) after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house (a temple) for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever." (7:12,13)

Psalms: "The Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." (2:7,8; see Acts 4:25,26)

"He (the promised king) ... shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." (72:6-8)

Isaiah: "It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house (His temple) shall be established in the top of the mountains (at Jerusalem) ... and all nations shall flow unto it ... for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations." (2:2-4)

"Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever." (9:7)

Jeremiah: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch (descendant), and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is the name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness." (23:5,6)

The kingdom of God

Many times God has promised that He will rule the earth. What man has failed time and again to achieve, God will establish. The king will be a descendant of both Abraham and David (see Matthew 1:1). He will rule from Jerusalem, on David's throne (see Luke 1:31-33). His kingdom will be one of justice and righteousness; it will involve Divine education, temple worship, and the exercise of kingly power to establish peace on earth (see Revelation 11:15-18).

The kingdom of God was once before established on earth. King David and his descendants reigned upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord (1 Chronicles 28:5). There was nothing special about the throne itself. The Divine appointment was what mattered and when king after king had neglected God's law, He brought that arrangement to an end. But even when the prophet Ezekiel announced the end of the kingdom to King Zedekiah (in 21:25-27), he promised that God would restore the kingdom on earth when he should "come whose right it is".

The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth has therefore to be understood against that powerful Old Testament background. When Jesus began his public ministry by announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15), he was saying to those who knew the Old Testament promises that he was the promised king. But Jesus had first come to achieve personal righteousness, and to make it possible for others to become right with God.

It is now possible for us to find peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins, by association with the saving work of the Lord Jesus. First we have to understand the Gospel, including Bible teaching about the work and person of the Lord Jesus, and

the kingdom over which he is now the king. Then we have to be baptized as believing adults into his saving name (see Acts 8:12).

Behold your king!

But what is the Second Coming of the Lord going to be like? For example, would it be possible to miss it altogether and not even be aware that it had occurred? Will it be visible or invisible? Will Jesus be there in person or merely a spiritual presence? And will he come to the earth or only towards the earth?

Jesus Christ rose bodily from the grave. He was not an invisible spirit creature but one who could be seen, handled and held (1 John 1:1; Luke 24:39,40). His body was marked by the evidence of his suffering on the cross. Yet he was no longer subject to the limitations of human existence. He could come and go despite locked doors, and on Mount Olivet he ascended bodily to heaven, defying the law of gravity. The disciples had seen him go; he would return visibly. As the angel later said: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him" (Revelation 1:7). Or as Zechariah the Old Testament prophet had predicted, long before the crucifixion, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced and they shall mourn for him" (12:10).

So it will not do to say that only those who look with faith will see the Lord. Some will look, see, and mourn (Revelation 1:7). Nor will it do to say that Jesus will come invisibly, for the Lord himself warned:

"Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs and false prophets ..." (Matthew 24:23,24)

Nor will it do to argue that the Bible talks of the presence of the Lord, meaning that it will be an invisible one. The New Testament also talks about the revelation of the Lord, using a word that means uncovering or manifesting. In fact, the presence (Greek: *parousia*) of the Lord turns out to be an especially suitable term. One of the most authoritative Greek lexicons available says of the word:

"It became the official term for a visit of a person of high rank, especially of kings and emperors visiting a province." (Arndt and Gingrich)

It is such a visit by a king that the scriptures foretell. The crowds who welcomed King Jesus into Jerusalem, when he sat astride a donkey and they threw coats and palm branches before him, shouted out greetings that referred right back to the promises of God: "Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:10). Matthew comments that the rejoicing was a foretaste of what had been forecast by Zechariah the prophet, when he wrote, "Behold, thy King cometh unto thee".

Now if the initial royal visit was attended by such joy and rejoicing, consider what the next one will be like! The prophet had declared:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation ... and he shall speak peace unto the heathen; and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth." (Zechariah 9:9,10)

Dual fulfilment

This scripture illustrates a widely used feature of Bible prophecy: its joint short and long-term character. Jerusalem rejoiced at the kingly coming of Jesus – "lowly and

riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass" – just as the prophet had said. But their joy was short-lived, for he did not then go on to establish worldwide peace, or commence to rule from Jerusalem over a kingdom that was to last for ever. Jesus completed enough of the prophecy at that time to demonstrate that he was the Coming One, and to give us confidence that he will return to complete the promised transformation of the earth. Zechariah compressed the two comings in such a way that there appeared to be no interval between them. This has led some people to argue that the kingdom will never come, because, they say, even Jesus expected it in the first century, or at most shortly afterwards. It has thus been dismissed by some as an early Christian hope, which has now been superseded by a superior understanding. But when all the scriptures are studied carefully, it becomes clear that the coming of Jesus was not to occur immediately after his ascension to heaven.

The day and the hour

Any attempt to show that Jesus was mistaken about the time of his coming is doomed to failure. He clearly stated, more than once, that he did not know:

"Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only." (Matthew 24:36)

As he later said, this was something that the Father had reserved within His own authority (Acts 1:7). But Jesus did know that some long time would elapse before his Second Coming. He told parables to indicate that his coming would not "immediately appear" (Luke 19:11), that it would be "after a long time" (Matthew 25:19), and that there might be some delay for those who were waiting (25:5). Like their Lord, his followers were to appreciate that they could "not know what hour" he would come.

The apostles also acknowledged that they could not know the precise time of the great event for which they waited. Peter warned about people who would scoff, as so many have, at the "promise of his coming" (2 Peter 3:4). Indeed he poured scorn on their faithlessness, what he called "wilful ignorance" – people believing what they wanted to believe, regardless of the evidence. And Paul was in no doubt either, for he went on record as saying:

"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:1,2)

Can you complete that quotation? It holds the key to two vital matters concerning the early return of the king. Notice first what the verse above says. There would be general indications available – what Paul calls "times and seasons" – which would help keep the believers prepared. And the verse continues:

"... the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night."

When it happens the Lord's coming will be swift, sudden and unexpected. No-one expects thieves to strike. But they often succeed because people overlook the dangers. It is also the case that speed is vital to a successful robbery, which is why the figure is used by Jesus (Matthew 24:43), Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:2), and Peter (2 Peter 3:10), to emphasise the vital point. We must be on our guard, watchful, prepared, vigilant. The Lord could come at any time! He will come when we least expect him!

The times and seasons

That is why when Jesus explained what was to happen before his return, he very carefully emphasised the need for watchfulness. Sitting with his disciples one day on the Mount of Olives, from where he would later ascend to heaven, he gave them some general indications of what was to happen prior to his "coming and the end of the world" (Matthew 24:3). This prophecy presents a fascinating challenge, for it combines a short-term prediction about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, with a long-term forecast of world events.

A list of the predicted events in the three Gospel accounts (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), which does not claim to be a structured sequence of prophetic events, shows the following:

The rise of false Christianity and false Christs.

The persecution of true Christians.

Wars and rumours of wars, nation against nation.

Earthquakes, famines and pestilences.

Jerusalem surrounded by armies.

The Jewish nation dispersed.

Jerusalem in non-Jewish occupation.

Tribulation and distress.

Signs in the sun, moon and stars.

The powers of heaven shaken.

Notice how believers are warned about the rise and growth of false Christianity. It is the Lord's first concern. His words were fulfilled by the rapid development of wrong teaching in New Testament times (e.g. Acts 20:29), and are being fulfilled again at the close of this age. Elsewhere the message is that the true believers will comprise a very small remnant, compared with those who hold a distorted form of Christianity.

Antichrist

The apostles also warn about this development. Paul was emphatic that there would be manifestations of false Christianity, for he prophesied that the Day of the Lord:

"shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped." (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4)

The Apostle Paul describes the man of sin in language that refers back to the prophet Daniel, who accurately foretold the rise and fall of four empires that exercised power in the Middle East. He traced the development from them to a false religious system, involving the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy, that is opposed to Christ and his true followers. This is counterfeit Christianity, and the Apostle Paul describes it as "the mystery of iniquity" which was already at work, and "a strong delusion".

The other thread of teaching in the Lord's catalogue of future events concerned trouble. There were to be wars and rumours of wars, both within and between

nations; there would be natural disasters and widespread hardship, earthquakes, famines and epidemics; terrors and fearful sights would be in the heavens, causing much fear and distress. People would not know which way to turn for fear of what was about to happen on earth.

To some extent these problems are as old as man. The tendency to war against one another is evident even in the first book of the Bible, and famine features there too. But even within Bible history the atrocities of which man is capable become increasingly ugly, and since then even more widespread horrors have been seen. The powers now available to mankind are enough to make any sane person fear for the future. More than ever before, these words of Jesus are coming true:

“There shall be ... upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:25-27)

Tribulation

The reference to the sea and waves roaring, like others to signs in the sun, moon and stars, may be either symbolic or literal or some combination of both. The prophet Isaiah, for example, wrote about the wicked being “like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt” (57:20). Jesus may have been drawing upon such imagery to describe a world that was full of trouble because it was full of wickedness. He may also have been teaching us to look out for some upheaval of the physical order, like tidal waves, which would also be an indication of the end of the age. Certainly there have been many earthquakes and natural disasters over the past few years, all over the world. The Apostle Paul described the whole world order as groaning and travailing in pain (Romans 8:22), like a woman waiting to be delivered of a child. It is thus evident that our present troubles are the birthpangs of a new and better world, soon to begin.

In both Testaments we are told that the tribulation that will come at the end of human government is the final herald of the Second Coming. It will be:

“a time of trouble such as never was” (Daniel 12:1);

“the time of Jacob’s (Israel’s) trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7);

“great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21).

Will the believers waiting for their Lord have to suffer this trouble, or will they be spared? The likelihood is that present-day believers will live through this time of trouble, indeed that they have already begun to do so. Jesus promised that for the elect’s sake that time would be shortened (Mark 13:20). But those who finally stand approved before the Judge are those “which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

As that trouble increases, and God pours out His wrath upon the earth, there are indications that true believers will be sheltered from that outpouring. Isaiah describes the great shake-up of human society when God intervenes:

"Come, my people, enter into thy chambers... hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast. For, behold, the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity." (24:18-23, 26:20,21)

We must therefore consider carefully what Jesus said:

"When these things (the signs of which he spoke) begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh." (Luke 21:28)

We should not wait until total disaster has struck, and there is no escape route left. It is better to learn the lesson now, that this is the time immediately before the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The nation of sign

There is one great sign which removes all doubt concerning his imminent return. The nation of Israel is back occupying the land promised by God. The history of the Jewish nation has been a guide throughout the ages to the outworking of God's purposes. They were called as a special people, because of the great promises that had been made to their Fathers. They were given the right to occupy the land we now know as Israel, conditional upon their faithful obedience to God. They were the people whose kings occupied the throne of God's kingdom on earth.

They forfeited these rights when, after centuries of indifference, they not only refused to accept the Lord Jesus as their Messiah, but were involved, with the Romans, in effecting his death by crucifixion. Because of that rejection, Jerusalem was overthrown. Throughout the intervening centuries Jews have wandered the earth as a stateless people, hated and persecuted almost everywhere they went, just as scripture said they would be.

But scripture also forecast a better future for this nation of sign, not because they would change their behaviour and live to deserve better treatment, but because God would take pity on their plight and act to redeem them. He would remember the promises made of old to the Fathers and act to vindicate His great name. At the time of the end they would be brought back from the nations and once more be settled in their own land – the land of promise! So the prophets said:

Isaiah: "The remnant shall return ... the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion." (10:21; 35:10)

Jeremiah: "He that scattered Israel will gather him." (31:10)

Ezekiel: "I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries ... then shall they dwell in their land ... yea, they shall dwell with confidence." (11:17; 28:25,26)

Zechariah: "I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem." (8:8)

And so it came to pass. After nearly two thousand years of dispersion and down-treading, in 1948 the State of Israel was born by the decree of the United Nations, and in 1967 the whole of Jerusalem was repossessed by Jews. It had taken all that time for the words of Jesus to be fulfilled:

"They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." (Luke 21:24)

Everything now indicates that the Times of the Gentiles are rapidly drawing to a close and the Time of the Kingdom of God is once more at hand. The bringing together of troublous times and the return of the Jews to the land removes any doubt. Shortly King Jesus will return to Jerusalem as world ruler, to reign over Israel and over all nations. Of all the available signs of the times given by Jesus and the prophets, the establishment of Israel – the nation of sign – is the clearest witness that the end is now at hand.

The “rapture”

What then awaits the faithful follower of Jesus? Can he expect to go to heaven with the Lord at his return? Hardly, for the Lord is coming to reign on earth, from Jerusalem. An elaborate scheme has been devised by some Bible readers which requires not one coming but two. According to this, Christ’s coming would be first for the Church only and would be a secret “rapture”. He would come again with the Church, for the world, and this would be visible and public. In some versions of this theory the interval between the two comings is very small; in others as much as seven years is thought to separate the two events.

There is very little scripture that can be used to attempt to support these theories, for whilst there are some indications that a separation will occur between companions when Jesus comes (Luke 17:34-36), the main teaching about the circumstances of the return is that given in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians:

“The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (4:16,17)

The phrase caught up is that from which the whole idea of a rapture has evolved; and the links with a supposed seven-year period of tribulation have been achieved by the unsatisfactory interpretation of other scriptures, especially from the Revelation. Clearly there is to be a catching away of true believers, both of the living and the resurrected dead, “to meet the Lord in the air”. They are to form a welcoming party who, with the angels who attend his coming, will make up his entourage. But they go to meet him, not he them. And their destination is made clear in the scriptures already considered: the Lord and his followers are bound for Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4), “the city of the great King” (Matthew 5:35).

The Lord will come!

In these dying moments of human government, the powers of heaven will be shaken as men’s hearts fail them for fear. The nations will be engaged in a battle around Jerusalem. Then the Lord will come! Unexpectedly, suddenly, in great power and glory, bringing salvation for those who have faithfully waited and prepared for this central event in their lives; but bringing judgement upon all those who have wilfully ignored the faithful promises and gracious invitation of God:

“The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power: when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe.” (2 Thessalonians 1:9,10)

It is vital therefore that we believe what the Bible so clearly promises. We cannot simply "wait and see", because Jesus is coming to save those who already believe, not to give reasons for faith to those who have had clear evidence, but no inclination for the things of God.

When the Lord spoke to his followers about his eventual return to earth, he focused their attention more on the consequences of his coming than on the sequence of events itself. To this day we cannot know for sure when Jesus will come. But we know perfectly clearly that when he comes he will call us to account, and ask us how we spent our lives on the eve of his return:

"Take heed ... be not led astray ... be not troubled ... take heed to yourselves ... preach the gospel ... be not anxious ... endure to the end ... flee ... pray ... believe not false prophets ... take heed ... look up and lift up your heads ... take heed to yourselves ... watch ... be ready." (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21)

The apostles make the very same points as they reflect on the nearness of the Lord's return:

"What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness ... be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Peter 3:11-14)

"Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:12,13)

"When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man who has this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." (1 John 3:2,3)

Take heed to yourselves

The Bible is our guidebook to the future, just as it is our handbook for the present. It alone will show us what God wants us to do. From it we can learn God's purpose and promises. The first thing is to understand and believe those things that are true. We shall then come to appreciate the need for obedience to God, starting with baptism. And thus we shall be doing what Jesus commanded.

The coming kingdom of God on earth will transform human experience. We need to learn to live now in harmony with our Creator. The Lord is at hand! It is now an urgent matter for us all to examine our lives, so that we are properly prepared for the coming of the king.

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