

What Will Happen When Christ Returns?

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Christ’s Return

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Introduction

The study of future events is often called *eschatology*, from the Greek word ἔσχατος which means “last.” The study of eschatology, then, is the study of “the last things.”

The Bible also talks about certain major events that will affect the entire universe. Specifically, it tells us about the *second coming of Christ, the millennium, the final judgment, eternal punishment for unbelievers and eternal reward for believers, and life with God in the new heaven and new earth*. The study of these events is sometimes called *general eschatology*.

BFC Article 25 - The Second Coming of Christ

25-1 The Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the personal visible, bodily return of our Lord to this earth to conform believers to His image and to establish the millennial kingdom. In connection with Christ's return there will be the resurrection of the righteous dead, the rapture of the saints, the salvation of Israel, the great tribulation, and the inauguration of the millennial reign. Following the millennium will be the resurrection and judgment of the unrighteous. The righteous will be eternally glorified with Him; the unrighteous will be eternally punished.

25-2 The Second Coming is the believer's source of encouragement and comfort inspiring him to active service for Christ, and is a motive for purification and holy living.

The Return of Christ

- **There Will Be a Sudden, Personal, Visible, Bodily Return of Christ.**

Acts 1:9-11 - “And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “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.”

Other Passages: Mt 24:44, Jn 14:3, 1 Thess 4:16, Heb 9:28, Jms 5:8, 2 Pet 3:10, 1 Jn 3:2, Rev 22:20.

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- **We Should Eagerly Long for Christ’s Return.**

Rev 22:20 - “He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

Titus 2:11-13 - “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, *waiting* for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” (See also: 1 Cor 16:22, Phil 3:20)

- **We Do Not Know When Christ Will Return.**

Matt 24:44 - “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Matt 25:13 - “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Mark 13:32-33- “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.” (See also: Lk 12:40)

- **All Evangelicals Agree on the Final Results of Christ’s Return.**

- The judgment of unbelievers.
- The final reward of believers.
- Believers will live with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth for all eternity.

- **There Is Disagreement Over the Details of Future Events.**

- The nature of the millennium.
- The relationship of Christ’s return to the millennium.
- The sequence of Christ’s return and the great tribulation period that will come to the earth.
- The question of the salvation of the Jewish people (and the relationship between Jews who are saved and the church).

Note: *Their differences concern the interpretation of various passages relating to these events, but their differences on these matters should be seen as matters of secondary importance, not as differences over primary doctrinal matters.*

- **The Timing of the Return.**

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- Verses Predicting a Sudden and Unexpected Coming of Christ.

Lk 12:40 - “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Phil 3:20 - “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,”

1 Thess 5:2 - “For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

1 Peter 4:7 - “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”

Other Passages: Matt 24:42, 24:50, 25:13, Mark 13:32-37, 1 Cor 16:22, Tit 2:12-13, Heb 10:25, James 5:7-9, 2 Pet 3:10, Rev 1:3, 22:7, 12, 20)

- Signs That Precede Christ’s Return

- **The Preaching of the Gospel to All Nations:**

“And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.” (**Mark 13:10**)

- **The Great Tribulation:**

“For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.” (**Mark 13:19-20**, See also Mark 13:7-8)

- **The Coming of the Man of Sin and the Rebellion:**

“For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.” (**Mark 13:22**, See also 1 John 2:18)

“For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.....
The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (**2 Thess 2:1-10 ESV**)

- **Signs in the Heavens:**

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” (**Mark 13:24-25**, Mt 24:29-30, Lk 21:25-27)

- **False Prophets Working Signs and Wonders:**

“False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible,

the elect.” (Mark 13:22)

- **The Salvation of Israel & Gentiles:**

“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved.” (Rom 11:25)

Conclusions from These Signs That Precede Christ’s Return: The impact of these passages seems so clear that, many Christians have felt that Christ simply cannot return at any moment.

- Possible Solutions:

- **Christ could not come at any time...**

Seems to nullify the force of the warnings of Jesus that we should watch, be ready, and that he is returning at an hour we do not expect.

The signs are given so that, when we see them, they will intensify our expectation of Christ’s return.

- **Christ indeed could come at any time...**

One way to reconcile them is to say that the New Testament talks about two distinct returns of Christ. This is the pre-tribulation rapture view whereby Christ doesn’t come to earth physically but secretly raptures away the Christians out of the world. In this view Christ would not physically come to earth until after the seven year tribulation is over thus fulfilling all of the prophecies before His return.

Another solution is to say that all the signs have been fulfilled, and therefore Christ in fact could return at any moment.

Another is to say that it is unlikely but possible that the signs have already been fulfilled and therefore we simply cannot know with certainty at any point in history whether all the signs have been fulfilled or not. (Most likely)

The Events at the Return

- **Much of the disagreement regarding Christ return is centered on the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6...**

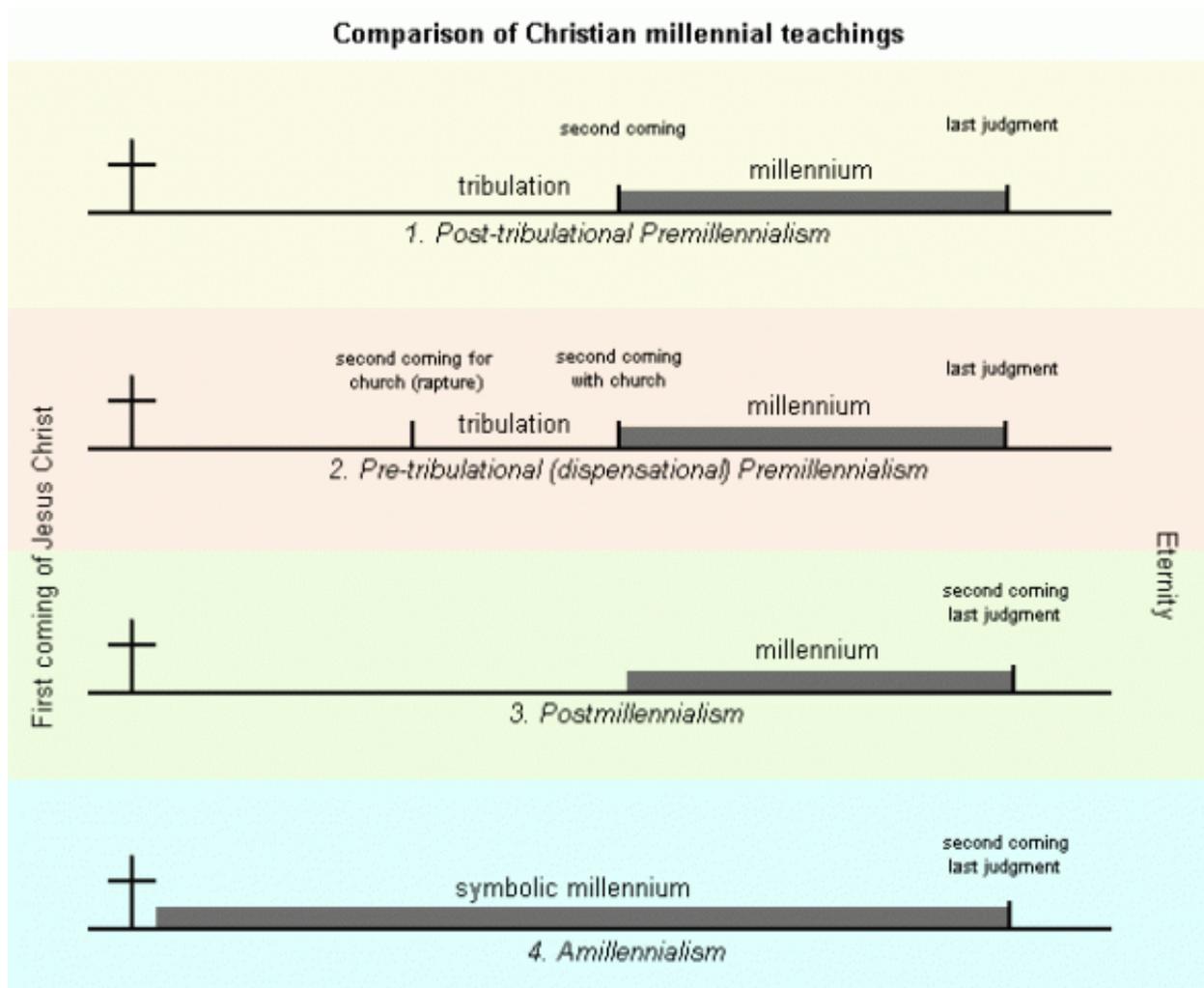
“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a *thousand years*, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.” Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a *thousand years*. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the *thousand years* were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first

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resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a *thousand years*.” (Rev 20:1-6 ESV)

- **Three views on the time and nature of this thousand year period known as the millennium.**
 - **Amillennial:** The millennium is *now* and when it ends, Jesus will return.
 - The present Church Age, no future millennium to come.
 - The signs of Christ coming occurred early on in Church history.
 - Those who reign with Christ (Rev. 20:4) are those who died and are in heaven with Him.
 - The 1000 years are symbolic for a long period of time.
 - It is the simplest of the views.
 - **Postmillennial:** The millennium will come gradually, and Jesus will return *after* the millennium.
 - The influence of the church will gradually cause society to become more and more in line with God’s standards.
 - Gradually a “millennial age” (not necessary literal) of great peace and righteousness will come upon the earth.
 - Christ will not physically reign, but will do so in His people.
 - Proponents say that the parables of the mustard seed and the three measures of leavened flour support this view (Matt. 13:31-33).
 - **Premillennial:** The millennium will come suddenly, and Jesus will return *before* the millennium.
 - Jesus will return and physically reign after the tribulation and set up His kingdom.
 - Believers will be raised to reign with Him.
 - Satan and demons will be completely removed.
 - There still will be those who do not believe, even without Satan.
 - Satan will again deceive after the millennium.

NOTE: Premillennialism seems to be the most biblically supported! (Is 11,:6-11, 65:20, Ps 72:8-14, Zech 14:5-17)



<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Amillennialism>

- **BFC Article 27 - The Millennium**

27-1 The Millennium is that aspect of the Kingdom of God that will be ushered in when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to the Earth to rule in righteousness. The unfulfilled Messianic prophecies will then be completed. During this period, Satan will be bound and his deceitful activities thus restricted. The created universe will undergo a transformation, with universal prosperity and peace prevailing on earth. The saints will reign with Christ, and the earth will be full of the knowledge and glory of the Lord.

- **The Victorious King**

“And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and

sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” (Rev 20:7-10 ESV)

The Final Judgment & Eternal Punishment

BFC Article 26 - The Judgments

26-1 The Scriptures enumerate several judgments that differ in time, place, subjects, and results. All judgment has been entrusted to the Son by the Father.

26-2 Through the death of Christ on the cross, the believer's sins have been judged, and he has passed from death unto life. In no case do the redeemed come again into judgment concerning their eternal destiny. Each saint, however, will be required to give an account before the judgment seat of Christ regarding his works and conduct.

26-3 The unregenerate will be judged, condemned & banished to eternal damnation in the lake of fire.

The Fact of Final Judgment

- **Scriptural Evidence for a Final Judgment.** Scripture frequently affirms the fact that there will be a great and final judgment of both believers and unbelievers whereby they will stand before the judgment seat of Christ in resurrected bodies and hear his proclamation of their eternal destiny.

Rev 20:11-15 - “Then I saw a *great white throne* and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, death and hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Acts 17:30-31 - “Now....commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has *fixed a day on which he will judge the world* in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Other important passages: Rom 2:5, Matt 10:15, 11:22, 24, 12:36, 25:31-46, 1 Cor 4:5, Heb 6:2, 2 Pet 2:4, Jude 6, 2 Pet 2:9-10.

- **Will There be More than One Judgment?** Scholars debate this topic. Covenant theologians believe there is simply one judgment, which includes all judgments. Dispensationalists believe that there will be at least two judgments and possibly three depending on interpretation.

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- *Judgment of Believers* at the Bema seat whereby rewards will be dispensed. (2 Cor 5:10)
- *Judgment of all unbelievers* at the great white throne judgment at the end of the millennium, whereby all unbelievers will be pronounced guilty and eternal punishment will be declared. (Rev 20:11-15)
- *Judgment of the nations.* (Matt 25:31-46) Dispensationalists view this judgment of the nations as a separate judgment based upon how they have treated the Jewish people during the tribulation. Those who will treated Israel well will be allowed into the millennium, and those who did not will be refused.

The argument against the judgment of the nations is that the passage seems to promote the judgment of individuals (goats & sheep). Furthermore, entrance into the millennium is not mentioned, but eternal destinies and eternal punishment is mentioned. So some would simply understand this as a part of the final judgment between true believers and unbelievers.

The Time of the Final Judgment

The final judgment will occur after the millennium and the rebellion that occurs at the end of it. John tells us that the judgment will follow the great battle whereby God defeats His enemies. (Rev 20:1-11)

Dispensationalists would place the judgment of believers at the Bema seat before the millennium. The timing of that judgment would depend upon whether or not the rapture is believed to be pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation or post-tribulation.

The Nature of the Final Judgment

- **Jesus Christ will be the Judge.** (2 Tim 4:1, Acts 10:42, 17:31, Mt 25:31-33)

John 5:26-27 - “The Father....has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”

- **Unbelievers will be judged.** All unbelievers will stand before Christ for judgment including “the dead, great and small” (Rev 20:12), “on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to every man according to his works....for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.” (Rom 2:5-7)
 - Judgment will include degrees of punishment. (Rev 20:12-13, Lk 12:47-48, 20:47, Mt 11:22)
 - Every word & wrong deed will be remembered and taken into account. (Mt 12:36, Eccl 12:14)
 - The secrets of men’s hearts will be revealed and made public. (Rom 2:16, Lk 12:2-3)
- **Believers will be judged.** This judgment of believers will be a judgment to evaluate and bestow various degrees of reward. Believers should not fear eternal judgment or condemnation.

2 Cor 5:10 - “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may

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receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

John 5:24 - “He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life, *he does not come into judgment*, but has passed from death to life.”

Other passages: Rom 14:10, 12, Rom 2:6-11, Rev 20:12, 15, Mt 25:31-46, **Rom 8:1**.

- All secret sins, words and actions of believers will also be revealed on that day. (1 Cor 4:5)
 - We should not live in terror, but should be motivated to live godly lives.
 - Even though there will be degrees of rewards for believers, (1Cor 3:12-15, 2 Cor 5:10, Lk 19:17-19) every believer will have a full and complete joy in heaven and will in honor fall before God’s throne to worship Him (Rev 4:10-11).
- **Angels will be judged.** Rebellious angels are being held in the pits until the day of judgment. (2 Pet 2:4, Jude 6, 1 Cor 6:3)
 - **We will help in the work of judgment.** (1 Cor 6:2-6, Rev 20:4)

The Necessity of Final Judgment

Since both believers and unbelievers enter into eternity at the point of death (believers to glory & unbelievers to separation & punishment), why is there a final judgment established at all? *“It will serve the purpose rather of displaying before all rational creatures the declarative glory of God in a formal, forensic act, which magnifies on the one hand His holiness and righteousness, and on the other hand, His grace and mercy. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the judgment at the last day will differ from that of the death of each individual in more than one respect. It will not be secret, but public; it will not pertain to the soul only, but also the body; it will not have reference to a single individual, but to all men.”* (Berkof, Systematic Theology, p. 731)

Justice of God in the Final Judgment

All of God’s judgments are true. On that day of final judgment no one will be able to complain against God. He will judge every man impartially according to every man’s deeds (1 Pet 1:17, Rom 2:11). One of the great blessings of the final judgment will be that saints and angels will see demonstrated in millions of lives the absolutely pure justice of God and this will be a source of praise to him for all eternity. (Rev 19:1-2)

Moral Application of the Final Judgment

- The doctrine of final judgment satisfies our inward sense of a need for justice in the world. (Col 3:25)
- The doctrine of final judgment enables us to forgive others freely. (Rom 12:19 - “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (1 Pet 2:22-23, Lk 23:34, Acts 7:60)

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- The doctrine of the final judgment provides a motive for righteous living. (Mt 6:20, 2 Pet 3:3-4, 1 Pet 4:4-5)
- The doctrine of the final judgment provides a great motive for evangelism. (Ez 33:11, 2 Pet 3:9)

The Reality of Hell

Hell is a real place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.

- Place of eternal fire & yet darkness. (Matt. 25:41)
- Place of eternal pain, suffering, & sadness. (Mt 25:30)
- Place where the worm does not die and fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48)
- Place of eternal torment and punishment. (Luke 16:28, Rev 14:9-11)
- Place prepared for the Devil and Demons (Matt. 25:41)