

The Lord's Return and Last Things

Fight The Urge To Fit In (part 9)

Summary: We believe that Jesus Christ will return to raise all the dead, judge people and nations, consign Satan and his followers to hell and bring into heaven all who believe in him by faith.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2; Revelation 21:1–8; 22–27

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Metaphorical Language

We need to start today by defining just what is a metaphor. According to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*, a metaphor is: 1) a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable; 2) a thing regarded as symbolic of something else.¹ Put more simply, a metaphor states that one thing is another thing.

Metaphorical language is used often in poetry, song lyrics and novels. We even find it in the Bible (we'll come back to that).

I could give you lots of good examples of metaphor. I'd prefer to give you some bad examples taken from *The Washington Post's* weekly Style Invitational contest:^{2 3}

- She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like that sound a dog makes just before it throws up.
- The hailstones leaped from the pavement, just like maggots when you fry them in hot grease.
- Long separated by cruel fate, the star-crossed lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like two freight trains, one having left Cleveland at 6:36 p.m. travelling at 55 mph, the other from Topeka at 4:19 p.m. at a speed of 35 mph.
- John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.
- The plan was simple, like my brother-in-law George. But unlike George, this plan just might work.

While these are legitimate metaphors, they don't really communicate anything, but they certainly spark laughter (in myself if no one else).

The Bible too uses metaphorical language, which is not really surprising given that it is describing deeper, transcendent, and transformative topics. We would do well to remember this when we read the Bible, that a quick, superficial reading is not often going to get to the heart of the matter. We would do well to soak in the words and images, as conduits of truth.

What Apocalyptic Literature Is and Is Not

It is important to get this right because placing one's faith in Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle transforms our thinking about a whole lot of things. In contrast to the thinking of this fallen world and sinful humanity, we commit our lives to loving, serving and

worshipping the Lord. As a result, we know the good, pleasing and perfect will of God (Rom 12:1-2), as it pertains to the here and now, as well as the then and not yet.

The Bible teaches us many things about the then and not yet. This field of Theology is called Eschatology —and is probably the most popular class at Bible College! Eschatology has to do with doctrine about the last things and includes the subjects of death, the second coming of Christ Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, heaven and hell.

Popular Culture Reigns Supreme

However, if we were to think about it all a little more deeply, we would realise many of our notions about the last things do not actually come from the Bible, but from two popular sources instead: the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (1309-20 AD) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667 AD).

In my case, you might be surprised to discover how fond I am of the 1998 fantasy drama film, *What Dreams May Come*, starring Robin Williams.

Based on the 1978 novel of the same name by Richard Matheson, the worldview of the story is a combination of generous helpings of Spiritualism and Purgatory mixed with a dash of Reincarnation to finish.

While I would not teach the ideas in that film as truth in any way, they are compelling to my imagination.

We rely on such popular sources because the creation stories in *The Book of Genesis* are rather short and sketchy. They don't provide all the details we would like. Milton's great epic poem about the Fall of Mankind and its imagery is ever present in discussions about said missing detail. In a contemporary edition of *Paradise Lost*, the editor argues,

It is a strange fact that you could just about date the decline of the [biblical] story itself, as an essential vehicle for moral and religious truth, from Milton's great telling of it. (Christopher Ricks)⁴

While the creation stories contain great truth, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and *What Dreams May Come*, excite our imagination about last things, and so threaten to distract us with speculations.

Here and Now for Then and Not Yet

While the Bible, disappointingly, tells us very little about the last things, there are plentiful allusions, enough that we know something *IS* going to happen, but we are provided much less real detail than we think we have.

Most of what we are provided comes to us in the form of apocalyptic literature —for example, *The Book of Daniel*, *Revelation*, etc.⁵

What we often fail to recognise is the apocalyptic literature in the Bible is written to a particular people, in a specific time and place, facing particular challenges and threats —like the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, the Jewish persecution, the fall of Jerusalem, later Roman persecutions, etc.

Apocalyptic literature is written in a kind of code, where its referent (i.e., catalytic threat) is hidden, to a degree, perhaps to escape the notice of the authorities. Yet, apocalyptic literature uses common language and images, so the intent of the literature is not obscure to its devoted readers.

Apocalyptic literature is the pre-eminent example of the axiom *the Bible was written for us but not to us*. In this case, it is written very specifically to people other than us, yet also with clear import for us.

The purpose of apocalyptic is to remind those undergoing trials and tribulations that the Almighty is on the throne, that their suffering does not go unnoticed, that their salvation is at hand, justice will be served and there will be rewards for the faithful, for those who persevere. And these are lessons the faithful of all time and in places also need to hear in their midst of their own trials and tribulations.

What Is Essential About the Lord's Return and Last Things

While there is much worth speculating on, our statement reveals what is essential to believe about the Lord's Return and Last Things:

We believe that Jesus Christ will return to raise all the dead, judge people and nations, consign Satan and his followers to hell and bring into heaven all who believe in him by faith.

This statement teaches us four things worth meditating on and studying:

Christ Jesus Will Raise the Dead

Let me begin explaining these four things by naming the elephant in the room: physical death is universal, everyone will experience it. The character Job put it as succinctly as anyone could:

Yes, I know that you will lead me to death—the place appointed for all who live. (Job 30:23)⁶

Contrary to the thinking of this age, the Bible declares death is the penalty for unforgiven sin:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)⁷

Understood in this way, death then is not to be feared by the one who places their faith in Jesus, for

Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)⁸

Whether it is trials, tribulations, natural disasters, persecutions or even the ultimate violence of death, the friends of Jesus have nothing to fear. For believers, death is likened to falling asleep:

then [Jesus] told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I’m on my way to wake him up.” Then the disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen

asleep, he will get well.” Jesus, however, was speaking about his death, but they thought he was speaking about natural sleep. (John 11:11–13)⁹

How can we treat death as if it is like falling asleep? Because the second coming of Christ Jesus is foretold:

Jesus told him ... “in the future you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:64)¹⁰

Because the resurrected and ascended Christ will return, God’s purpose for this miracle is to gather his people together, to reward the faithful and judge the wicked:

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done. (Matthew 16:27)¹¹

Now, this is a pretty bold and outlandish claim. Just because the Bible says so, how can we know this is true?

We can know this is true because we have every reason to believe that Jesus is who he said he is and that what is written about him is true. For example, on the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter boldly declared,

God has raised this Jesus; we are all witnesses of this. (Acts 2:32)

Peter spoke of himself as a witness and the other disciples with him as witnesses. This direct testimony then bolsters our belief in Jesus’ resurrection.

Consider the alternative:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17)

The Christian faith hangs on this doctrine concerning last things. If you can confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9), then believing in Jesus’ second coming is a logical conclusion.

Therefore, the first thing our statement teaches us is **Christ Jesus will raise the dead**.

When the Resurrected Christ returns, he will gather his people together, reward the faithful and judge the wicked. In order to do this, there will be a resurrection of the dead:

Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28–29)¹²

If Christ has himself been raised, in front of witnesses, then we can believe we also will be raised for that is his promise and his warning. Yet, before I continue discussing these last things, let me reiterate with scripture there is a right attitude toward the second coming:

So now, little children, remain in him so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming. (1 John 2:28)¹³

In talking about last things, we cannot lose sight of the here and now. We will all be raised at Christ Jesus' second coming—that's a promise and a warning. Let us start preparing for its fulfilment now by cultivating our own faith and lifestyle, with the help of each other, so that we reach unity in the faith and maturity in bearing the image of God in our world (Eph 10:9-13).

Further, keep in mind the timing of the second coming is known only to God the Father:

Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone. (Matthew 24:36)¹⁴

I knew a man who had worked out the year and month of the Lord's return. His calculations were quite compelling, but they were based on faulty assumptions. His first faulty assumption was that we can know the year and month. Did he think Jesus was lying when he said this?

It is very easy to get 'tied up in knots' over an interpretation of apocalyptic literature, yet that is not its purpose. We are only provided enough details to take to heart the promise, yet not enough to form a roadmap to these last things.

Christ Jesus Will Judge People and Nations

Beyond the promise and warning all will be resurrected, the next thing this statement teaches is **Christ Jesus will judge people and nations**.

The Father, in fact, judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, (John 5:22)¹⁵

The final judgment is certain, it is right, and it will be impartial. Its purpose is to display the glory of God, to vindicate the righteous and to condemn sin. Why should anyone be surprised at this? Does anyone believe humanity is not deserving of judgement?

All of us will face judgment after death:

And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment (Hebrews 9:27)¹⁶

Interestingly, the friends of Jesus will be judged on how we have lived our Christian lives,¹⁷ but not judged for sin.¹⁸ Why do you think that is? Because Christ Jesus saved us from our sin, silly! (how often do I need to repeat that?)

Our understanding of this judgment is sorely lacking, however.

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. (John 3:16–18)

When we imagine Jesus judging people, do not imagine the weighing of scales, where every secret is laid bare and compared to the relative value of all the good one has done. That is the Hindu concept of *karma* and has no place in Christian thinking.

Yes, it is true Christ Jesus will lay bare all our secrets,

For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
(Hebrews 4:12)

Rather than looking down on us with displeasure, imagine instead Christ Jesus is the measure against which we will be judged. And that judgment is not delayed until his return.

God knows RIGHT NOW whether you or I do, in fact, believe in the one and only Son of God. When we finally stand before Christ Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb, will you shrink in fear at the exposure of our sin or will you revel in the light?

That is the nature of his judgment. We either stand condemned already or in his righteousness won for us.

Just as I mentioned last week, how we can have a personal faith but not an individual faith, judgment will be applied to nations as well as individuals:

he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:31–32)¹⁹

What this judgment will look like and how it will be applied is left up to our imaginations. However, what little info we are provided is meant to help us understand God takes both individuals and nations seriously, he cares for persons and the effect of the world's systems on the poor and vulnerable. The final judgment will bring justice to all.

Some Will Be Consigned to Hell

Following our acknowledgment of the general resurrection and final judgment, the next thing we learn is **some will be consigned to Hell** and **some will enjoy Heaven**.

Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28–29)²⁰

At the final judgment, those who did not respond to Christ in their lifetime will be condemned:

The one who rejects me and doesn't receive my sayings has this as his judge: The word I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (John 12:48)²¹

This is a 'bitter pill to swallow', a hard teaching. Yet should we be surprised?

Is it unreasonable that those who reject, dismiss, ignore or are openly hostile to their creator God do not stand in a right relationship with him? They don't want to be near God in this life, why then would they want to be with God in their eternal life?

“Ah, but what if they don't know anything about God or Jesus?” you might be wondering.

Know nothing about God? Really?

For God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. (Romans 1:18–20)

There is more than enough evidence in the world around us, and within human nature, to lead us to search for meaning and purpose beyond ourselves. Sitting around a campfire, we all naturally look to the heavens and wonder, "Is this really all there is?"

And we all inherently know the answer is no, there is more.

The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth ... he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things ... He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.' (Acts 17:24–28)

We may not be able to put our yearning into words, but you know there must be an answer to the question that haunts each and every human person. Knowing there must be something more places the onus on each of us to find out what that something more is, which will lead us to HIM.

If you choose to ignore the question, then you are rejecting the very problem at the heart of the human condition and that is on you. No one can claim they didn't know the answer to the question when they did not bother to put any effort in to finding an answer.

If you stand before Christ Jesus and he says to you, "I'm sorry, I don't know you", then whose fault will that be?

Some Will Enjoy Heaven

To those who know Christ Jesus and are known by him, he will say,

'Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master's joy.' (Matthew 25:21)

Believers in Christ Jesus will be raised to eternal life

For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:40)²²

The fulness of life in heaven that will be enjoyed by believers is wholly sustained by God:

I did not see a temple in it, because the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Revelation 21:22–23)

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city's main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, (Revelation 22:1–2)²³

What words or images can really describe the paradise that awaits the saints?

What is most sad about this situation for the unbeliever is that very little is required for entry:

And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”
(Luke 23:43)²⁴

Even a thief dying on a cross beside Jesus was granted entry because, in that moment, he knew Christ and Christ knew him.

This is not to belittle the act of placing one's faith in Christ Jesus and beginning to live a Christian lifestyle but, really, what barrier is there to entry? What have you really got to lose now but life eternal in paradise?

Conclusion

There is much we do not know nor understand about the Lord's return and other last things. What we do know is HE WILL RETURN! And when he does, he will raise the dead to judge individuals and nations. As a result, some will be consigned to hell and some will enjoy heaven.

Make no mistake: the choice is not going to be made in the future. The choice is before you right now!

If Christ Jesus did not himself rise from the dead, then don't worry about it. It is all mere speculation, a nice idea. Yet the weight of the evidence is on Jesus' resurrection.

Since he is enjoying eternal life with our Heavenly Father, the choice is to be made now, if you have not made it yet. Believe in the One sent to trample death and free us from the curse of sin. With your belief, eternal life begins for you now, the free, full and forever life promised by Jesus to his friends.

Endnotes

- 1 Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 2 David K. Israel, “18 Metaphors and Analogies Found in Actual Student Papers (Or Not—But They're Still Hilarious)”, *Mental Floss*, 22-Sept-2011, <https://replug.link/a5c12d20> (accessed 28-Sept-2022).
- 3 “The Style Invitational goes viral”, *The Washington Post*, <https://wapo.st/3fk1u8B> (accessed 28-Sept-2022).
- 4 *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, Christopher Ricks (ed.) (New York, NY, USA: New American Library, 1968), pg xxii; as quoted in James M. Kee, “Typology and Tradition: Refiguring the Bible in Milton's *Paradise Lost*,” ed. Gary A. Phillips, *Semeia* 51 (1990), pg, 156.
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

- 6 See also 2Sa 14:14; Ro 5:12.
- 7 See also 1Ch 10:13; Pr 11:19; Ro 5:12.
- 8 See also Ps 116:15; Pr 14:32; Ro 14:8; Php 1:21; Rev 14:13.
- 9 See also Mk 5:39; Ac 13:36; 1Co 15:6.
- 10 See also Lk 21:27; Ac 1:11; Heb 9:28; pp Mk 14:62.
- 11 See also Da 7:13-14; Mt 25:31-32; Jn 14:3; 1Co 4:5; 1Th 4:16-17; 1Pe 5:4; 1Jn 3:2; Jude 14-15.
- 12 See also Da 12:2; Ac 24:15.
- 13 See also Mk 13:35; Ac 3:19-20; 1Ti 6:13-14; 2Pe 3:11.
- 14 See also Mal 3:1; Mt 24:44 pp Lk 12:40; Rev 16:15; pp Mk 13:32.
- 15 See also Ac 10:42; 17:31; Rev 1:18.
- 16 See also Ro 14:12; 1Pe 4:5; Rev 20:11-12.
- 17 See 1Co 4:5; 2Co 5:10; Heb 9:28; 1Jn 4:17.
- 18 See also Jn 3:18; 5:24; Ro 8:1-2,33-34.
- 19 See also Da 12:2; Jn 12:48; Ro 2:16; 14:10; 1Co 4:5; 2Ti 4:1; 1Pe 4:5; Rev 20:11-15.
- 20 See also Mt 25:46.
- 21 See also 2Th 1:7-8; 2Pe 3:7; Jude 15; Rev 20:15.
- 22 See also Jn 11:25; 2Co 4:14; 1Th 4:16.
- 23 See also Isa 55:1; Eze 47:8-9,12; Jn 7:38-39; Rev 2:7.
- 24 See also 2Co 12:3-4; Rev 2:7.