

**HIS
COMING
APPEARING**

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Published by
New Creation Publications, Inc

First published July 1983

1983 Grant Thorpe
ISBN 0 949851 55 8

Cover Design by Glenys Murdoch

Typeset by Kay Robinson

Printed by John Skewes

Wholly set and printed at
New Creation Publications Inc.
PO. Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia, 5051

This study is a selective review of teaching on the return of Christ, focusing attention on some matters needful to the maintaining of a true hope at the present time.

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NO GOAL WITHOUT INTERVENTION BY CHRIST

In one sense, we have become accustomed to crises in the twentieth century—but mostly to do with the outbreak of evil. With regard to what is good, most still treasure evolutionary ideas that mankind will come to its goal by natural human development.

For example, socialism may or may not be the most responsible form of human government, but should divest itself of any idea that it will lead any country, or the world, to lasting peace and justice. And not because that is a bad aspiration, but because by now it ought to be clear that there are more difficulties in the way than can be overcome by the world, or the church, as they are presently constituted. Jesus spoke about the gradual and pervasive growth of the kingdom, but never outside of the context of a final and complete ‘reaping of the harvest’ or ‘separating sheep from goats’, at the time of his own ‘coming in power and glory’. (See Matthew 13:24-33, 36-43, 24:30-31, 25:31-34, Luke 19:11-27)

Faithful people were to labour with a view to improving the end result, but the end result would not naturally follow or be acknowledged as having true worth apart from the return of the king. Warnings were given to those who sought the approval of men in the present—as distinct from the approval of God—which, in one sense, one must wait for until the final day (Matthew 6:1-6, 23:1-12, John 5:44).

Jesus’ teaching about his return was not by way of an addendum to his teaching, but integral to it. If his basic message was about the kingdom, then there could be no finale to his work without his return. Only then would the efficacy of his own labours be revealed to all. Only then would the diverse strands of his plan be seen in their essential unity. Only then would the integrity and usefulness of his

people be revealed.

An essential part of his return would be for judgement, both with a view to rewards and punishments. This judgement was not seen as incidental but vital to the authentication of the kingdom. Only in the judgement is God vindicated as the one who can bring his promise and plan to fruition; therefore it had, and must continue to be, part of the proclamation so as to command the respect and allegiance of those who hear it (see Matthew 13:41-43, 16:27, John 5:22 24, 28-29, 6:39-40, I Corinthians 4:5, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 2 Timothy 4:1). A god who cannot complete what he began must be 'propped up', helped through his inadequacies, and pitied, but certainly not worshipped }

It was a very natural thing for the disciples to ask Christ, 'What will be the sign of your coming?' (Matthew 24:1-3). To them, this fact was established and could be the basis of warm assurances (John 14:13, 17:24). Finally, his claim to be returning in power sealed his guilt in the eyes of the Jewish authorities and led naturally to his death (Matthew 26:63-66). In other terms, Jesus was not crucified for what he had accomplished to that point, but for what he claimed to be about in both of his comings.

The Old Testament had frequent references to 'the day of the Lord' as a great day when God's truth, and his servants, would be vindicated: a day of judgement (eg. Amos 5:18ff.). in the New Testament, this is generally seen as the day of Christ, sometimes stated as such and sometimes implied (see 1 Corinthians 1:8, Philippians 1:6, 10, 2:16, I Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 2 Peter 3: 10). For New Testament believers, the events of that Day were of major importance.

Other words are used to describe his return. *Parousia* means 'presence' or 'arrival'. *Epiphania* means 'appearance'. (Both of these words have some association in religious usage with the visit or manifestation of a deity.) *Apokalupsis* means 'disclosure'. (*Erchomai*, the general word meaning 'to come' or 'to arrive', was used by Christ particularly in his Olivet discourse.)

This 'day of the Lord' or arrival, appearance, or disclosure, is uniquely Christ's day—his marriage day, in fact (Revelation 19:7). He will come with a shout (as of command in battle). It is not certain that the shout is his own, but there seems little reason to doubt it (1 Thessalonians 4:16, with John 5:28-29). This is the day on which he will culminate the victory over all his enemies, which in fact are nothing but our enemies (Revelation 11:17-18). This is the day for which all other things have been subservient (Hebrews 12:2), the ultimate day of joy on which he will be able to hand the kingdom to his Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). This is the day on which both the goal of God and the destiny of man have come to one fulfillment.

This day of Christ is the day of regeneration or renewal of all things (Matthew 19:28, AV or N.I.V.), the time for establishing all that was foretold by the prophets (Acts 3:21), the time for the deliverance of creation from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:21), the unity of all things, and especially of his family (Ephesians 1:10).

This then is the hope of history. Any lesser anticipations totally underestimate the perversity, intensity, and persuasiveness of evil. The end will not come without the unleashing of all the vileness of Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). It is not clear what the final manifestation of this destructive and demonic reality will be, but every age has its own reason for believing that such there is. Even in the apostolic era, the spirit of Antichrist was present, particularly in the form of false teaching (1 John 2:22-23, 4:3).

For the maintenance of hope in the midst of our history, as also in our personal experience, nothing less than the return of Christ will suffice.

OUR EAGER EXPECTATION

The coming again of Christ relates to every area of life, and generates many eager hopes.

Believers will then be in the immediate presence of Christ. Our being *with him* is directly related to his coming again (John 14:31, and is with a view to our seeing his glory (John 17:241, and being changed to be like him (1 John 3:2). An immediate question is: ‘How does this relate to being with Christ at the time of one’s own death?’ The thief crucified with Jesus, and Paul and John confidently expected that there would be no delay in their experience of blessedness beyond death (Luke 23:43, Romans 8:38-39, 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:5, Philippians 1:21-23, Revelation 6:111. It is clear in these writers, as in the New Testament generally, that Christian hope is strongly tied to the appearing of Christ rather than to an interim or personalised triumph; but the confidence of immediate bliss expressed cannot be denied.

Some have argued for the irrelevance of time once this life is completed, but this is conjecture because eternity cannot be defined simply as the absence of time. Calvin suggested that the blessedness of those who have departed must relate very much to expectation of the final resurrection from the dead—‘the happiest thing of all’ (*Institutes* III ix.5), and this seems to preserve the balance required, though not remove the enigma that must remain about how it all fits together. (For example, it is not clear that persons exist apart from being a body, and Paul did not look toward the idea of being unclothed, 2 Corinthians 4: 16—5:10.)

Ultimately, for us all, the coming of the Lord will be the time of our being with him—and with one another also (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). No personal hope can degrade this final victory to the pos-

ition of an appendix. Everything else anticipates it. The people of God have been truly socialised and cannot see their own benefit as complete apart from the completion of all things and the gathering of all the people of God.

The church anticipates a bodily *resurrection* or translation of all believers. Jesus Christ is with the Father now, bodily. We will be changed to be like him and have a body of glory (1 Corinthians 15:42-57, Philippians 3:20-21). Only this can finally authenticate the victory of Christ over sin and evil powers (I Corinthians 15:21-26). This becomes an eager expectation, particularly as we experience the ongoing failures within our present 'body of death' (Romans 7:21-25, 8:11, or the general 'bondage to decay' of our mortal bodies (Romans 8:19-25, 2 Corinthians 4:16—5:51, as also the pressures involved in bringing the grace of God to others (1 Corinthians 15:54-58, 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, 4:13-15).

Believers look forward to the ultimate word of *acquittal* and approval from their Lord at his appearing. The fact that believers have lost their fear of condemnation does not lessen their delight to hear of their acceptance on that final day. It is only because this is to be the case that fear can be destroyed in the present (1 Corinthians 1:8, Galatians 5:5, I Thessalonians 3: 13, 5:23-24, of. 2 Corinthians 1: 14). This may be expressed as not coming to judgement (John 5:24), but can also be expressed as having confidence for the day of judgement, or not shrinking from Christ in shame at his coming (1 John 4:17, 2:28).

Paul desired to live, in faith, and also in good works, so that he and others would be able to be proud on 'that day' (1 Corinthians 3:12-15, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10, Philippians 1:10, 2:16). This is reflected in the parable Jesus told (Luke 19:11-27).

Believers have hope (i.e. confidence) that at the appearing of Christ, they will be *like him*, not just bodily, but essentially (1 John 3:2). This appears to include character ('he is righteous', I John 2:29), but also all that is involved in 'glory'. It is this which Jesus wanted believers to see in him at his appearing (John 17:1,5, 24), and

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what Paul was confident of sharing (Romans 5:2, 8: 17-19, 2 Corinthians 4:7, Colossians 3:4, I Thessalonians 2: 12, 2 Thessalonians 1:10, 2:14).

How close is the end?

The ascended Lord has said in a vision to John: ‘Surely I am coming soon’ (Revelation 22:20, 7), and with understandable longing, the church’s response is ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ (Revelation 22:20, 1 Corinthians 16:22). In times of distress, the church’s longing for this return may become urgent, but in fact it should never be less than a longing. This is our confession, that, apart from his return, neither we nor our world can come to their goal. But when will this be? Or how soon is soon?

For the apostles, the return of Christ seemed to be linked to the destruction of the temple, and for Jews this is understandable. In the teaching known as the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24 and parallel passages) the Lord seems to show both the connection and the separation between the crisis through which the apostles would pass and his coming in glory at the end of the age. First, he showed that neither the claims of false christs, nor wars, natural disasters, persecution or apostasy would be indicators of the end, but part of the course of history (vs. 4-14), and that the gospel would be preached first to all nations—a reminder of Christian responsibility. Bearing in mind their need to understand the new attitude of God to the temple (once its veil had been torn during the crucifixion of Christ), he warned Christians not to piously defend it when its glory had departed (15-20, and 21-227). Taken in this way, the prophecy was of very practical value to Christians residing in Jerusalem around 70 AD when the armies of Titus besieged the city. It is on record that some escaped to Pella.

The reference may have further application, but because prophecy is given to encourage proper action and never mere speculation, the matter must remain open. What follows are warnings not to be led

astray, and to remember that the coming of Christ will be beyond all question (vs. 23-28). Whatever the tribulation referred to in verse 29 is, it will be followed speedily by the return of Christ (vs. 29-31).

The earlier identified crisis of 70 AD, and its being shown in close proximity to the coming of Christ, may show us how to view its nearness or soon-ness. In local judgements, one could say that the future is brought into the present, as testimony to the reality for the present of the ultimate judgement, and in this sense, its immanence. (See G. E. Ladd's *A Theology of the N. T.*, p. 198). If it is true that sinners live in fear of death (and after that the judgement) all their life, then one could say, by extending the principle, that all of history is lived in the shadow of the last judgement, that it is always immanent and having dynamic interaction with those involved in local judgements.

Therefore the lesson learned from the fig tree (vs. 32-35) may relate to AD 70, and as such would have encouraged Christians to act appropriately and be comforted by the nearness of the Christ (or his kingdom). The same will continue to relate to us all in the continuing crises of history.

The day or hour of his coming will always remain unknown until it happens, and this is as true for believers as for unbelievers (vs. 36-44. See also concerning 'times and seasons' in Acts 1:7). So the end is close, always, and is experienced as such especially in times of tumult, but the closeness may never be measured in time.

We know that Antichrist will appear first (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12). But although many identities have been found for this personage throughout history, none have been the identity to end the matter. The final manifestation of evil is still ahead.

Jesus said that the gospel would be preached in all the world and then the end would come. This keeps the church focused on her task, and does not make it easy to pick when the task is completed. The secretness of the kingdom makes observation not a good indicator of progress. This must remain the prerogative of the Lord. What is clear is that 'salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the

night is far gone, the day is at hand' (Romans 13:11-12). It would be too trite to say that the early church was misled and that we know better now. What they knew, we need to know: the Lord is at hand! The passage of time should not concern us so much as being thankful for the opportunity it provides, and by being about his business, hastening the day of his arrival (2 Peter 3:8-13, Luke 19:11-27).

THE PRESENCE OF THE FUTURE

If it is clear that the future coming of Christ is the event to which we look for the concluding and vindicating of all things, then we are free to see how that future comes into the present. But it only has power in the present by its being future.

Christ himself has authority over all things, not only in this age, but in the age to come (Ephesians 1:21, cf. Hebrews 2:5). Those who have encountered the ministry of the gospel have therefore encountered 'the powers of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:5, cf. I Corinthians 10:11).

Jesus said that the kingdom of God was 'at hand', or 'has come near to you' (Mark 1:15, Luke 10:9, 11). He also said it 'is in the midst of you' (Luke 17:20-21). In Jesus, the kingdom was present. But in another sense he was to go away and receive that kingdom (Luke 19:11-27). But Jesus has now received his kingly power and is seated at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:29-36). It is this decisive factor which makes these days the 'last days' in which it is only a matter of Christ making all his enemies his footstool. It is his kingly power, appropriate to a victor, which the church lives under and bears witness to (eg. Ephesians 1: 16-23, Matthew 28: 18-20).

Our acquittal in a very real sense is still future, but the certainty of that verdict rings back into the present. Our resurrection is very much in the future, but Christ has appeared and 'abolished death and brought life and immortality to light' (2 Timothy 1:10, also John 11:25). Believers will not see death because they have passed from death to life.

We wait to be with, and to see him, but similar words are used to describe his presence with us now (John 14:3, 18-19, 23, Matthew 28:20).

We wait to be glorified or changed into Christ's likeness, yet Paul speaks as though it were already accomplished (Romans 8:30), and can say we are being changed from one degree of glory to another as we behold the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the future, poured out into the present, the down-payment, or guarantee of what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5, Ephesians 1:14), the first fruits of the new age (Romans 8:23). In him, the future is present to those who believe, enabling them to live in the sureness of its coming and awakening their desire for its accomplishment.

DIM THE FUTURE —KILL THE PRESENT

Because the comings of Christ are of one piece, though with very different actions in each case, one cannot ignore either one and have a true picture of Christ, or any gospel at all. An early attempt to dim future hope may be referred to in I Corinthians 15: 12, and 2 Timothy 2:18. Is there no resurrection? Or has it passed already? These attempts must always be resisted with the same sternness given them by Paul. Without a whole message, its viability soon must be called in question. Materialistic and humanistic perspectives must then take over. Without hope, bitterness must follow in the wake of disappointment as evil asserts itself again and again. There will not seem to be any reason to be vigilant, or holy, nor any way of avoiding a preoccupation with this world.

God has destined us to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 5:9-I 1), to be like him when we see him (1 John 3:13), and to share in a new heaven and earth in which there is true righteousness (2 Peter 3: 13). A gospel that does not teach us to relish these prospects is no gospel. But where the whole Christ is presented and the Spirit gives a foretaste of what is to come, true joy, faith, hope and love are generated and maintained.

The need for sharpening our awareness of this truth is acute for another reason. The church cannot afford to be without strong hope when our society is becoming increasingly aware of its fragility. Those who have encountered the grace of Christ in his coming to deal with sin, and await his coming to complete what he began, will have reason to stand with confidence in whatever situations come, and be able to offer a sure word to fellow travellers.