



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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33. The Parousia

A word derived from Greek, *parousia*, is used in the New Testament and in Christian theology to speak about the appearing of Christ at the end of history as judge and Lord. That word has the basic meaning of “presence” or “arrival”. This matter of his coming, or arrival, really carries the weight of “the visit of a ruler”. This great event marks the end of history as we know it, the consummation of the plan of God, and the beginning of the ushering in of the things of eternity.

The early church had a cry in their hearts: “*Maranatha!* Come, Lord!” This event is the dominant thought in the mind of God’s people: all we do comes from our anticipation of it; to say that Christians are people of hope means that we are people who look to this event as the event that makes sense of all that has happened in the history of the world. Without Christ’s appearing, and without the final judgment that comes, history is just the bland continuation of events with no real significance at all. Look at how the Thessalonian church longed for this great event:

⁸ The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1Thess. 1:8-10)

As we will see a little later in the study, *waiting* for the Son from heaven has a very practical and motivating force in life now.

When Will Christ Appear?

1Corinthians 15:24-28 says:

Then the end will come, when [Jesus Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet”. Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all

This passage spells out the events of history between the ascension of Christ and his *parousia*. In this time he is exerting his reign over all things, bringing his enemies under his feet. Finally the last enemy, death, will be destroyed and history will reach its climax. What Jesus the risen Lord is doing in this time is outworking the great victory of the cross. What happens at the end is the final consummation and total consolidation of that victory. When he comes he will only unveil what already has been accomplished in the great events of his death and resurrection. He will not add *another* victory to those events, but show the full scale of the victory won there.

In a couple of places there is talk about signs that occur before the coming of Christ. In a couple of places in the New Testament we can see that there was a problem with some

false teachers claiming that Christ had already returned. It was linked to a falsity that the resurrection had already taken place.

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. (2Thes. 2:1-2)

Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2Tim. 2:17-18)

In his letter to the Philippians Paul makes clear that the resurrection lies ahead, and that he has not yet reached “perfection” (Php. 3:12). These false teachings seem to have a perfectionistic and idealistic thrust, and to deny the reality of ongoing sin and imperfection in Christian experience.

In Acts 1:7, Jesus made clear to the apostles that the date of his appearing was not one that would ever be open to them or to any human being. In fact, he himself did not know that date, but it was a date set by and known by the Father by His own authority. For any person to try to pry into that date, or even its “general vicinity”, seems to me to be a pointless exercise. When we think about the end and the appearing of Christ, we tend to think in linear terms, and the longer it has been since Christ’s ascension, the sooner it must be to his returning. That is a valid way of thinking. However, we can also think of it in another way. Imagine walking around the edge of volcanic crater. At any point on the track we are equidistant from the volcano’s boiling heart; it could erupt at any time and at any point we are as close to it. So too, as we live our lives in the light of Christ’s return.

What do we make of those passages which speak of what have been called “signs of the end of the age”—e.g. many deceivers appearing, wars and rumours of wars, famines, earthquakes, the persecution of the church, wide-scale apostasy from the faith, the appearing of the desolating abomination, etc. (Matt. 24:4-25)? A few times we are told in these passages to not be alarmed (24:6) because the end is still to come, and that all these things are the beginning of the birth pangs. It could be said that these signs are not signs of the end, but rather of the fact that it is *not yet* the end. In fact, a good student of church history will see that these signs have been present in every age of the church’s life. Jesus’ focus in these passages is to encourage believers to faithfulness, and to endurance (24:13). Throughout this time the gospel is to be proclaimed to the whole world, and then the end will come (24:14).

There is no hidden or secret return of Christ. His returning is apparent to all and is the end of the course of this world’s history, and marks the inauguration of the world to come (Matt. 24:28-31). His return is sudden, surprising, and will catch the unprepared and unwatchful off-guard (1Thess. 5:1-10).

What Happens When Christ Appears?

The new Testament outlines a number of events that occur at the appearing of Christ.

- It is the end of the age: history is wrapped up—Matt. 24:3, 28:20, 25:31ff
- All that is anti-Christ and evil will be destroyed; it is the day of the wrath of God—2Thess. 1:8-9, Rom. 2:5, 1Thess. 1:10, 5:9, Rev. 20:10, etc.
- Those who have longed for and waited for his appearing will rejoice and marvel at him—2Thess. 1:10

- All who have died will be raised, either to judgment or life—Rev. 20:11-15
- The redeemed are gathered to God; and those who have died in Christ are reunited with those who are alive at his coming—2Thess. 2:1, 1Thess. 4:14-18
- The rule of Christ will be recognised, the triumph of God will be universally acknowledged—1Cor. 15:24; Rev. 11:15; Php. 2:9-11
- God’s people will be transformed and glorified—Php. 3:21; 1John 3:2

All of this is told to us with a very practical intention. It is to engender hope, for it is the hope of these things that is the spur to true living in the kingdom.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. (1John 3:2-3)