

The Coming of the Lord

I Th. 4: 13-18

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So I had the most amazing conversation the other day. Now one of the best parts of my job is all the interesting people I get to meet and the extraordinary things we get to talk about. Well, this guy is not a member of our church. But we were at lunch and talking about various matters related to careers, life, and churches. And he said to me sort of randomly, “What do you think about the second coming of Christ?”

I replied rather quickly, “Well, I’m all for it!” I went on to explain how important I think Christ’s return is to the whole Jesus story. It means the story isn’t over. It means things aren’t always going to be the way they are. It means things will be set right. Jesus Christ will return as reigning King, and the heavens and the earth will be remade. So, I really look forward to Christ’s return.

But as far as determining the exact dates, or whether or not we get raptured to heaven before or after the tribulation, what all the images in Revelation correspond to in the modern world—I told him I have zero interest in that. After all, when I first became a Christian, everybody was reading *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The book made all these cool connections between events going on then and Revelation. Four decades later, it hasn’t happened that way. That Christ is returning, I think is absolutely true and crucial, but all the end times speculation just gets in the way of getting on with Jesus’ mission.

Then, wondering why he asked the question, and hoping I hadn’t just dissed him, I said, “What about you? What do you think about Christ’s return?”

He said, “Well, I think that ever since he left, Christ has been returning to his people. He comes to us through his Holy Spirit. So constantly Jesus returns to his church by his Spirit and he’s always with us.”

That was really interesting. I took a sip of water and tried to process quickly what he was saying. Yes, I thought, Jesus departed and promised he would send his Holy Spirit to be with us. Yes, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the three persons of the Triune God are so close in their oneness that you can say that where one divine Person is, the others are too. And yes, the Holy Spirit joins us to

Jesus. So that's true that Christ comes to us by his Spirit. So there is a sense in which Jesus returns to his people by giving us the Holy Spirit. But. But Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus who ascended into heaven will return in the same way. At a particular time the man Jesus himself is coming back to call a halt to the way the world is now and fully bring his kingdom.

So I asked him, "But don't you think there is a Day, a particular time, when Jesus himself will return?"

"No," he said, "I can't see any reason why Jesus would need to re-incarnate in this world. He already did his work, gave us his teaching, died for our sins. Why would he need to get a body again and do something more?"

I could feel my heart racing. I apologized in advance. "I'm sorry if I get a little bit passionate here, but you just brought up an area of study I've given a lot of years to considering. The Church has from the beginning taught that Jesus has never stopped being in our flesh. The Son of God came to us as the man Jesus and he didn't stop being the man Jesus. He is in heaven. He is outfitted for a heavenly life. His body has been transformed by the resurrection, but he still has a body."

He looked at me like he was sorry he brought all this up. But for me it was too late.

"Look, Philippians 3 teaches us that Christ will 'transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.' It matters a great deal that Jesus keeps our humanity, because what Jesus has, we will have. Calvin made a big deal about this. Christ is going to return in the same body he left in."

When he hesitated, I pressed on. "So if Jesus himself isn't returning, will the world just keep going as it is? Will we stay in this mess?"

"No, no, it's clear from the Bible that good wins, that God's way wins out."

"So, how does that happen without Jesus' return? Does the church just make the world a better place? Is it up to us to bring in the kingdom? Do we make earth into a heaven? Is that the new earth of Revelation?"

He took the mention of Revelation as a path to retreat into the realm of mystery. "But isn't most of the language of Revelation symbolic? You can't really know what all those things mean. The picture of a world without a sun because

God himself is light, or a tree with 12 kinds of fruits—isn't that obviously a symbolic way of talking?"

I had to let that one go partially. Yes, there is a lot of symbolism in Revelation—the imagery in apocalyptic writing can be pretty wild. It's not always clear what is to be taken literally and what is a picture of something beyond words. But Revelation is not the only information we have. So I said, "That's why it's so great that Revelation isn't the only source about his second coming. We have Paul's teaching about Christ's return in Thessalonians and Corinthians. And the angel in the book of Acts promised the disciples that Jesus would return in the same way he left."

Wishing very much the food would come, as did I, my companion changed tacks, "It just doesn't seem fair to me that one generation would get to see his return while all those other generations waited and waited but didn't see him."

I was this far in, so I had to reply, "Hebrews 11 talks about that. From the Old Testament onwards, people died in faith. They had a vision of what was to come, but didn't live to see it fulfilled. They lived and died trusting in the future God promised even if they didn't see it happen. That's just part of being a Christian."

"Well, I just think it's fairer if we think of Jesus returning every time his Spirit comes into someone's heart."

I just couldn't let it rest with that sentiment, so I said, "But if you spiritualize his ascension and his return, you could just as easily spiritualize his resurrection. Jesus rose in the memory of his disciples. The church is his body, so his bodily resurrection happens whenever the church remembers him."

"No, no, I wouldn't go that far. I believe in the cross and resurrection. I just think his return happens spiritually."

We had to leave it there and talk about other stuff. The food did come and we parted amiably. But my mind was whirring. I live in such a bubble of well trained, deeply orthodox believers that I forget how muddy it can get for people out there. Now it's not just a matter of having it all correct and feeling superior. Getting the story straight actually makes a tremendous difference to our sense of hope. And how we hope makes a huge difference in how we act, what we choose

to do or don't do, particularly when things get hard. The story that's inside you will determine what you feel and what you do.

In our passage today from Thessalonians, Paul wrote, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do, who have no hope." The news of Jesus' eventual, inevitable return is directly connected to our sense of hope in the face of loss. The gospel of Christ's return to gather his people directly affects the way we grieve.

- In parting, we will experience loneliness. Not, however the despair of total abandonment.
- Our tears will flow. Not, however, into a sewer of despair but into the ocean of God's love.
- We will cast our gaze about for our loved ones. Not, however in the vain hope of finding them still here but in the vision of meeting them in a glorious world to come.
- We will ache. Not, however, with the null of futility, but with the anticipation of reunion.

We all must grieve in this world. But what a difference it makes whether you anticipate oblivion or resurrection.

I've seldom seen the poignancy of grieving without hope expressed so piercingly than in John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. Two teenagers dealing with cancer and early death fall in love and pit their moment of life together against the untimely snatching away of this disease.

At one point, Gus says to Hazel,

There will come a time when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that's what everyone else does.

Has the futility of life limited to these years in this world ever been expressed more poignantly? Green takes it farther when Gus declares his love:

I'm in love with you, and I know that love is just a shout into the void, and that oblivion is inevitable, and that we're all doomed and that there will come a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, and I know the sun will swallow the only earth we'll ever have, and I am in love with you.ⁱ

There, there is the eternity set into the heart of every person, as Ecclesiastes tells us, yet so that we cannot find it out. There, there is the love that is the Triune God imaged into the love of man and woman, expressed as the defiant hope that love is stronger than death. That a moment of true love now spits in the face of time and defeats it. The spark of hope is buried deep in us and does not easily go out.

But even the brave clasping together of two beautiful young people in love does not stop the dying, does not even slow the onslaught of the juggernaut that is oblivion. If this is all there is, the grief is the ocean floor. Underneath is nothing but loss, and in the end that is not romantic, not even brave, just despair.

The Gospel speaks another story, and so a different hope:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

What happened to Jesus makes a huge difference to those who belong to him. He has not stopped being like us, so if we are joined to him, we will share in his life, his embodied resurrection life. And we will share in his story of working in this world.

This really is quite a stunning passage: God will bring with Jesus, when he returns, those in Christ who have already died. Can you imagine this conversation among souls? “Hey, Jesus is going back down to earth, you wanna go? Jesus is going to go straighten out the world, wanna see? We’re going to go meet our brothers and sisters on earth—get dressed for the party!”

Here’s how the story goes,

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. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The world lives like a toddler closing his eyes, covering his ears and shouting, “I can’t hear you!” We can’t face the silence of death. We can’t face the blaze of God’s throne before which we will appear. So we crank up the distractions and ignore it. But God, who so often whispers in our hearts, will this time raise his voice.

A triple sounding will call our madness to a halt. A triple sounding will bring the world to silence. A triple sounding will raise the dead and the living together. There will be a cry of command. The voice that spoke the worlds into being will speak again. An archangel, a being of terrifying beauty and power, will echo the Lord’s shout. And a trumpet will sound. What instrument this actually is remains to be heard, but it will be the instrument that calls the dead from their graves and rallies men from their beds into their duty. It will be the reveille of God for his church to rise for the feast.

And reunion will occur. We will meet, the dead and the living, both transformed and glorified. We will reconnect. And so we will always be together. With each other in the Lord. In the presence of the Triune God, dancing the joy of a redeemed creation.

Not oblivion. Not ending. Not darkness. But worship. Feasting. Loving. Dancing. Light. Justice. Rightness. Wholeness. Life. Everlasting life.

The return of Christ is an absolutely crucial part of our story for it is foundational to our hope. We grieve, but not as others do who have no hope. A story, a vision, a glory assures us. The end is not oblivion and nothingness. In Christ, in Christ alone, it is all love and it is all good.

The billboard says about Louisiana shrimp: Accept no substitutes. That’s even more true about this return of Christ. Accept no substitutes. This is the glorious truth. Encourage one another with these words.

ⁱ John Green, “*The Fault in Our Stars*” <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/16827462-the-fault-in-our-stars>.