

# Where Is The Promise Of His Coming?

by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

***Forerunner*, "Prophecy Watch," December 2003**

As the first century began to wind down, some in the church were beginning to wonder why Jesus Christ had not yet returned to set up His Kingdom. Members in Thessalonica were concerned that the day of Christ's second coming had already come and gone (II Thessalonians 2:1-3; see II Timothy 2:18)! As much as the apostles reassured the people that Jesus would return but that certain events had to take place first, a good many listened to the talk of cynics and mockers, bringing on a crisis of faith in the church.

To those in the end time, Peter writes:

Beloved, I now write to you . . . that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."  
(II Peter 3:1-4)

In our day, such scoffers have indeed arisen, both inside and outside the church, spreading their ideas that the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings is many decades away. As happened in the first century, members who hear these prognostications begin to wonder if they are true, and sadly, some come to believe them, put down their guard, and begin to drift away. Agreement with any form of "the Lord delays His coming" will take a heavy, spiritual toll on those who accept it as true, as it eliminates their motivation to overcome their sinful human nature and to prepare for God's Kingdom.

## **This Present, Evil World**

Presently, the world scene does not *appear* to threaten the imminent return of Christ. There are certainly wars, natural disasters, diseases, famines, religious and secular deception, moral and cultural decline, and a host of perennially grievous problems—events that are "par for the course" for sinful humanity—and many of the biblical signs of the end are not *quite* in place.

Despite the war and its aftermath in Iraq, as well as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the China-Taiwan squabble, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear posturing, and a world economy trying to climb out of the dumps, many secular pundits look around and profess that things are not all that bad. Columnist Mark Steyn, tongue firmly in cheek, wrote in Canada's *The National Post*:

Now, in 2002, with enough oil for a century and a half, the planet awash in cut-price minerals, and less global famine, starvation and malnutrition than ever before, the end of the world has had to be rescheduled. The latest estimated time of arrival for the apocalypse is 2032.

With the United States as the world's sole superpower—and the only possible rival, China, in no position to make a serious challenge to American hegemony—the world appears to be in for many years of the status quo. Analysts admit there will be upsets and downturns from time to time, but they

see the world scene floating in a narrow range with no major, apocalyptic blowups in sight—at least nothing the nations cannot handle themselves.

These circumstances lead some to believe that we can firmly say Christ's return must be many years off—even sometime in the next generation. But is this the way Christians should view the next few decades?

### **"I Am Coming Quickly!"**

A quick survey of the New Testament reveals that imminence and urgency permeate Jesus and the apostles' approach to Christ's return in power and glory. The idea of His returning soon was so ingrained in the disciples' minds that, on the day of Jesus' final ascension to heaven just before Pentecost, they asked, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). His answer? "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (verse 7). One could paraphrase His reply as, "No, not today, but whenever the Father gives Me the nod. . . ."

Several days later, Peter begins his Pentecost sermon with the end-time prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, which mentions "in the last days" and "the great and notable day of the Lord" (Acts 2:16-21). Then, not long thereafter, while preaching in Solomon's Portico on the Temple Mount, he speaks of Jesus,

whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. . . . Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. (Acts 3:21, 24)

He later writes in his second epistle:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . .? (II Peter 3:10-12)

His point is clear: Repent now, or these days will come upon you in a flash!

In one of his early epistles, I Thessalonians, written about AD 50, Paul ends every chapter with an admonition concerning Christ's return:

» . . . to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1:10)

» For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? (2:19)

» . . . so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. (3:13)

» For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (4:16)

» Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (5:23)

This repeated emphasis on His second coming suggests urgency and an ever-narrowing window of time before that great day arrives. This is the typical Pauline approach, found in some form in nearly every epistle.

Even James preaches Jesus' imminent return:

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:7-9)

John, too, mentions Christ returning soon in his first epistle:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. . . . And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. (I John 2:18, 28)

Finally, the book of Revelation is full of warnings that Jesus Christ will return before long. Its first verse informs us that the book will reveal "things which must shortly take place." Verse 3 says, "The time is near," and verse 7 proclaims, "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him." In six of the letters to the seven churches, there is a mention of His coming to them (Revelation 2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11, 20), four of which are specific references to His second coming. Chapter 19, of course, prophesies of His return to marry His bride and put down His enemies. The final chapter contains three instances of Jesus Himself warning us, "Behold, I am coming quickly!" (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20).

These are just a few of the New Testament references to Christ's return—and this list does not contain any material from the four gospels.

### **Jesus' Instruction**

Our Savior says in John 14:2-3, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." Jesus had clearly intimated throughout His ministry that His physical appearance in Judea did not signal the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. In fact, many times He told His disciples that He had come to die (see, for instance, Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19)!

By the last few months of His ministry, His disciples had at least intellectually accepted this, enough to ask Him, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of

the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus' response is the Olivet Prophecy, which speaks of the signs that will precede His return and the awesome display of divine power that will accompany Him when He comes.

But He does not stop there. He goes on to give His disciples three fundamental principles vital to having the proper approach to His return. First, He teaches that we must learn to read the signs so we can recognize how close His return is—at least we will know in which generation He will return (Matthew 24:32-35).

Second, He warns that we will not know precisely when He will come back, for that information is known only by the Father (verses 36-44). Therefore, we are advised to watch—that is, be aware of events, trends, and attitudes both inside and outside the church, as well as in ourselves—and to prepare for His return at any time.

Third, in the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants, He says to continue doing the job He has given us to do no matter what conditions *appear* to be (verses 45-51). If we say, "My master is delaying his coming," we are likely to veer off the path of righteousness and abuse the brethren. Thinking we have many more years before His return puts off the day of judgment, causing us to relax our determination to be transformed into Christ's image, reduce our excitement about and anticipation of His Kingdom, and ignore our sins.

The prophet Amos cries, "Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near" (Amos 6:3). The very act of believing judgment is delayed causes violence and destruction to descend nearer and swifter! As Solomon puts it, "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). When humans think they have gotten away with sin, their hearts become calloused to it, and they commit more and worse sin, bringing on its penalties: distress, destruction, and death.

In Luke's account, Jesus gives the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants just after instructing His disciples to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Luke 12:31). Notice how He prefaces His comments:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (verses 35-40)

From this, we can see that expectant watchfulness is the normal posture of a Christian. Jesus wants us to be ready for His return at any time, and as servants, we are in no position to determine when to expect Him. He will come when He will come, and we must be prepared to welcome Him whenever that happens to be.

### **A Thief in the Night**

The apostle Paul picks up Jesus' language in his own admonition to the Thessalonians:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. . . . Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. (I Thessalonians 5: 1-4, 6)

Thieves send no warning messages ahead of them that they are coming, so break-ins are usually sudden and shocking events. We are assured that Christ's return will be equally surprising to most on the earth. The Bible's indications are that He will come when a majority of people least expect Him: when newscasts assure us of "Peace at last!" and the whole world is busy with the affairs of this life (Matthew 24:37-39). Then, everything will fall to pieces with a bang!

Yet, Christians should not be taken by surprise. We are supposed to be aware of the signs of the times, evaluating the course of events, and growing in the grace and knowledge of God, so that, no matter when He comes, we are prepared to meet Christ in the air. Because we are not in darkness, our eyes should be fixed on what is truly important during these troubled times: God's Kingdom and His righteousness.

Like his Master, Paul tells us to watch, and he adds, "Be sober." A sober person's mind is unadulterated by anything that would cause poor judgment, as a drunk's ability to make proper decisions is affected by the booze in his system. One who is sober is serious, thoughtful, cautious, calm, and not given to excesses of any kind. He weighs matters carefully and chooses the wisest course of action.

This should be our stance now, despite what people claim about the timing of Christ's return. The promise of His coming has not been delayed, and things are not as they always were. God's plan marches on; He is maneuvering events, circumstances, and individuals into place. We have been given front-row seats to witness the most astounding series of prophetic fulfillments in human history, and to keep them, we must watch, be sober, and prepare for the return of Jesus Christ.