

THE END TIMES

The Second Coming of Christ

The risen Christ ascended into heaven 40 days after he left death and the grave behind on Easter Sunday morning. The angels promised the disciples that Jesus would come back in the flesh. When can we expect him? Christians have been asking that question ever since.

THE APPOINTED HOUR

The Son of God came into this world the first time as a baby in Bethlehem. Micah prophesied exactly where he would be born. Isaiah foretold he would be born of a virgin. David wrote in Psalm 132 that the Savior would be one of his descendants and sit on his throne forever. The prophets did not predict the exact time of his arrival. They did not know the exact time.

- Micah 5:2 **"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."**
- Isaiah 7:14 **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."**
- Psalm 132:11 **"The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: 'One of your own descendants I will place on your throne.'"**
- Galatians 4:4,5 **"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."**

The New Testament does not give the exact time Jesus will come again. We call Jesus' return the second advent. *Advent* comes from a Latin word that means "to come". Jesus will come again in all his glory and majesty as true God and true Man to judge the living and the dead. Like the prophets of old, Jesus did not reveal the appointed hour he would come so that people would be ready and prepared at all times. We are ready and prepared when we believe in Jesus as our Savior.

Some have attempted to figure out exactly when Jesus will come again. The Bible commands us not to do that. The following are but a few of the "seers" that have misled people:

1836: Johann Bengel, a German Lutheran, devised a numerical formula that predicted the end of the world.

March 21, 1843: William Miller, a Seventh Day Adventist, became so prominent in predicting the end times that the dates were called Millerisms.

1874: Charles Russel, founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, predicted many "ends" from 1914 to 1994. None had been successful.

(Some have set other dates such as 2010, December of 2012, 2016, 2034, and September of 2047.)

- Matthew 24:36 **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son but only the Father."**
- Matthew 24:44 **"So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour you do not expect him."**
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1,2 **"Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that **the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.**"**
- 2 Peter 3:9 **"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."**

Notice carefully in these passages that although the exact time has not been revealed, that does not mean that the end of the world is indefinite. God clearly reveals that he has appointed an exact “day,” “date,” “hour,” and “time.”

After the gospel has gone out into the world and the Holy Spirit has called together those who are to make up the Church, Jesus Christ will return. Every person will see him. Every person will know who he is. For believers, seeing our Lord will be the fulfillment of daily expectation. It will be a day of great joy. For unbelievers, the sight of Jesus, whom they did not expect to see, will fill their hearts with great fear and trembling.

- *Matthew 24:30* “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and **all the nations** of the earth will mourn. **They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.**”

DISCUSS: What is the means the Holy Spirit uses to keep us ready and prepared at all times for the day Jesus comes again?

SIGNS OF THE END

The New Testament does give some information about the days before Jesus’ return. We have seen that the second coming of Christ is imminent. Imminent means it can come at any time. We have the most information about the signs of the end of the world and the universe as we know it in Jesus’ own words, recorded in Matthew’s gospel.

Some of the signs take place as the day of the Lord draws closer. Others take place at the same time Jesus returns. Since the Holy Spirit has preserved these words for us in the Bible, we know that these signs of the end are nothing to be afraid of. The signs are a warning that Christ is coming soon and we should not grow careless in our watchfulness. The signs tell us something wonderful is going to happen soon, just like labor pains tell a mother she is about to give birth to her long-awaited child.

Have these signs already been fulfilled? Many have. However, God has so scheduled these signs that no one can compute when the exact day the judgment will come. God gave us these hints of the end times not to calculate the exact moment, but rather to encourage his people with constant watchfulness.

- *Matthew 24:4-14* “Jesus answered: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. For **many will come** in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ **and will deceive many**. You will hear of **wars and rumors of wars**, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be **famines and earthquakes** in various places. All these are the **beginning of birth pains**.

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and **you will be hated** by all nations because of me. At that time **many will turn away from the faith** and will betray and hate each other, and **many false prophets will appear** and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the **love of most will grow cold**, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this **gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world** as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

- *Matthew 24:29,30* “Immediately after the distress of those days **‘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.’** At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and **all the nations of the earth will mourn**. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with great power and great glory.”

- *Matthew 24:38,39* “For in the days before the Flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the Flood came and took them all away. **That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.**”

At Jesus’ ascension the disciples stood there and stared up into the sky where the cloud had hidden their Lord and Savior from sight. The angels told the disciples to get on with their lives while they waited.

DISCUSS: What does Jesus want to find us doing when he returns?

THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

The Bible gives us a clear definition of death. Death is the result of sin. Death is the separation of body and soul, while resurrection is the uniting of body and soul.

- *Ecclesiastes 12:7* “The dust returns to the ground it came from, and **the spirit returns to God** who made it.”

An event we look forward to at Christ’s second coming is our bodily resurrection from the dead. This doctrine is frequently despised by the unbelieving world, which scoffs and mocks at the thought of the dead coming to life once again.

- *Acts 17:31,32* “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, **some of them sneered.**”

The Sadducees of Christ’s day were notorious for denying both the existence of angels as well as the teaching of the resurrection.

- *Matthew 22:23-31* “That same day the Sadducees, **who say there is no resurrection**, came to him with a question...Jesus replied, ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God...about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you...?’”

The resurrection consists of two main incidents: 1) bodies will once again be restored, and 2) there will be a reunion of the body and the soul. When God’s trumpet sounds, all the dead will rise at one time.

- *John 5:28,29* “...A time is coming when **all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...**”

Believers’ souls will return with Christ from heaven. They will be reunited with their glorified bodies to go back to heaven. The apostles’ letters referred to the resurrection of the dead that the evangelists had mentioned in their histories of Jesus. They all wrote so that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ. By believing in Jesus, we have life through his name.

- *John 11:25* “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. **He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die...**”

A glorified body means that the body now subject to the results of sin like illness, infirmities, pain, decay, and death, will no longer suffer those things. There are some things we do not know about the glorified body; however, it will be the same body we have now, and it will be like Christ’s glorified body.

- *Philippians 3:21* “(Christ) will transform our lowly bodies as **they will be like his glorious body.**”
- *1 Corinthians 15:52,53*, “The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and **we will be changed.** For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”
- *Colossians 3:4* “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then **you also will appear with him in glory.**”

Old Testament believers also expected the physical resurrection from the dead on the Last Day.

- *Job 19:25-27* “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, **yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I and not another. How my heart yearns within me.**”

Unlike the glorified bodies of the believers, the bodies of the unbelievers will reflect the sin and debauchery that led them to their eternal destination in hell. The damned will have no power or heavenly beauty but, rather, they will display the hideous results of their sin-filled lives. Their souls will also be united with their bodies; however, they will return to hell in body and soul.

- *Daniel 12:2* “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, **others to shame and everlasting contempt.**”
- *Isaiah 66:24* “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; **their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.**”

But what of those who are still living at the time of the resurrection? Scripture addresses this situation as well.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 “According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, **will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep**. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, **we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds** to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

It is difficult for us even to imagine what our lives will be like after the resurrection from the dead because we will be perfect. It is Jesus our Savior's empty tomb that assures us that those lives will be infinitely better than the ones we have in this sinful world. Our certain hope is that we will be like Jesus for we shall see him as he is.

DISCUSS: Why must we believe that Jesus' body rose from the dead and that not just his spirit or his teachings live on?

THE BOOK OF LIFE

When discussing the final days, the resurrection, and the judgment, it is interesting that Scripture makes some reference to a register called **the book of life**. The Lord has so named it because it contains a list of those who will share in the glory of heaven. Already in the Old Testament this terminology was used.

There are some observations that can be made regarding this book. First, we see that it is God's book, and he alone has the authority to add or subtract names.

- Exodus 32:31-33 “So Moses went back to the LORD and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written. The LORD replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me **I will blot out of my book.**”

Second, we note that the book of life contains the names of the righteous, those who have overcome the onslaughts of Satan and have lived as believing children of God.

- Psalm 69:28 “May they be blotted out of **the book of life** and not be listed **with the righteous.**”
- Revelation 3:5 “**He who overcomes** will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from **the book of life**, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”
- Philippians 4:3 “Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side **in the cause of the gospel**, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in **the book of life.**”

Finally, we see that the book of life will be opened on Judgment Day.

- Revelation 20:12-15 “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. **Another book was opened, which is the book of life.** The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. . . If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

DISCUSS: Why do you think the Lord uses the idea of keeping records in a book?

THE JUDGMENT

When the Son of God came to earth the first time as the humble child of Mary, he came in mercy. When Jesus comes the second time, the Bible says he will come in judgment. The Father has appointed his Son as the judge. We confess this judgment also in the Nicene Creed when we say, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and dead.”

- Acts 17:31 “(God) has set a day when **he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.**”

The judgment will be carried out upon all people; the living and the dead, the evil and the good. Even the angels will pass before their Lord to receive the final judgment. Yet this judgment will take on a completely different meaning for the believers and the unbelievers. For the believers, this will not be a

judgment in which the Lord “decides” if they have inherited heaven or not. Rather, it will be a time of pronouncement of everlasting rewards. Martin Luther wrote that “the Judgment pertains to the believers as little as it does to the holy angels.” Scripture itself declares that the righteous will be separated from the unrighteous even before the actual judging of the unbelievers takes place.

- *Matthew 25:32,33* “All the nations will be gathered before him, and **he will separate the people** one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”

Scripture also indicates that the judgment will not be a long, drawn-out affair but, rather, it will take place in but a moment, an instant, or in the blink of an eye.

- *Matthew 24:27* “For **as lightning** that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”
- *1 Corinthians 15:51,52* “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a **flash, in the twinkling of an eye**. . .”

It is interesting that Scripture also notes that not only will the believers receive their divine reward on that day, but the Christians themselves will be actively involved in the actual judging as it takes place. They will be with Christ acknowledging his verdict as he judges the deeds of evil people and the wicked angels.

- *1 Corinthians 6:2,3* “Do you not know **that the saints will judge the world?** . . . Do you not know that **we will judge angels?**”

We must not think, however, that we have to wait until Judgment Day to find out whether we are going to heaven or hell. Yes, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. We know that Jesus is not going to decide at that moment whether we are guilty or innocent of sin. The Father already has made that judgment. In raising Jesus from the dead, God declared the whole world “not guilty.” God cancelled the debt and guilt of sin by accepting Jesus’ sacrifice as the world’s Substitute on the cross.

- *2 Corinthians 5:10* “For **we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”
- *Romans 4:25* “**He was delivered over to death for our sins** and was raised to life for our justification.”
- *2 Corinthians 5:19* “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, **not counting men’s sins against them.**”

The Holy Spirit gives us the blessings of that judgment when he brings us to faith through the gospel in Word and sacrament. Baptism washes the sinner clean from the guilt, power, and penalty of sin. Baptism creates saving faith in the heart that assents to God’s verdict of innocence and makes it personal.

- *Mark 16:16* “**He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.**”
- *1 Peter 3:21* “**Baptism...now saves** you also, not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Our judgment already has taken place at the cross and in coming to faith. Unbelievers are condemned already, so long as they do not believe. No one goes to hell because of sin. The Father forgave all sin on Jesus’ cross. Rather, on Judgment Day, those whom Jesus sends to hell will receive the result of their unbelief that rejected forgiveness.

- *John 3:18* “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but **whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed** in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

Judgment Day is the public revelation of the faith or unbelief in the heart during life on earth. This faith or unbelief manifests itself in life through works of love or the absence of love. When the Bible speaks about our being judged by whether we have done good or bad, it is referring to those things as evidence of faith or unbelief. The Last Day will expose hearts, and the children of God will be revealed.

- *Matthew 25:34,35* “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For **I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. For I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.**”

- *Matthew 25:45* "He will reply (to unbelievers on his left), 'I tell you the truth, **whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.** Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."
- *Romans 8:19* "The creation waits in eager expectation **for the sons of God to be revealed.**"

The Bible urges Christians to lift eyes and hearts toward the heavens to look for the Savior. He is coming again to take us soul and body to live forever with him in heaven. We eagerly await the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- *Revelation 21:10* "**Yes, I am coming soon.**"

May we always echo St. John's plea:

- *Revelation 21:20* "**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**"

DISCUSS: Why would a Christian not want to answer the question, "Are you going to heaven?" by saying, "I sure hope so"?