

The Second Coming of Jesus

After Jesus ascended to Heaven, his followers expected him to eventually return to the earth again. This expected return is known as the Second Coming. It is also called the Second Advent, the Parousia, and the Last Coming.

During his ministry Jesus talked about a second coming on a number of occasions. For example, in John 14:3, he says "I will come back", and in Matthew 16:27 he says "For the Son of Man is going to return in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

Most Christians believe that Jesus did promise to return. But some people are puzzled by certain statements he made regarding the time of his return. One such statement can be found at Matthew 16:28, in which he says "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Another example is found at Luke 21:32, where he says "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." He makes similar statements in Luke 9:27 and Mark 9:1.

Some people take these statements to mean that Jesus promised to return while some of his disciples were still alive. But his meaning isn't completely clear, and it's possible to interpret the statements in a way that doesn't put any time limit on when he will come back.

However, his original followers may have misunderstood him, because they believed that he would return very quickly. That's why many of them stayed in Jerusalem instead of going back to their homes in Galilee and returning to their former occupations. They expected the second coming to take place either in Jerusalem or on the nearby Mount of Olives, and they wanted to be in the area when it happened. Because they anticipated only a short wait, they saw no reason to go back to their previous way of life.

The apostle Paul also expected a quick return. Although he apparently never met Jesus, he knew about the promised return, and he expected to live long enough to see it happen. In 1Corinthians 7:29-31 he says that the time is so short that believers must drastically change the way they live. But several of his letters, particularly those he wrote to the Thessalonians, reveal that some people were starting to wonder why Jesus hadn't already returned and were concerned about the delay.

As the delay grew longer, it was natural for people to start worrying that they wouldn't live long enough to see Jesus return. But an intriguing passage at John 21:20-23 suggests that many people held onto their hopes for a surprisingly long time. At one point in this passage Peter asks Jesus about the final fate of the Beloved Disciple. The passage continues as follows:

Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

Evidently Jesus had once made a statement about wanting the Beloved Disciple "to remain alive until I return." Such a statement could have caused people to expect this disciple to live until the second coming. Thus, as long as he remained alive, people could still hold out hope that Jesus would soon return.

The passage also mentions a rumor that the Beloved Disciple would never die. This could indicate that he eventually reached a very advanced age. But at some point he finally did die, and this may have been the final blow to the expectations of a quick second coming. Some scholars think that this passage was written shortly after this disciple's death, and that it is an attempt to explain why Jesus still hadn't come back.

Because the early hopes for a quick return weren't fulfilled, later Christians gradually shifted their attention away from the second coming. But most modern Christians still believe in it. A number of people have even predicted an exact time and place for it, and in some cases large crowds gathered to watch. Such predictions are often based on "signs" such as natural disasters, wars, the appearance of evil political leaders, an increase in immorality, and sightings of the Wandering Jew.

The study of biblical prophecies has led some people to expect the return to take place during a future period known as the End Time. Other predicted events of this period include a final war between Good and Evil, the resurrection of the dead saints, the Last Judgment, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Opinions differ as to whether Christ will return before, during, or after these other events.

The Rapture

Some people associate the Second Coming of Jesus with an expected event known as the Rapture. This refers to an envisioned future time when Jesus will suddenly appear in the clouds and pull all true Christians up to him, then take them to heaven. Everyone else will be left on the earth, where they will go through a period of torment called the Tribulation.

During the Rapture all saved people will be pulled up to Jesus at the same moment, and will appear to vanish instantly from the face of the earth. In the same process all dead people who lived righteous Christian lives will be resurrected and also pulled up. Thus Jesus will rescue not only the living righteous, but also those who have died.

Many of the expectations about the Rapture are based on Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, especially a passage at 1Thessalonians 4:16-17:

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.

Jesus will not come down to the earth's surface, but only to the clouds, and the saved will be pulled up to meet him there. Many Christians believe that they will be "glorified" as they are pulled up. This means that their bodies will be converted into an imperishable perfect form, and that their minds will be freed from any desire to do sinful things or think sinful thoughts. This is seen as a necessary step in preparing them to enter heaven.

After the Rapture, the people left behind will have to suffer through the Tribulation, a period of famine, plagues, pestilence and war. According to some predictions, this will last for seven years.

Some Christians expect a different order of events, with the Rapture not taking place until either the mid-point or the end of the Tribulation.

NOTE

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