



Part 32 – When Jesus Returns

Revelation 14:14-20

In the Apostles Creed, Christians affirm that the Lord Jesus will one day return to “judge the living and the dead.” This final judgment has always been a part of essential Christian belief. Indeed, to deny the coming day of final judgment would be to deny a host of specific passages in the Bible. During his ministry, Jesus frequently warned of the judgment to come and cautioned his hearers to be ready to face it.

1. When Jesus returns, he will do so personally and publicly.

This portion of John’s vision is all about Jesus’ return as a singular and public event. In Acts 1, an angel said to the dazed apostles as they watched Jesus ascend to the Father in heaven: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” That is, Jesus’ return will be public and will be witnessed by the whole world.

Perhaps you think that the actual return of Jesus and an actual final judgment are just too supernatural for you to accept – too final, too other-worldly. And if that is your standard, then what will you do with an eternal God? Or the Incarnation? Or a sin atoning death? Or the resurrection?

The center of Christianity is the coming of the Son of God into the world as a real man to destroy the works of the devil and create a new people for his own glory. The very heart of our faith is that he did this by obeying the law of God, dying for the sins of his people, rising victorious over death, ascending to God’s right hand, and will return to judge the living and the dead. The second coming of Christ is the completion of his saving work. If you take it away, the whole fabric unravels. What a tragedy it would be if we stripped from the Bible the message of Christ’s ultimate victory. Dennis Johnson writes that “Christ himself is the Royal Judge, authorized...to render the momentous, eternity-determining verdict on every human life.”

The scope of what will be accomplished at the Lord’s return is far greater than the apostles had envisioned when they asked Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel. By the time he writes his second epistle, Peter understood that the kingdom God had promised to restore would be wider than Israel and deeper than politics. It would, in the end, embrace “all things,” a whole new heaven and a new earth, as Isaiah foretold (Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:2-23). Peter would later encourage Christians to anticipate “a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). Jesus’ healing miracles were powerful lessons; previews of a coming healing for the whole cosmos.

- In terms of a rapture, I take the position of the consensus of the church throughout the ages that Christ’s second coming and his taking up (or, *rapture*) of his church are simultaneous events. The doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture is a very recent innovation and is based on a faulty reading of Revelation and other relevant passages. For instance, in **Matthew 24:36-44** Jesus warns that just as in “the days of Noah,” two men will be working, one will be left and the other will be taken away.” Given that Jesus anchors his illustration in the judgment of the flood we must conclude that the ones who are taken away are those who are judged. The ones “left standing,” are those who, like Noah, will be saved. A simple reading of **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17** indicates that Jesus is returning once, both to gather his people to himself and to judge the wicked.

2. When Jesus returns, he will bring his people safely home.

Vs. 14 – The reference to “one like a son of man,” is taken from Daniel’s vision of the Divine and is clearly a reference to Christ (Daniel 7:13). He is crowned with gold and seated on “a white cloud,” which are symbolic of his majesty. The sickle is an instrument of harvest which indicates that this is a reference to his return.

Vv. 15-16 – The angel that comes from the temple is not exercising authority over Christ but announcing the decree of the Father that the time of judgment has come. In John’s gospel, Jesus said that the Father has entrusted judgment to him. This is no indication of differing degrees of authority within the Godhead but, rather, has to do with what theologians call the “processions” among the Persons of the Triune God. The Son proceeds from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. What the Father decrees, the Son accomplishes.

“...the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” – What is being described here is a harvest of grain. Also, there is no reference to this grain being winnowed or gathered up and burned. Therefore, it seems best to take this first act of harvesting as the Lord’s gathering his redeemed people unto eternal salvation.

3. When Jesus returns, he will judge the wicked.

Vs. 17 – There has been much debate over the four angels that are referenced here. While it seems obvious that the first “angel” John sees in verse 14 is the Lord Jesus, it is a bit trickier with the other angels. Here John sees “another angel.”

Vv. 18-19 – The next angel coming out “from the altar” may relate to the prayers of the martyred saints who were said to be “under the altar” (6:9-11). The first angel swings the sharp sickle to harvest the clusters of grapes and then casts them into the wine press which represents God’s judgment upon the wicked (Isaiah 18:5; 63:3; Joel 3:13). In Revelation 19:15, Jesus is depicted as treading “the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.” There the winepress is said to be “outside the city,” indicating separation from God’s people (Revelation 22:14). This second angel that comes forth to judge is not Christ, but this should not be seen as a contradiction of other passages in which we are told that Christ is returning to judge. That fact does not rule out the involvement of his angels.

Vs. 20 – The results of the wicked being cast into the winepress of God’s wrath results in the gruesome image of blood rising over a vast plain some three or four feet deep. Sixteen hundred stadia is about 184 miles, roughly the length of Israel. It is also significant that 1600 is the sum of ten squared multiplied by four squared. Ten is a number indicating completion, and four is a number indicating a world-wide scope (four winds of the earth; “language, nation, tribe and tongue;” four corners of the earth). Sixteen hundred may also be reached by squaring 40. In the Bible, 40 is a number associated with God’s judgment or testing (40 days of flooding in the days of Noah, 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus’ 40 days and nights in the wilderness). The image is meant to “shock the readers back into spiritual reality by awakening them to Babylon’s deadly influence and to God’s serious commitment to judge sin thoroughly and completely.”¹

1. Be Prepared

Jesus described his return as something akin to a thief breaking into a house; it will happen suddenly without warning. He also likened his return to a groom coming to retrieve his bride-to-be at an unannounced time, requiring her to be watchful. Paul tells us that Jesus will return “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” So many of Jesus’ parables were about our need for preparedness. So let us be prepared for him! Be prepared by fleeing from sin and temptation. Be prepared by investing in the things that will matter in eternity. “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

2. Be Working

By this I mean, we must labor to make Christ known. Jesus called his church “the light of the world,” and “a city set upon a hill.” He calls us to look upon the world as a field ready for harvest and to pray that multiplied workers would go into this field to labor for the sake of souls. The coming judgment of the wicked ought to call us out of our complacency. It is a truth which is meant to stoke the fires of our zeal to see men and women of all nations flee to Christ.

3. Be Joyful

The truth of the Lord’s coming judgment is not meant to make us morose, despairing, or fatalistic. We are to welcome the news that justice will be done, and all that is and has been wrong will be made right. It is a joyful thing that Satan will be cast down and all wickedness wiped away. God’s judgment of the wicked will be entirely vindicated. No one will wonder whether justice has been done. It is also doubly joyful that when Jesus returns, he will do so to gather the vast number of his elect into his glorious presence where there will be no more sin or suffering or sorrow. This is the Christian’s “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). “Surely the believer, whose heart is in heaven where Christ, its treasure, is, will be in frequent and close communion with his absent Lord; and the Church, as a Body, ‘looking for and hastening unto the Coming of the Lord,’ will long for the cry that shall break the stillness of the midnight hour- ‘Behold, the BRIDEGROOM comes; go out to meet Him!’” (Octavius Winslow).

¹ Scott Duvall, *A Theology of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2025) p. 228