

## **The End Is Our Beginning**

In a national poll conducted just a year and a half ago, 60% of Americans said they were either optimistic or very optimistic about their future. My, how things have changed. Today 81% say that Covid-19 has created a national emergency. And if you do a simple Google search on the words “Covid-19” and “the future,” you’ll find dozens of articles explaining why your life in the future will be radically changed and mostly for the worse. Some are even joining the Climate Change Evangelists in predicting an end to the world as we know it.

So, as Christians, how should we think about all this? Does the Bible, and especially Jesus, have anything to say about our future? The answer to that is, “Yes and Yes.” One quarter of the Bible is prophecies about the future. Now, many of those prophecies have already been fulfilled, such as, the prophecies of Jesus’ coming to earth the first time. These fulfilled prophecies give us proof of the Bible’s reliability. But there are some 1,800 passages in the Bible – 318 of these are in the New Testament – that speak of the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus Himself spoke often of this.

Our final Affirmation of Faith, #12, deals with the topic of our future. It says...

*The Last Things - We believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of His Kingdom. We believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal felicity (happiness) of the righteous, and the endless suffering of the wicked.*

So, what does all that mean and what importance does it have for us in the present? That’s what we’ll study today. Now, I could spend weeks on this topic but I have 30 minutes, so let’s organize this into three categories: Christ’s Return, the Judgment, and Our Final Hope. First:

### **I. We Believe in the Personal and Visible Return of Jesus Christ**

The personal return of Jesus Christ has been a doctrinal cornerstone of our hope for nearly 2,000 years. Even people who aren’t Christians know what the phrase “Second Coming” refers to. But what are the biblical details of His coming?

Matt. 24 is a detailed account of the return of Jesus. Now, it’s clear to me from what Jesus says in this chapter that His return will happen in two parts or two phases. Not everyone believes that but here’s what I believe Jesus taught. Phase one is described in verses 36-44. It begins...

**“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Matt. 24:36)**

So, if anyone teaches, preaches, or tweets to you that they have figured out the date of when Jesus is coming again, DON’T BELIEVE THEM! Or if they say that the world could be destroyed before Jesus returns, IT’S NOT TRUE! It can’t happen. So, don’t lose sleep over it.

But then, in verses 37-39, Jesus talks about how, in Noah’s day, everyone but Noah’s family didn’t believe God either. Jesus says that the people were “unaware until the flood came and swept them away. So will be the coming of the Son of Man.” Then He says...

**“... two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matt. 24:40-42)**

The clear teaching here is that this phase of the coming of Jesus is secret. No one knows when it will happen, and even when it does happen, Christians will seemingly disappear. That’s why this part of the Second Coming of Jesus has been called the *“rapture,”* which means “to be caught up.” This word comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word *harpazo*, used by Paul in 1 Thess. 4:17 to describe this same event. So, that’s phase one. Jesus returns but does NOT touch the earth. The trumpet sounds which only Christians hear, the dead Christians rise from their graves, and the Christians still alive at that time will follow and rise into...

**... the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.**

This phase 1 happens BEFORE the Great Tribulation, which is a period of intense suffering for the whole earth that lasts seven years. But there’s another phase of the Second Coming described by Jesus in Matt. 24:29-31. Here the scene is quite different. This happens AFTER the Great Tribulation. It says...

**“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”**

There are three key differences between phase two and phase one of the Second Coming.

1. Phase two happens *“immediately”* after the tribulation. So, then it wouldn’t be a secret, would it? The Tribulation begins with the anointing of the antichrist. Once that happens, everyone will know that Jesus will return in seven years.
2. In phase two it says that *“all tribes of the earth”* will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds. This means it wouldn’t be a secret so it must be a different event from phase one.
3. Not in this Scripture but in the Old Testament prophet Zechariah’s prophecy of Christ’s coming, it says...

**On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley ... (Zech. 14:4)**

But in phase one it says that Jesus will meet Christians *“in the air.”*

So, do you see that these descriptions of Christ’s coming can’t be describing the same single event? So, Jesus’ Second Coming must take place in two phases.

But whether you believe we’ll be raptured out of this world before the Great Tribulation or you believe that all Christians on earth at the time will go through the Great Tribulation, the over-arching message from Jesus in Matt. 24 is still the same...

**Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ... Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matt. 24:42, 44)**

But why does Jesus give this warning? What does it mean to “be ready,” and what are the consequences of not being ready? Those questions bring us to our second important belief...

## **II. We Believe in the Final Judgment of All Humanity**

An old fable tells of three apprentice devils coming before Satan to present their proposals of how to tempt and ruin people. The first said, "I will tell them there is no God." Satan said, "That will delude only a few, for people know in their hearts that there IS a God." The second devil said, "I will tell them there is no hell." Satan replied, "You will deceive no one that way! People believe in justice and know that, in the end, the scales must be balanced." But the third devil then came with a devilish smile and said, "I will tell them there is no hurry." Satan said, "Go, you will ruin them by the thousands."<sup>i</sup>

Let's face it, judgment in any form is not a popular concept today. Even on a very small scale, not speaking about moral judgment, but simply judging the winner or loser of a children's sports contest, there are people who say, "Don't keep score! It will damage the tender psyche of my child!" Or there are colleges that provide "safe spaces" for students because they have such a low tolerance for any form of judgement by others. All of this has grown from the same root, from a belief that all forms of judgment are bad.

But this is not the message of the Bible. The Bible not only speaks fluently about right and wrong, it also states clearly that at the "end of the age" there will be a massive balancing of the books. Rev. 20 describes it...

**And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (Rev. 20:12-13)**

But why is this true? Wouldn't life be better, wouldn't eternity be better if there were no judgment at all? How can God be loving and still judge people, sending them to hell? Why does judgment have to exist?

So, what if you could do anything you wanted and there were no negative consequences whatsoever? What if, when you stole from someone, they didn't really lose anything? Would that be good? Or, when you chose to drink too much, and then drive home, and you hit a pedestrian with your car, what if they didn't die? What if they didn't even get hurt? Would life be better if there were no consequences to bad behavior?

Well, so far all we've considered is what we might gain from such a system. But what might we lose? If there were no such thing as judgment, as consequences, what would be missing from our lives?

If there were no such thing as judgment, there would be no courts, no jails, no prisons. There may not even be any hospitals because the consequences of bad choices would be gone. But something else would be missing as well. Wouldn't choice itself be missing? If there were no consequences, if you could do anything you wanted and a positive outcome was still guaranteed, then you would have no choice in the matter. You would simply be an automaton, a robot. You would never be able to say, "Good or bad, I did that!" You would never feel that sense of accomplishment or pride or satisfaction in knowing that, imperfect as it may be, you built that, or you wrote that, or you accomplished that. There would be nothing that distinguished you from a billion other people. So, take away judgment, take away consequences, and you take away individual choice. And quite literally, you take away you. "YOU" would not exist. I would not exist. For me, that's way too much to lose.

The Rev. 20 passage describes the “Great White Throne” judgment. This is for unbelievers only. This is where only punishments are given out and they are proportional to the severity of the offense: “*according to what they had done.*”

Christians have a separate judgment, not to determine whether we go to heaven or hell, that has already been settled by our faith in Jesus’ work on the cross. But our judgment is to determine our proportional rewards as is described in 2 Cor. 5:10...

**For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.**

And 1 Cor. 3 describes this as a “fire” judgment that test the quality of our work...

**... each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:13-15)**

God’s judgment is not evil. Far from it. It’s the foundation for healthy self-esteem and the eternal reminder that, amidst all the mistakes you made in this life, as a believer you also made good choices and took good actions which Jesus Himself says He will reward when He returns. In Rev. 22:12, Jesus Himself says...

**“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.”**

Without judgment, life simply is not fair. With it, there is eternal, perfect justice.

But our twelfth Affirmation also points to the fact that...

### **III. We Believe That, At the End, The Life We Hoped for Will Begin**

The End truly is Our Beginning. Affirmation 12 uses the phrase, “*...the eternal felicity (happiness) of the righteous...*” Why are non-Christians so freaked out about the coronavirus? Because for them, the “end of the world” or death means that all is lost – no more friends, no more family, no more beauty or excitement or joy. It means everything of value to them is gone.

But for the Christian, when this world ends or when we die, it’s the beginning! We’ll be reunited with family and friends, and the beauty, excitement, and joy we’ve had here will explode into living color in heaven. I remember visiting a long time Valley member, Ruth Lundgren, just before she died. She asked me, “Pastor, what do you think it will be like when I enter heaven?”

I said, “Well, Jesus says it will be wonderful. So, what do you think Ruth?”

She said, “I think I’ll walk in and there will be Milton (her husband) and Rune (a close friend) sitting at a coffee shop having fika (Swedish coffeebreak). And they’ll look up and see me and say, ‘Ruth, how wonderful to see you!! How’d you get here so fast?’” I said, “Yes Ruth, I’m sure it will be just like that.”

Michael Buble sings of his longing for home when he travels...

*May be surrounded by*

*A million people I*

*Still feel all alone*

*Just wanna go home... let me go home.*

Have you felt that longing? C. S. Lewis writes...

**“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>ii</sup>**

Where's your home? Pastor and author, Randy Alcorn, wrote a book I highly recommend entitled, "Heaven." In it he describes it this way...

Imagine someone takes you to a party. You see a few friends there, enjoy a couple of good conversations... and some decent appetizers. The party's all right, but you keep hoping it'll get better... Suddenly, your friend says, "I need to take you home." *Now? You think...*

You're disappointed – nobody wants to leave a party early – but you leave, and your friend drops you at your house... As you open the door... you sense someone's there... You flip on the light and, "Surprise!" Your house is full of smiling people, familiar faces.

It's a party – for *you*. You smell your favorite food – barbecued ribs and pecan pie... The tables are full. It's a feast. You recognize the guests, people you haven't seen for a long time. Then one by one, the people you most enjoyed at the other party show up at your house [too]. This turns out to be the *real* party. You realize that if you'd stayed longer at the other party, as you wanted, you wouldn't be at the real party...

Christians faced with terminal illness or imminent death often feel they're leaving the party before it's over. They have to go home early. They're disappointed, thinking of all they'll miss when they leave. But the truth is, the real party is underway at home – precisely where they're going. They're not the ones missing the party; those of us left behind are. <sup>iii</sup>

Rev. 2:17 says...

**"... To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."**

And Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic for five decades, makes this comment...

Our true identity will unfold in the new name God will give us. And the name is a secret between God and you. Think about that... In heaven, you will not only find what was irretrievably lost, but when you receive it – your new name, your true identity – you will be a thousand times more yourself than the sum total of all those nuances, gestures, and inside subtleties that defined the earthbound "you." On earth you may think you fully blossomed, but heaven will reveal that you barely budded.

What's more, you will be like none other in heaven. The fact that no one else has your name shows how utterly unique you are to God. You touch His heart in a way no one else can. You please Him like none other. It is a royal seal of His individual love on you. <sup>iv</sup>

Dear friends, Christ's return is real, a day of Judgment is real and Heaven and Hell are real. Today, you have a choice whether you will live forever in Heaven with the One who loves you like no other or if you will go to the home of the one who fought your whole life to keep you estranged from your Heavenly Father. Once you die or once Jesus returns, that choice will be gone. The Bible says...

**... Behold, now is the favorable time ... now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2)**

God honors you by giving you this privilege to choose. What's your choice? Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 317

<sup>ii</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) p. 120

<sup>iii</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishing, Co., 2004) p. 457

<sup>iv</sup> Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven, Your Real Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) p.103