

IS JESUS REALLY COMING BACK?

INTRODUCTION:

- A. For what it's worth, it appears that most Americans think so. That is certainly reflected in the wild popularity of the Left Behind series from LaHaye and Jenkins. When *The Indwelling*, part 7 of the series, came out in 2000, it opened at number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for hardcover fiction. That's the first time that ever happened for a book from an evangelical publisher. *The Indwelling* edged out both Harry Potter and John Grisham. In about a month it sold more than 2 million copies. ("Culture Beat: Evangelical thriller is No. 1," *World*, July 1, 2000, 15)
- B. The reason so many people believe that Jesus is coming back is no mystery when you read the Bible. The Return of Jesus is a major theme. Hal Lindsey in his classic, *The Late Great Planet Earth* claims that *the Second Coming of Christ is one of the most frequent prophecies in the Bible, mentioned more than five hundred times.* (William Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent*, Revell, Old Tappan, NJ, 1989, 50)
- C. But here we are in 2003 AD...2,003 years after Christ was born. Is Jesus really coming abck? Some people don't think so. They put the return of Christ in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. They have some objections. Let's think it through this morning.

I. OBJECTION #1: "IT HAS BEEN SO LONG!"

- A. What Did Jesus Actually Promise?
 - 1. **John 14:2**, *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*
[Cf. **Acts 1:11**, *Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*]
 - 2. That Jesus is really coming back is a conviction that virtually all true Christians uniformly embrace. But when it gets done to details, the uniformity evaporates. For instance, *The Left Behind* series holds to the belief that the next thing on God's end-times calendar is the Rapture of the Church. On the other hand, John Noe counters with a book called, *Shattering the 'Left Behind' Delusion*. He claims that the "rapture theory" is "tragically unbiblical." He believes that the "last days" are already behind us that all "rapture" Scriptures have already been fulfilled. (Ad inside front cover of *World*, July 1, 2000)
- B. Why the Long Delay?
 - James 5:8**, *"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."*
 - II Peter 3:4**, *They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? 8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation..."*
 - 1. Time perception. 1,000 years = one day. Time feels different in Heaven. For example, what feels faster for a 12-year-old rambunctious boy?: an afternoon at Disneyland or a afternoon at a boring family reunion picnic? All passings of time are not created equal. 2003 years seem almost like an eternity to us. But on Heaven's clock it may be more like a few clicks of the second hand.
 - 2. Is God careless or slow about keeping His promises? Sometimes people ask me for something out of a sermon: a quote or a book title, maybe some background material. I tell them I'll send it to them. If they haven't heard from me by Friday, you can count on it...I'm slow. I may have forgotten, or I couldn't find what they wanted, or my e-mail was down. God has no such limitations. If God seems slow on coming through with a promise, you can stake your life on it...there is a very good reason. *Like at the tomb of Laraus.*

3. Check our God's patience. See how it is keyed to compassion for the lost. If Jesus had come ten years ago, I wonder how many of you sitting here would have been left behind? Let me put it this way: If Billy Graham was having a crusade at Safeco Field this Friday evening, and your unsaved son had agreed to come with you...would you want Jesus to come on Friday morning? *Dear Lord, make it Saturday morning...maybe my son will be saved on Friday night!* Here it again in **verse 9**, *He is **patient** with you, not wanting anyone to **perish**, but everyone to come to repentance.*

C. Could It Really Be Today? ["Imminence" = "at any moment"]

II Peter 3:10, *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.*

1. The Evidence:

NOTE: To discuss the doctrine of "**imminence**" honestly, you have to address the differing views on WHEN Jesus is coming back. Before I get into this material, I'd like to establish the tone. The WHEN of the return of Jesus is much less important than the FACT of the return of Jesus. Not every doctrinal teaching is created equal. If someone held a gun to my head and demanded me to recant the deity of Christ, I'd say, *You might as well pull the trigger.* If the same person held a gun to my head and demanded that I change from pre-trib to post-trib position, I'd give it some thought. One's position on the WHEN of the return of Jesus is not a test of one's love for the Lord, nor is a test of Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, we do need to engage our brains on the subject, because the Bible talks about it. And we each need to do our best to draw conclusions about what we think the Bible means. And regardless of who is right on the "WHEN" question, one thing is very, very clear: Jesus is coming back...and He'll be right on time!

□ Let's start with the three main Millennial schemes:

- Amillennial: There will be no Millennium before the end of the world comes. They believe that the millennial prophecies are either 1) Fulfilled by the present age of the church on the earth, or 2) Fulfilled by the saints in heaven now.
- Post-Millennial: **Lorraine Boettner**: *...the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world is eventually to be Christianized, and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the 'Millennium.'* (Quoted in Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1986, 441)
- Pre-Millennial: The Rapture of the church and The Great Tribulation will be followed by the Second Coming of Christ to bring a literal 1,000 year Millennium in which Christ will visibly rule on the earth.

- The Second Coming: **Zechariah 14:1-11 and Revelation 19:11-16.**

□ Among Pre-millennialists, there are three main views on when the Rapture will occur:

- Post-tribulationism: They believe that Christians will live through the entire Tribulation and the Rapture will be at the end.
- Mid-tribulationists: They believe that Christians will live through the first half (3.5 years) of the Tribulation when things are pretty benign. But just before God's most intense judgments begin to rain down on planet Earth, the Christians will be raptured.
- Pre-tribulationists: The Rapture will happen just before the beginning of the seven-year Great Tribulation.

□ Why we teach the Pre-Trib position at SCC:

- Believers will be kept from the hour of trial. **Revelation 3:10** [message to the church of Philadelphia], *Since you have kept my*

*command to endure patiently, I will also **keep you from the hour of trial** that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.*

- The language is global (“the whole world”)
- The word “keep from” (*ek*) means not just being kept safe in the midst the trials of the Trib., but actually being kept from the very time of the Trib.
- Compare **I Thessalonians 5:1-11**:
 - **Verses 1-2**, *Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*
 - **Verses 9-11**, *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*
- The motif of the Great Tribulation is Jewish, not Church. There is a conspicuous absence of any church-talk in **Revelation 5-18**. This Great Tribulation is prophetically referred to in **Jeremiah 30:7** as *The time of Jacob’s trouble*.
- The Millennium events require this time order:
 - Only believers will enter the Millennium. These are the mortal believing survivors of the Great Tribulation. All unbelievers will be sent into Hades (See the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats in **Matthew 25**). [Note: Matthew 24-25 is Jesus’ Olivet Discourse on the end of the age. I believe that this is about what happens during, and at the end of, the Great Tribulation, not the Rapture of the Church.]
 - Children will be born during the Millennium and many of them will not trust in Jesus as their Savior.
 - Raptured saints will have resurrected, glorified bodies and will not bear children. Nor will they be capable of defecting from their loyalty to Jesus.
 - If the Rapture were to occur at the end of the Tribulation, then all believers would receive glorified, transformed bodies. Everybody else would be sent into Hades. So what mortals would be left to inhabit the Millennial Kingdom and bear children?
- Now, what does all that have to do with *imminency*? Just this: The unpredictability of the pre-trib rapture best fits with the biblical passages that urge Christian expectancy, and others declare the soon-ness of Christ’s return:
 - **I Thessalonians 5:2**, *the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*
 - **I Corinthians 1:7**, *you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*
 - **Philippians 3:20**, *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,*
 - **Titus 2:13**, *we wait for the blessed hope-- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,*
 - **Romans 13:11-12**, *our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.*

- **James 5:8-9**, *the Lord's coming is near.... The Judge is standing at the door!*
- **I John 2:18**, *Dear children, this is the last hour;*
- **Revelation 22:20**, *He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

2. The caution:

- *In the 1987 NCAA regional Finals, LSU was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. As is often the case with a team in the lead, LSU began playing a different ball game. The television announcer pointed out that the LSU players were beginning to watch the clock rather than wholeheartedly play the game. As a result of this shift in focus, Indiana closed the gap, won the game by one point, and eventually went on to become NCAA champions. (J. David Bianchin in "To Illustrate," Leadership, nd, 45)*

I have met Christians like that. They get so preoccupied with the second coming that they don't do anything of any earthly good. An extreme example would be occasional clusters of cultists who sell everything, put on white robes and sit on their rooftops waiting for Jesus.

The right attitude was brilliantly expressed by **Martin Luther** about 400 years ago. He was asked what he would do if he knew for sure that Jesus was coming back tomorrow. Her replied, *I'd plant a tree today!*

- Date setting is another unhealthy extreme. Things got pretty wild back in 1988. [S]pace-engineer-turned-Bible-scholar *Edgar Whisenant's claim that the Rapture would occur between September 11 and 13.* He distributed 3.2 million copies of his book, *On Borrowed Time* which put is second in paperback sales for the August chart of the Christian Booksellers Association. When Jesus didn't come back on time, Edgar simply revised his date to October 3. ("Update," *Christianity Today*, October 21, 1988, 43)
- Martin Luther didn't exactly set a date, but he came close. Back in the 16th century he wrote, *It is my firm belief that the angels are getting ready, putting on their armor and girding their swords about them, for the last day is already breaking.*

He also said, *As things are beginning to go, the last day is at the door, and I believe that the world will not endure a hundred years.* (Mark Galli, "In Praise of Foolish Lovers," *Christianity Today*, November 19, 1990, 35)

- Even Chuck Smith of Costa Mesa's Calvary Chapel announced in 1978 his conviction that Jesus was coming back before the end of 1981. Now he is convinced that date setting is wrong. (Alnor, 41)
- Before we snicker too much at these excesses, let's acknowledge that at least Luther really cared about the return of Christ. Many Christians today don't even think about it. Mark Galli talked about this in an article called, "In Praise of Foolish Lovers." In it he tells one on himself. He loved a girl. She went on an all-summer trip to Europe. *As her return became imminent – two weeks away, perhaps – I noticed a serious lack of judgment. A car would pull up in the driveway, **It's her!** I would think, **No, she's not due for a week. Get a hold on yourself!** I would fly out of the house and smash the mail carrier with the screen door....*

Luther...[was] so taken with Christ, so anxious about seeing him face to face, that [he] acted sometimes like [a] young, impatient lover.... [He] jumped every time the phone of history rang. [His] adrenaline pumped when someone knocked on the door. When [he] saw a familiar figure, [he] thought [he] saw Jesus. (Galli, 36)

II. OBJECTION #2: "IT'S TOO INCREDIBLE!"

A. It's More Incredible Than Most People Think!

- NOTE: A Scottish man learned about the second coming of Jesus and got all excited about it. It started changing his life. One Sunday he took a trip into Edinburgh to visit larger churches and learn more about Jesus coming back. When he got home his friends asked him how he liked Edinburgh preachers. He replied, *They all fly on one wing. They all preach the first coming of Christ but do not mention his second coming.* (Donald K. Campbell, “What Next?”, *Kindred Spirit*, Winter 1986, 18)
- ❑ The Rapture [from the Latin translation (*rapio*; here *rapturo*: *to seize or snatch in relation to an ecstasy of spirit or the actual removal from one place to another*) of the Greek (*harpazo*: *to snatch or take away*) for “caught up” in I Thessalonians 4:17, *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.* (Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1986, 462)]
 - Resurrection [**I Thessalonians 4:16**, *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.***]
 - Translation [**I Corinthians 15:52**, *For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be **changed.***]
 - ❑ The Heavenly **Judgment Seat of Christ** and the **Marriage Supper of the Lamb** [between the Rapture and the Second Coming] **II Corinthians 5:10** and **Revelation 19:7-9**
 - ❑ The Great Tribulation
 - The Bible teaches that this is a seven-year period of time. These are the days of the Antichrist. Two synonyms for the Great Tribulation are *The Seventieth Week of Daniel* (**Daniel 9:24-27**) and *The Time of Jacob’s Trouble* (**Jeremiah 30:7**)
 - It is a time initially of world peace and treaties. But at the mid-point the wheels fall off everything. Gentile armies overrun Jerusalem militarily. The Antichrist loses control of the world scene. God turns up the heat of judgment on a rebel world. The Book of Revelation paints graphic scenes of this time of unprecedented world scale judgment under the motif of **seven seals, seven bowls** and **seven trumpets**. Every one of which is filled with world-scale judgments. The judgment content of just the fourth seal wipes out fully **one-fourth** of the world’s population. The Great Tribulation is a time of disease, famine, war, cosmic disasters, and demonic assault.
 - **Matthew 24:21**, *For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now-- and never to be equaled again.]*
 - ❑ The Battle of Armageddon: This is the great battle that warps up the seven-year Tribulation. Armies mass northwest of Jerusalem on the Plain of Meggido. Jesus comes back visibly and decimates the enemy armies.
 - ❑ The Second Coming. This is when Jesus comes back for all the world to see. And this time He comes to stay and to rule.
 - ❑ The Millennium. A millennium is a thousand-year period of time. When we say THE Millennium, we refer to the predicted 1000-year reign of Jesus Christ on the earth. The center of His administration will be in Jerusalem. It will be a reign of world peace and pervasive justice for all. There will be a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem at which there will be daily sacrifices. The nations will bring their homage to Jesus. (**Isaiah 11:1-7, Revelation 20:2-7**)
 - ❑ The Final Conflict. One would think that a 1000 years of Jesus as world king would produce such a happy world population that everyone would sing his praises and happily embrace his dominion. Sadly, not so. At the beginning of the Millennium, Jesus will lock up Satan. At the end he will be released. He’ll go right back to his old tricks of opposing every good thing Jesus does. He will find millions of people ready to follow his lead. The result will be a huge army from the east marching on Jerusalem to attack Jesus and the saints. The Bible wraps this story with this simple

understatement: **Revelation 20:9**, *But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.*

- The Great White Throne Judgment. Right after the final conflict at the end of the Millennium, there is a great resurrection of the bodies of the unbelieving dead. They are summoned before God who sits on a great white throne. **Revelation 20:11**, *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*
- The Eternal Kingdom of God. **Revelation 21:1**, *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.... 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"*

B. But It's Not Without Precedence!

II Peter 3:4, *"They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. [Noah's Flood] 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*

III. OBJECTION #3: "IT DOESN'T SEEM FAIR!"

A. Because Most People Get Left Behind!

Matthew 7:13, *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and **many** enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and **only a few** find it."*

1. What's really unfair is if we don't tell others about Jesus coming back.
2. We're probably not going to get through to some of them, like Ted Turner: *Heaven is perfect. Who wants to go to a place that's perfect? Boring, boring. [Where we're going] we'll have a chance to make things better because hell is supposed to be a mess.* (in a speech at the National Press Club, quoted in *National and International Religion Report*, Nov 28, 1994)
3. *As stories began to emerge from the survivors of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, several mentioned a mysterious young man who stepped out of the smoke and horror to lead them to safety. They did not know who this man was who saved their lives, but this they did remember: wrapped around his mouth and nose was a red bandanna.*

For 76 minutes, the man in the red bandanna barked orders, and led people to safety down stairwells. He said, "I found the stairs, follow me." He carried one woman down fifteen flights of stairs—on his back, while leading others to safety, urged them to keep going down, then headed back up.

Upstairs, a badly injured woman was sitting on a radiator when the man with the red bandanna over his face came running across the room and said, "Follow me. I know the way out. I will lead you to safety." Then he led

several survivors to a stairwell that took them to safety. He was never seen alive again.

Six months later, on March 19, 2002, the body of the man with the red bandanna was found intact alongside firefighters in a makeshift command center in the South Tower lobby, buried under 110 stories of rubble.

THE STORY COMES OUT

Slowly the story began to emerge. Welles Crowther graduated from Boston College where he played lacrosse, always carrying his trademark red bandanna—his dad carried a blue bandanna. In high school Welles was the kid who would feed the puck to the hockey team’s lowest-scoring player, hoping to give his teammate his first goal.

At 16 he became a junior volunteer firefighter, following in his dad’s footsteps. After college he joined Sandler O’Neil and Partners and worked on the 104th floor of the South Tower. He always carried change to give to street people. His dream was to become a firefighter or public servant. On Sept. 11, at the age of 24, Welles Crowther became both, and also a hero—the “man in the red bandanna.”

“Follow me. I know the way out. I will lead you to safety.” (Man in the Mirror News, July 23, 2003)

4. We need to be filled with the urgency for the lost that the Apostle Paul felt: *I am obligated*, he said (**Romans 1:14**). *Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel*, he said (**I Corinthians 9:16**).
- B. But Even Then It’s Not Too Late!
1. At the moment of the Rapture, the world will be for an instant 100% populated by unbelievers. It has never been that way before and never ever will be again. But after a few ticks of the second hand, I believe that there will be so many “left behind” people praying to Jesus that it will make a Billy Graham altar call look like the ticket line for an accordion concert. Reported and politicians and reporters may speculate on this mass disappearance as an act of terrorists or alien abductions. But millions of people who have been close to Christians will recognize immediately the true explanation for what has happened and will turn to Christ as their Savior.
 2. Interestingly, **Stanley Ellisen** does not think that procrastinators will be able to be saved after the Rapture; that they will be ensnared in a delusion (**II Thessalonians 2:11**). On the other hand, he believes that post-rapture people who never heard the Gospel will have the freedom to believe the Gospel and be saved. (Stanley Ellisen, *3 Worlds in Conflict*, Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, OR, 1998, 262-263) I suspect that he’s cutting it a little too fine here. We do know for sure that people will be saved during the Tribulation. And because of their faithfulness to Jesus, many of them will be martyred for the faith.
 3. And it’s not as if God doesn’t give the inhabitants of earth a chance. **Revelation 14:6**, “*Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth-- to every nation, tribe, language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.’*” Never has the Gospel been so universally proclaimed in such a compelling manner. Surely there will be no excuse for anyone who turns his back on the grace of God.
 4. Billy Graham: *I have spent my lifetime proclaiming one central truth: there is good news for the people of planet earth.... I like announcing that good news, but...I cannot write just the good news! There is also bad news.* (Billy Graham, *Approaching Hoofbeats*, Grason, Minneapolis, MN, 1983, 30)

CONCLUSION:

A. *My Grandma Kent lived in Vernon, Texas, and Jesus lived in heaven. Grandma came to see us every year and Jesus was coming to see us at an unexpected hour and only God knew exactly when.*

*Still, I envisioned those moments to be somewhat alike. When Grandma came, we children were always in the yard, peering down the long lane where Granny would approach. We could hardly wait. She had a Mary Poppins-like carpet bag and she always brought us myriad treats and gifts. She did come more often than Jesus but we expected each of them sooner or later to show up. We knew we would be made rich by their visits. (Calvin Milelr, *Jesus Loves Me*, Warner Books, New York, New York, 2002, 57)*

B. **Revelation 22:20**, *He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

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July 27, 2003