

## When Will Christ Return?

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This Spring we've been taking a long, deep look at Jesus, the Son of God. His life, teaching, ministry, trial, death, resurrection, and now his *return*. When will Jesus come back to earth as he promised? How will he come back? What will his return accomplish? We will answer these three questions over the next three weeks as we consider *The Return of Christ*. This morning we're asking: When will Jesus return? Could it happen at any minute or do we need to wait for certain signs to be fulfilled? Is this one of those pie-in-the-sky doctrines or does it actually impact daily life?

### Eagerness for Return

There are many texts that suggest a sudden return of Christ: Jesus said: "[You must also be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect](#)" (Matt 24:44). When you don't expect it; suggests it could happen at any minute. Paul and Peter describe the return of Christ as "[a thief in the night](#)"; its comes upon you suddenly (2 Pet 3:10; 1 Thess 5:2). There are many short, punchy sayings that alert our attention to his imminent return: "[The time is near](#)" (Rev 1:3); "[the coming of the Lord is at hand](#)" (Jas 5:8); "[Surely I am coming soon](#)" (Rev 22:20). These texts pile up pointing to the imminent return of Jesus, meaning he could come at any moment. If his return is imminent, how should we respond? One clear response is to wait **eagerly**: Christ "[will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him](#)" (Heb 9:28). Feel the eagerness leap off the page at the end of Revelation, "[Come, Lord Jesus!](#)" Rev 22:20. The word "wait" contains anticipation. Its not disinterested expectation, "Yeah, I can't wait for Jesus to come back." It's pregnant with hope even celebration. That hope is connected to the return of Jesus; it looks forward to his imminent return. **Imminence ignites eagerness**. When the release of a film or album you've been wanting gets closer, our eagerness grows. We say things like "I *can't wait* for that movie to come out." We also feel this way about home. When we've been on a long trip, and home is imminent, we get eager to get out the car, step out of the plane, and arrive. Imminence ignites eagerness; it even generates hopeful celebration. Why? Because we can taste victory in advance, excited about making it home [Austin!], and it makes us dance. It brings joy. Ever notice that in a blowout playoff game or Superbowl, the winning team will start jumping on the sidelines 30 seconds before the victory is official? They don't wait to celebrate when the win is imminent. They flood out onto the field in celebration, even though the game isn't over. Imminence ignites eagerness; it's packed with hope that anticipates the future. This should be true of Christians who anticipate the return of Christ. People redeemed by Jesus cant wait to meet Jesus. They anticipate his return...unless our hearts are captured by something else, unless something else is imminent: a break thru idea, a big client, a bigger paycheck, a show, a new iPhone. Moms are often fried and most passionate about getting a break. Professionals are eager to be successful. Where is your eagerness? Because you are anticipating...finite things should spark a little excitement, but the infinitely glorious thing—return of Christ—should eclipse all excitement...if we are waiting for him.

## Perseverance to Return

Now what if there are signs that have to be fulfilled before Jesus returns? Should we anticipate those? Even if you're not a follower of Jesus, you've probably heard or seen some of these signs on a billboard, in a newspaper. Jesus describes many of these signs of the times in Matthew 24/Mark 13. There is some more detail in Revelation, but we'll leave that for another time. In Mark 13, the disciples eagerly inquire about Christ's return, asking when and what signs will accompany his coming. We don't have time for all of them, but let's look at three major ones: **First, the gospel will be preached to all the nations** (Mk 13:10). Some people point to this text and conclude that the gospel of Jesus must be preached to every nation or people group before Jesus comes back. Last I looked there are around 8,000 unreached people groups. **Second, false messiahs and prophets will emerge and lead Christians astray** (13:22). Some say this hasn't happened, and that there will be one big anti-Christ who will pose as God. **Third, there will be a great tribulation of intense suffering** (13:19). People point out that things have to get much worse before they get better. Together, these "signs" constitute a delay before Jesus returns. But I thought the return of Christ was like a thief in the night. Imminent? How do we reconcile this? Theologian Wayne Grudem offers three options. First, all of these were historically fulfilled, so return is imminent. Regarding the gospel being preached to all nations, the word actually doesn't refer to a geography or people group, but to the known inhabited area of the world, which when this was written would have been the Greek world or Roman Empire. They didn't have precise ethno-linguistic groupings that we make today. In support of this interpretation, I would point out that many of the so-called unreached peoples were actually, at one time, reached, e.g. Muslims in North Africa during the time of Augustine. What about the false prophets, there actually have been many of those. The Jews have falsely prophesied the return of Christ several times. What about the tribulation, during the reign of Emperor Nero thousands of Christians were burned at the stake. So you could make the case that these events have been, and are repeatedly fulfilled. Now, the second point is that none of these have been fulfilled, and to be honest, it does seem that there will be an intensifying of suffering, false prophets, & gospel witness, but it also appears that this has already happened. So what's the third option? The third option Grudem gives is that it is unlikely but possible that the signs have already been fulfilled. In other words, there is deliberate, holy ambiguity. He says that the point of these texts are not to read the tea leaves of the future, but to heighten our anticipation of Christ's return, like the texts we looked at earlier. The gospel was preached to the known world, but also needed to go further. The persecution was great but may get greater. There have been false prophets/messiahs, but there may be more. This seems to do justice to both groups of texts—those that say Jesus return is imminent and those that say there are signs of the times. In fact, the Scriptures do teach that when Jesus arrived on earth in his first coming he inaugurated a new time, attended by unprecedented conversion, suffering, and false prophets. One of the follies of the "end times" Christians is that they locate the "end times" at a point in the future instead of recognizing that Jesus has already inaugurated the endtimes in his life, death, and resurrection. **Therefore, the unlikely but possible fulfillment does the most justice to all of the Biblical texts.** It also keeps us focused on Christ, embracing a holy ambiguity, instead of focusing on signs or "end-times" scenarios. Now, is it possible to anticipate something that we think is unlikely but possible? Certainly.

We do it all the time. When we put our seatbelt on before driving, we are anticipating a wreck that we actually believe is unlikely but possible. What, then, does this anticipation look like in real life? Returning to our earlier theme, **imminence ignites eagerness**, for all evil to be undone, eagerness to encounter the returning Christ. Another way is to recognize the tension regarding fulfillment should trigger perseverance in our faith. **Tension triggers perseverance.** We don't know what's going to happen but we do know that we need to persevere. Returning to the need for the gospel to be preached, it's important to notice the conditions Jesus places around it: **"you will be hated for MY NAMES SAKE and those who persevere to the end will be saved"** (13:13). Warning/Promise. This means that being devoted to Jesus and sharing his exclusive message of grace will be hard. Expect it. He's worth it. He's better. It also means the tension of not knowing when the gospel will be entirely preached in the whole world should trigger personal perseverance in testifying to the unsearchable riches of Christ to *all people*. We don't know who; he does. We need to be Gospel Philanthropists, generously giving away God's grace in Christ. No one is beyond his grace. **Endtime tension shifts our attention from missions statistics to Spirit-filled witness**—we preach the gospel for his names sake, for lifting up his name and spreading his grace—regardless of the stats or cost. In verse 21, where we are warned about false teachings, the context also tells us that we are to "be on our guard" to keep our eyes out for the return of the true Christ. **Instead of fretting over false saviors, we should be focusing on the one, true Savior.** Reading about him, talking to him. As for intensifying tribulation, the text tells us to "keep awake" in our sufferings. Instead of being lulled away from the exclusivity of Christ because it's hard, we should strive to be sober minded, focused on his sufficiency and promise of return to put things right. **We need not calendar global tribulations, but count on Christ.** Christian faith is not a one and done; it is a deep, persevering faith through all of life. If you won a priceless painting, Monet's Water Lilly Pond, would you hang it in your basement, look at it once, and then carry on as usual? No, you'd hang it up in a prominent place, return to it at least once a day, to revel in its priceless beauty. You'd show it off to others and protect it at all costs. So it is with Christ. Put him on display for all to see. Be a Gospel Philanthropist. Return to take him in day after day, enjoy and revel in the preciousness of Christ, and protect your faith. Stay awake. *The one who endures to the end will be saved.* Tension Triggers Perseverance He's coming back. Imminence Ignites Eagerness. When will Christ return? No one knows the day or the hour. Holy ambiguity. How should we respond? Eager perseverance. In the words of The World Council of Churches: **"We do not know what is coming, but we do know who is coming to us."**