

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN CHRIST RETURNS?

There have been many debates in the history of the church over questions regarding the future. Specifically, the debates have centered on the return of Christ, the millennium (or “thousand years”), the final judgment, the eternal punishment of unbelievers and eternal reward of believers, and life with God in the new heaven and new earth. Studies of these events are called studies of the “last things,” or “eschatology” (from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning “last”).

The Return of Christ. Jesus told his disciples that he would return to earth a second time: “I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:3). While it is clear from this and other passages (such as Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:16; Heb. 9:28; 2 Peter 3:10; 1 John 3:2) that Jesus himself will return, these passages also make it clear that “no one knows” (Mark 13:32) the exact time of that return, for “the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Mt. 24:44). Although no one can know the time of Christ’s return, all believers should respond as John did in Rev. 22:20 when he heard Christ say, “Surely I am coming soon.” John’s response was “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

The Timing of the Return. While the verses cited above are clear that Christ’s return will come at a time no one knows, other passages in the Bible seem to suggest that certain signs will precede the time of Christ’s return. These signs, as shown through the verses that support them, are as follows:

- “The gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mk. 13:10; see also Mt. 24:14).
- “There will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord has not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days” (Mk. 13:19-20).
- “False christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect” (Mk. 13:22; see also Mt. 24:23-24).
- “After that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mk. 13:24-25; see also Mt. 24:29-30 and Lk. 21:25-27).
- “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:1, 3-4).
- “I want you to understand this mystery . . . all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25-26).

Jesus did not say these signs were given so that people would think that since they haven’t seen the signs, Christ couldn’t return. Instead, they were given to intensify an expectation of Christ’s return: “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21:28). But the mentioning of these signs raises two legitimate questions: Have any of these signs occurred? And, if they haven’t all occurred, could Christ really return at any moment? The answers to these questions vary throughout the church. Some believe these signs haven’t occurred and therefore Christ won’t return at any moment. But Jesus encouraged his disciples, “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come” (Mk. 13:33). A view that tells Christians that Christ cannot return soon seems to nullify the force of Christ’s encouragement.

Others believe that Christ could indeed come at any time, and they deal with the fulfillment of the signs in three distinct ways. (1) Some argue that there will be two separate comings of Christ: a secret return and a public return. But the passages that speak of his return don’t seem to support two separate returns (see discussion below). (2) Others argue that all the signs were already fulfilled in

the early history of the church and that therefore Christ could really return at any moment. But some of the signs (for example, the great tribulation, the salvation of Israel, the appearance of the “man of lawlessness,” and the stars falling from heaven) do not seem to have been fulfilled in any clear or evident way at the time of the early church. (3) Still others argue that it is unlikely but possible that the signs have been fulfilled and that therefore Christ could return at any moment.

In light of the ambiguity related to the fulfillment of these signs, it seems that the last view is the most reasonable. This view allows us to expect that the signs preceding Christ’s return will probably still happen in the future, but since we are somewhat unsure about that, we can still be ready for Christ to suddenly return any day. (On this view, being ready for Christ’s return is somewhat similar to wearing a seatbelt in a car: you do not think that you will get in an accident, but you still wear the seatbelt because you might be wrong.)

The Events at the Return. Much of the disagreement within the church regarding Jesus’ return deals directly with the interpretation of one Bible passage: Revelation 20:1 – 6. Specifically, the disagreement has to do with the thousand years that John mentions in Revelation 20:4 – 5 when he writes that certain people “came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” Many Christians term this thousand-year stage “the millennium,” and they usually take one of three views on the time and nature of this period.

View 1 — *Amillennial*: The millennium is now, and when it ends, Jesus will return. The simplest view of the millennium is that Rev.20:1-6 describes not a future time but the present church age. Christians who hold to this view believe that many or all of the previously mentioned signs occurred early on in church history and that Christ could really return at any moment. According to this view, when John writes that “they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4), he means that Christians who have already died are today reigning with Christ in a spiritual sense (see Mt.28:18 where Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” and Eph. 2:6 where it says that we are seated with Christ “in the heavenly places”). Since the events in Rev. 20 are currently being fulfilled in the church, the thousand-year period John mentions in Rev. 20:4-5 is a figure of speech for a long period of time — namely, the entire church age from Pentecost until Christ’s return.

This view would say that Satan, who in Rev.20:2-3 is said to be “bound” and sealed in a pit “so that he might not deceive the nations any longer,” had his power significantly reduced during Christ’s ministry on earth (Mt.12:28 – 29; Lk.10:18). The fact that someone like Paul could teach all Gentile nations about “the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31) is a demonstration that Satan has been “bound” so that he does not “deceive the nations any longer.”

View 2 — *Postmillennial*: The millennium will come gradually, and Jesus will return after the millennium. Other Christians believe Jesus will return after the 1,000 years mentioned in Rev. 20:4-5. As the church grows and Christians continue to have a greater and greater influence, society will begin to function more and more in line with God’s standards. Gradually, a “millennial age” of great peace and righteousness (not necessarily a literal one thousand years) will come about on the earth. Christ will not physically reign on earth during this period; instead, Christians will have a tremendous influence in society, and Christ’s reign will come about through this influence of Christians. People who support this view emphasize verses that show how the kingdom of God grows quietly but steadily from a tiny start to a huge end. For example, there is the parable of the mustard seed that became a great tree (Mt.13:31-32) and Jesus’ statement that “the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened”

(Mt.13:33). Postmillennialists also emphasize Jesus' statement, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt.28:18), and they expect that as a result the kingdom of God will continue to advance with great power throughout the earth until there is a millennial kingdom on the earth.

According to this view, Jesus will return at the end of this millennial age. Then there will be one resurrection of both believers and unbelievers. Those who believe in him will go to heaven; those who don't will face the final judgment and eternal condemnation. At that time, the new heavens and new earth will begin and remain for eternity, and Christ will be present on earth to reign in bodily form. This view is called the postmillennial view because Christ's return and reign will occur after a future millennium.

View 3 — *Premillennial*: The millennium will come suddenly, and Jesus will return before the millennium. Finally, there are Christians who believe Jesus will return before the events of Revelation 20:1 – 10. This is called the premillennial view because it holds that Christ will return before the millennium. This view also holds that prior to Jesus' return there will be a time of great suffering on the earth, sometimes called the great tribulation (see Matt. 24:21 – 31).

According to the premillennial view, Christ will return and physically reign on earth for the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4 – 5 (not necessarily a literal one thousand years). When Christ returns to begin his millennial reign, all who have believed in him will be raised from the dead to reign with him. This is the meaning of Revelation 20:4, "They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

During that millennium, Satan and his demons will be completely removed from all influence on the earth, as described in Revelation 20:1 – 3: Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

Because Jesus will reign in peace and righteousness over the earth, many people on the earth will turn to him for their salvation. But there will still be unbelievers on the earth just as there were some who "doubted" after they had seen Jesus in his resurrected body (Matt. 28:17). Some will not believe because genuine faith is something that must come from an internally changed heart and cannot be compelled even by overwhelming outward evidence and arguments. Even with no influence from Satan or demons at all on the earth, there will still be people who do evil, showing that our sin is not really caused by Satan but is the responsibility of the human beings who do the sin.

In this premillennial view, after the 1,000-year reign of Christ on the earth, the final judgment will occur, and those who believe in Jesus will continue to reign with him for eternity; those who rejected him will be condemned for eternity. The Bible seems to support this position more than the others. It is an easy and natural reading of Rev.20:1-6, and many have understood it in this way since the early church. In addition, Old Testament passages such as Is. 65:20 indicate a time in the future that is very different from this age yet when sin and death are not removed: "No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed." Other passages, such as Ps.72:8-14; Is.11:2-9; Zech. 14:6-21; 1 Cor. 15:24; and Rev. 2:27; 12:5; and 19:15, seem to indicate a period of time when Christ's reign over all things is seen in a greater way but sin and evil still exist on the earth. This fits a picture of Christ's future millennial reign.

In addition, a future but not final reign of Christ is supported by passages such as Rev. 2:26-27 that indicate a ruling with “a rod of iron” over a rebellious people. This type of rule is indicative of a premillennial reign of Christ. This reign seems to be well supported by other New Testament passages that affirm that believers in Jesus will reign over the earth with him sometime in the future (Lk. 19:17, 19; 1 Cor. 6:3; Rev. 2:26 – 27; 3:21).

One variation on the premillennial view has had many followers in the United States. Since it holds that Christ will come back before the great “tribulation” mentioned in Mt. 24:21-31, this view is called a pretribulational premillennial view. Those who hold this view believe that Christ will actually return twice: once in a secret return to suddenly take Christians out of the world and then seven years later in a second, public return when he will bring Christians back to earth to reign with him for the thousand years mentioned in Rev. 20:4-5. During the seven years when Christ and Christians are absent from the earth, there will be a time of great tribulation when the vast majority of Jewish people will trust in Christ as their Messiah and preach the gospel to those left on earth.

The difficulty with this position is that it is hard to find any passages that speak about a secret return of Christ. The passages that speak of Christ’s return always speak of it in very visible, public terms, such as 1 Thess. 4:16: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.”

The Victorious King It is perhaps not surprising that Christians have differences over their views of the future. This is due in part to the subject matter: the future is somewhat unclear to us since it has not yet happened! But regardless of the timing of Christ’s return, all Christians believe that the final victory of Christ over Satan (described in Rev. 20:7 – 10) will occur in the future. They believe that Satan “will be released from his prison” (Rev. 20:7) to gather together for battle those he has deceived. At that final battle, Jesus will defeat Satan and his army once and for all. At the end of the battle, Satan will be “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur” where he “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). At the end of the final battle, Jesus, the victorious king, will execute his final judgment. And then, he will reign forever and ever.

As Jesus told John, this is something in which Christians can take great hope, because his words “are trustworthy and true” (Rev. 22:6). Jesus said, “I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done” (Rev. 22:12). The response of those who are believers in Jesus, regardless of their interpretation of Revelation 20:1 – 6, should be like John’s: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

Questions for Review and Application?

1. What are some of the things about eschatology that all Christians should agree on? Which of those things gives you the greatest joy?
2. What are some issues relating to eschatology that Christians differ on? How should Christians deal with these differences?
3. Take a moment to read Revelation 22:12. In response to reading that, take a moment to pray John’s prayer as found in Revelation 22:20.