

Lesson: Coming Again: Jesus' Return

Biblical Passage

Revelation 22:12-17

Supporting Passage

Revelation 21:1-22:21

Memory Verse

Matthew 24:42

Biblical Truth

Jesus will personally return in power and glory.

Context

After Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to the disciples while they were in Jerusalem, He was taken up into heaven. Two men then appeared to the disciples who were staring up at the sky and promised them that Jesus would return in the same way He had departed. John later wrote of Jesus' return in the Book of Revelation.

Investigation

In the Book of Revelation, John described the darkness of human history and the suffering role of God's people. As he reached the description of the final victory of Jesus and His return to bring about the consummation of all things, John described in chapters 18 through 20 the judgment of those who rejected the salvation provided by God through Jesus Christ. Then John looked beyond that final judgment and saw the destiny of Christ's followers. The picture of the destiny of those who have rejected salvation and those who have accepted it are important to the account of the return of Christ. He is coming to call His own to their destiny in the presence of God and to announce the eternal judgment of those who will not be in heaven. The focus of this lesson is on the return of Jesus to bring His people into the presence of God.

In this larger passage, there are four controlling ideas: 1) Jesus is coming "soon"; 2) there will be a new creation; 3) a new, heavenly city will be man's abode; and 4) God's presence will be known in a new fullness.

Throughout the Bible, the idea is prevalent that creation is good because God is the one who created it. It is clear from the Word, however, that the consequences of man's sin marred creation. Paul wrote in Romans 8 of the desire of creation to come into the same fullness to which Christians will come at the consummation of the age. The description that John gives in chapters 21 and 22 is a fulfillment of that desire.

Importance

This passage is important because it clearly shows that The Future is in God's Hands. Revelation demonstrates that Jesus is in control of His actions and that His return is imminent. Further, the passage demonstrates the rewards and judgment that will be pronounced at Christ's return.

Interpretation

Revelation 22:12 The Book of Revelation indicates that the present earth and the present heavens will pass away and be replaced by a new creation. Some would interpret this to mean that there will be a new, physical earth upon which man will live. The Bible, however, does not speak clearly that the new earth will be physical. There will be a new, literal city of God (the New Jerusalem) coming down to a new earth, and there will be a new, literal heaven. "Literal," however, can mean both "physical" and "spiritual." God is Spirit, we are spiritual beings who will be delivered from physical bodies (1 Corinthians 15), and the Kingdom is spiritual.

The symbols used here are metaphors that point to spiritual realities. Metaphors do not negate realities. In fact, we could say that the spiritual things to which the metaphors point are the real realities. The only language that humans can use or comprehend is human language. When the Bible speaks of heavenly things, human language is used. Human language is limited, but we will see the full reality described in the metaphors when all things are consummated.

The promise of Jesus in this verse is, "Behold, I am coming soon." The Greek word used here can mean "quickly" "soon" or "swiftly." The question for the interpreter is, "Does this word mean that Jesus is coming in a short time, or does it mean that He is coming suddenly in God's own time?" Herschel Hobbs, commenting on the statement in 22:7, says that "suddenly" is the meaning (Hobbs, 1971). Either meaning could apply, but in the context of Jesus' own emphasis, the suddenness of His coming is more likely.

Jesus spoke of suddenness when He taught about His return. He encouraged His disciples to always be ready because no one

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knows when He is coming except the Father. In a parable about the owner of a house going on a trip and leaving his servants in charge, Jesus made the point that the servants must always be ready for the return of the master because they do not know the time of the return. The advice to His followers was "Watch!" (See Mark 13:32-37.)

It is true that the early believers anticipated the coming of Jesus at any moment, even in their lifetime. That belief in the imminence of His return and the need for readiness has persisted throughout the history of the Church, even to the present day. The appropriate response for believers today is to have the same anticipation regarding His coming that the early Church had. We still do not know when He will return, only that His return is promised and sure. Whether we think in terms of the death of the individual or the coming of Christ at the consummation of the age, Jesus' return is imminent. He is coming for us in our lifetime. Our task is to be prepared at all times.

Jesus reminds us that His purpose at His coming will be to judge and to "give to everyone according to what he has done." His words clearly communicate that the reward for His followers who are to be in heaven with Him will be based on the way they have lived out their relationships with Him in their time as believers. He does not, however, identify the reward. The only indication given about the reward in this context is in verses 14 and 15, in which the contrast is made between those who are inside the city and those who are outside. Those who have been redeemed have the right to the tree of life and are citizens of the New Jerusalem. Those who are not redeemed are outside the city (Easley, 1998).

Revelation 22:13 Jesus identified Himself as "The Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." The title "Alpha and Omega" was applied to the Father in Revelation 1:8 and in 21:6. Jesus applied the "First and Last" description to Himself in 2:8 and now applies the "Alpha and Omega" title to Himself. The descriptors "First and Last" and "Beginning and End" explain what "Alpha and Omega" mean. The verse is an affirmation that Jesus has the right to judge because He shares the nature of God (Beasley-Murray, 1974).

Revelation 22:14 The beatitude that appears in this verse is the seventh beatitude in Revelation (see also 1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7). This beatitude pronounces blessings on those who gain admission to eternal life, and it indicates how they have achieved it. Their robes are white and pure because of the cleansing power of Christ. "Washing robes" is also seen in Revelation 7:14 to describe the ones coming out of the tribulation of history who have died for the cause of Christ. The symbolism refers to the shed blood of Jesus by which He provides redemption to those who believe. Their blessing is that they have the right to the "tree of life," a reference to immortality, and they are given access to the city where God dwells eternally. Both these blessings describe the benefit of being in the presence of God (Mounce, 1998).

While heaven is not specifically described in this verse, it is presented in Revelation 21:1-22:5 and can be interpreted in two ways. One is to take it as a literal description of the way heaven will be. If the New Jerusalem we see when we enter God's presence is exactly like the literal description in these verses, it will truly be a beautiful sight and will not be disappointing. The Book of Revelation, however, was written in human, symbolic language; therefore, the description of heaven may be symbolic. Human language cannot fully express heavenly truths. The very highest of human metaphors possible are used to describe something of indescribable beauty. One thing is certain: We will not be disappointed in this place, either at its appearance or at the quality of life we enjoy there.

The important thing about the new city prepared for us is that we will have a dwelling place in the presence of God. God will be the focus of heaven, not us. Our focus will not be on streets or houses. We will stand in His presence. Revelation 21:3 says, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them and be their God." Jesus, who is God in the flesh, came to ~~dwelt~~ dwell among men in the Incarnation (see John 1:14, where the same word is used). The result of His incarnation will be consummated in the new city when Jesus returns and as God Himself dwells with His people. How the heavenly city is structured, we cannot know until we get there. The metaphors used here describe a glorious sight beyond our imagination. When we finally see it, however, we will experience it in its full glory. We will understand the true meaning of the metaphors.

Revelation 22:15 The ones outside the city provide the contrast in verse 15. They are described in very strong terms. The outside ones are those who will never be a part of the city. John often used contrasts to demonstrate the stark difference in the destiny of Christ's followers and those who have rejected Him. This is another instance. When Jesus brings about a consummation of all things at His coming, the believers will be in the presence of God and the unbelievers will be "outside." The list describing those outside is a common one used in the New Testament to differentiate between the righteous and the wicked.

Revelation 22:16 Jesus concluded the announcement of His return by reminding John and the Church of the message of Good News that deliverance is coming. His "angel" or "messenger" was first mentioned in Revelation 1:1. The statement in both verses reminds John and the church that this word is from the Redeemer who is qualified to provide the message of deliverance from oppression and security for the future.

As a confirmation of His authority to send the messenger to deliver this message, Jesus claims two additional titles. "The Root

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of David" was claimed in 5:5 and is expanded here to "Offspring" as well. The meaning is that Jesus is not only the source of the Davidic kingdom, but He is also the *Messiah*, the prophesied descendant of David. The other title is "Bright and Morning Star." That star appears when the day is near. This claim, therefore, is a promise of hope for the coming consummation He has promised to all who belong to Him (Easley, 1998).

Revelation 22:17 Throughout Revelation, there have been many invitations to repentance and to come to Jesus. Now, at the very end of the book, John encourages, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts of sin and calls people to salvation in Jesus. The "bride" is the Church. The role of the Church is to fulfill the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20—"Go and make disciples"—and the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8—"Be my witnesses." The one who hears and is transformed shares the message with others. Finally, John issues his own invitation to "whoever." Whoever senses a need for the available redemption may come. Whoever hears the message and desires to receive the benefit of the redemption provided in Jesus may take the free gift freely offered.

John acknowledges that before the coming of Jesus it is not yet too late for those who will come to Christ in repentance. When He comes, however, it will be too late (see Revelation 22:11).

Implications

John's Revelation is difficult for adults to understand. Questions abound as to what will happen when Jesus returns. There are many things we do not and cannot know about the second coming of Christ until He returns. There are, however, some things we can know based on the words of Jesus.

First, we know that Jesus is coming again. The clear promise of the New Testament is that just as He has gone into heaven to prepare a place for His people, He is coming again.

Second, He is coming personally. His coming will not be symbolic, but one day He Himself will personally come in power and great glory.

Third, we can conclusively say that we do not know when He is coming. We are not pleased in our practical minds when we are not able to work out the details of the second coming, including the time. But we will never be able to do so. We might as well be satisfied to accept the teaching of Jesus that we do not know, the angels do not know, He did not know, but only God knows.

Fourth, it does not matter when He comes. Neither our salvation nor our service depends on the timing of His coming. That is in the hands of the Father. Whether "quickly" means soon in calendar time or "suddenly like a thief," we are to anticipate His coming and live as though He will come today. Whether Jesus returns in the immediate future or He tarries for one million years may be significant in the plan and purpose of the Father, but it has no effect on our task.

Fifth, we know that Jesus is going to come to receive His own and judge those who have rejected Him. We do not know whether we will be living or dead when Jesus manifests Himself in the second coming, but we know that we will be gathered to Him from wherever we are.

Sixth, we know that the first coming is more important than the second coming. The promise that Jesus is coming again is an assurance to Christians and a warning to unbelievers. Therefore, it is very important. There is, however, no place in the New Testament in which we are commanded to proclaim the second coming. We are told to proclaim the first coming: the Gospel.

Seventh, we know what we ought to be doing until He comes. Our responsibility is to bear fruit in the Kingdom. God has called us and equipped us in unique ways, and He expects us to be faithful in serving Him until He comes for us. Faithful obedience to Him is the only way to be ready for Him.

- Why is it important to understand that Jesus will return suddenly and without warning?
- What significant truths do the names Alpha and Omega, First and Last, Beginning and End reveal about Jesus?
- When Jesus returns, how will people be rewarded? What rewards will they receive?
- How would you explain this passage to someone who doubts that Jesus will return physically to earth?
- How can you help unbelievers realize that Jesus' invitation to "Come!" is for them?

FREE THOUGHT

"The day Christ comes will be a day of judgment. This judgment will be marked by three accomplishments. First, God's grace will be revealed. Our host will receive all the credit and attention. Second, rewards for his servants will be unveiled. Those who accepted his invitation will be uniquely honored. And third, those who do not know him will pay a price. A severe, terrible price."—Max Lucado