

## Could Jesus Return This Year? • Luke 17:20-37

In AD 999 some Christians were convinced that the return of Christ would come at the end of the millennium in the year 1000. We know now that their calculations were off by over 1,000 years. Much later, in 1835, Mormon leader Joseph Smith predicted that the coming of Christ would be 56 years later in 1891. It didn't happen. In 1844 William Miller predicted the end of the era would come on October 22 of that year. He and 50,000 of his followers, based mostly in Massachusetts and Connecticut, abandoned all their material possessions to wait for the Lord's return. Historians refer to it as "The Great Disappointment". And in 1914 Jehovah's Witnesses all awaited the expected return of Jesus Christ. Referring to their previous prediction that he would return in 1884 they said that he actually did return but chose to remain invisible.

Archbishop Ussher of Armagh, Ireland, did some biblical calculations in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that became very popular and were published in some Bibles until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He calculated that God created the world on October 23, 4004 BC. He then figured that just as there were six days of creation followed by a Sabbath day of rest, so the history of the world would be six thousand years followed by another thousand years of Christ's millennial reign on earth. This meant that the return of Christ to set up his kingdom on earth should have occurred on October 23, 1997. Again, it didn't happen.

The human race has long had a sense of destiny and doom. We somehow assume that just as our individual lives come to an eventual end so our world and history must also come to an eventual end. We all wonder what will happen and when it will happen. That was certainly on the minds of people in Jesus' day. They wondered when the kingdom of God would come to earth. When would God take over and run this world hands-on?

Jesus responded to their questions with some very important and powerful teachings. I am not sure they liked what he taught. They, like us, would probably have preferred a simple straightforward declaration of the exact day and hour when God would

totally take over. Instead, Jesus told them that the kingdom of God is within. The report of this is in Luke 17:20-21:

*Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."*

Jesus nailed some important issues. They were most concerned about *when* but Jesus was most concerned about *where*. Frankly, they were a lot like us when it comes to prophecy. We want a date. We like charts and books and predictions that follow a timeline. Jesus insisted this is a dead-end approach: "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation.*" In other words, we will never figure out the time-line by looking at the evidence. The far greater concern is that the kingdom of God begins inside of us.

The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. Someday it will control our world, but we don't need to wait until then. We can have the rule of God in our hearts and heads right now. This is far more important than any prophetic timetable.

The Bible contains some interesting prophecies about future events. These prophecies have caused some wild speculations and even some deep divisions between Christians. Some denominations have been established with strict prophetic views that must be believed to belong. Not that these interpretations are not important but the purpose of prophecy is always to impact and transform the way we live now.

While we should anticipate the return of Jesus Christ someday, we should celebrate and live the rule of Christ in our lives today. People should be able to look at us, listen to us and say, "That is the way the world would be if Jesus Christ came back and ruled everything." In other words, our language, our relationships, our finances, our jobs, our marriages, everything should demonstrate the kingdom of God here today.

***When Jesus comes back to earth it will be great news for Christians and bad news for unbelievers who will be judged.***

Recently I was with a man who told me his life story. He grew up in a Christian home but did not become a Christian himself. Many parts of his life were out of whack. He said he kept remembering his father's righteousness. That was an interesting choice of words. He didn't say he remembered his father's beliefs, although I am sure they were strong and important. He remembered his father's righteousness, the way he lived. He knew he wanted to be like his dad. It was that desire for Christian righteousness that brought him to personal Christian faith.

That is what Jesus was talking about when he said, ". . . *the kingdom of God is within you.*" God ruled within that father's life. He lived as a citizen of heaven even though he was still on earth. Christ the King ruled his life. He was a living example of the fulfillment of the line in the Lord's Prayers that says, ". . . *thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" He lived righteously. He lived with Jesus Christ in charge of his life and that was extremely appealing to his son when he recognized that wasn't the way his life was.

Is the kingdom of God within you? Is Jesus Christ the ruler of your life? Do you submit to his reign? If Jesus Christ came back to earth as King would he rule in such a way that everyone would be like you? If yes, that is very good news; the kingdom of God is here now within you. If no, I encourage you to submit to King Jesus as the ruler of your life so that his kingdom may come and his will be done in you, just as it is in heaven.

Jesus adds to his basic teaching that the kingdom is within to explain that the kingdom is to come. The kingdom of God is now and is not yet. It is here and it is coming. For most of us that concept is difficult to grasp. But we may have some parallels in our own culture and society.

Let's say that you are fortunate enough to have inherited a large sum of money from a rich relative. You receive a steady stream of monthly payments from a trust for now but you are promised a large lump sum to be paid several years from now. In other words, you have your inheritance but you will also receive your inheritance later. And so it is with the kingdom of God. It is within. It is here and now. But more and better is yet to come there and then.

Jesus anticipates that Christians will yearn for him to come back to earth and completely rule everyone and everything. Jesus told his disciples, "*The time is coming when you will long to see one of the*

*days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.*" There are times when Christians will long for just one day with Jesus back on earth again.

This is a concept with which I have personally struggled. I truly want Jesus Christ to rule my life but I've not always been all that anxious for him to come back to earth. When I hear people say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus came back today?" I don't say much. The reasons are many. One reason is that I like my life the way it is and I don't want Jesus to change it. I don't like change; it's hard. And I don't think I adequately understand how wonderful it will be when Jesus Christ comes back, when he really reigns and we can see him face-to-face. I guess I'm afraid that my life isn't the way Jesus wants it to be and I don't want to get caught short.

Then I hear people talk about how very much they want Jesus to return (the sooner the better) and it makes me feel a little guilty. I have often observed that those who seem to want Jesus to return soon are either super-godly (much more than I) or really sick or really old!

Jesus was anticipating what was coming for all of us. We will all face tough days or advanced age or both. To quote Jesus in Luke 17:22, "*The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.*" Sooner or later every Christian will want more than the kingdom within; we will want Jesus back and in charge. But Jesus told his followers, ". . . *you will not see it.*" In other words, the second coming of Jesus Christ would not happen during their lives. It would be much later.

Jesus warned Christians not to be tricked. He said there would be those who would talk like they had everything figured out. They would predict exactly when, where and how Jesus would return to earth. They will say, "*There he is!*" or "*Here he is!*" But Jesus warned. "*Do not go running after them.*"

Unfortunately, lots of people have ignored Jesus' advice. They have followed all kinds of self-appointed prophets and teachers who have insisted they had it all figured out. Some have even claimed to be Christ returned. They failed to realize that the return of Jesus would strike like lightning . . . definite and spectacular, but not predictable by any of us here on earth. So, please heed Jesus' words of wisdom. Believe the truth that he is coming back, but avoid following the teachers and preachers who claim they

know when.

There are some other things Jesus told us for sure. He taught that until he comes back ordinary life will go on pretty much as it always has. We read in Luke 17:26-29:

*“Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day that Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.*

*“It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.”*

Jesus was referring to two terrible times in history. One was a period of awful sin followed by a huge flood when only Noah and his family escaped in a large boat God had told Noah to build. The other is the story of Sodom, a city of great immorality. God’s judgment brought sulfur and fire from heaven and destroyed it just like many ancient cities near volcanoes. Only Lot and his family escaped because God forewarned them.

Jesus taught that before his return to earth ordinary life will include the “same old, same old” of eating, drinking, marrying, buying and selling, planting crops and building houses. People will take life for granted until it is suddenly interrupted by Jesus’ return. He will come back to earth in a spectacular return that will change everything for everyone. It will be sensational and it will be a surprise. Jesus said in Luke 17:30, *“It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.”* In other words, people will live ordinary lives until Jesus comes back to earth like a strike of lightning. They will be as surprised as those flooded out in Noah’s generation or burned out in the city of Sodom.

When Jesus comes back to earth it will be great news for Christians and bad news for unbelievers who will be judged. His return calls everyone to keep priorities straight. Look at what Jesus said and I will try to explain it. He told them, *“On that day no one*

*who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise no one in the field should go back for anything.”*

Jesus was talking to people who lived under constant threat of invasion by foreign armies. These armies often attacked by surprise; at best there might only be a few minutes’ notice. The best defense was to run away. People faced a tough decision: try to gather their most precious possessions first or run now and leave everything behind. Probably lots of people took time to get their stuff and the minutes lost cost them their lives. Smart people abandoned everything in order to save their lives.

Jesus was using this as a teaching point for Christians. He was saying that we need to keep our priorities straight between now and the return of Jesus Christ. We need to decide how important “things” are in our lives. Would we rather abandon everything and be ready for Jesus’ return, or would we rather hold on to what we have and not be ready?

This may be a tougher call for us than it was for them because we have more possessions. We don’t like to think about any possibility of giving up our possessions for Jesus or anyone else. That’s bad thinking that leads to bad living. The more we have, the more we want to hold onto. Instead, we should be ready in case Jesus comes back at any moment. That’s the point Jesus makes in Luke 17:32-37 when he says:

*“Remember Lot’s wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell*

*you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.”*

Do you remember Lot’s wife? When she and her husband were fleeing the destruction of Sodom she was warned not to look back. She did and died. Her attachment to her hometown was more important than her life, and it cost her life.

Jesus is telling us not to make anything more important than eternal life. He gives a very typical Jesus statement when he says, *“Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”* That’s backward from the way we usu-

***Would we rather abandon everything and be ready for Jesus’ return, or would we rather hold on to what we have and not be ready?***

ally think. He's saying that those who live for themselves will lose; those who live for Jesus will win. The more you try to hang on to life and possessions the more likely you are to lose everything you have. Those who are willing to let go are more likely to live and gain.

This is a great spiritual principle of life. Jesus is telling us to have right priorities, to be ready for him to come back at any time. Don't get so attached to things and places that God takes last place.

Maybe all this sounds a little complicated, so let me try to make it as simple as I can. If you had a choice today between Jesus and your money, house, family and friends, which would you choose? If you knew that Jesus would come back to earth today and your eternal relationship with God depended on your choices, what would you choose? Probably, if we knew today was our last day, we would choose Jesus. And that's Jesus' point! We don't know when he's coming back. It might be today; it might not be today. Either way, put God first, follow Jesus as king and don't let anything be more important to you than your relationship and obedience to Jesus Christ.

Some people will choose right and some people will choose wrong. The difference in consequences when Jesus returns will be huge. Jesus said, *"I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left."* Jesus is saying that when he comes back to earth he is going to sort out those who belong to God and those who don't. The decision won't be based on intimacy or business partnership. Two people will be sleeping in the same bed and one stays and the others goes. Two people will be working side by side; one stays and one goes. It will happen very fast. There won't be time to change a thing. It will be too late. Their relationship to God will be the determining factor.

Jesus finishes up this teaching time with something that sounds quite strange to most of us. He said, *"Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather."* This was a popular folk saying in those days. In our culture we could say, "It's like looking for a snowball in a blizzard" (which wouldn't make much sense to people in Israel). The saying simply meant that when the necessary conditions are met something inevitable will happen. If an animal dies in a field or forest, vultures are sure to show up. Jesus was saying that when everything is ready, Jesus is

coming back. It's inevitable. It's a sure thing. It is going to happen.

What do we do with all of this? As Christians we should believe what Jesus says and take him seriously. We should believe that Jesus is really going to return to earth. He is coming back as a king and a judge. It will be great for those who are Christians and are ready. It will be bad for those who are not Christians and are not ready. Jesus wants us to be Christians and to be ready when he returns. We don't know when he will return, so we should be ready all the time.

Each year I find myself on more and more airplanes and I find myself thinking about crashes and dying. A few years ago, shortly after an Egypt Airlines plane went down over the Atlantic, Charleen and I flew the exact same type of Boeing jet from Los Angeles to New Zealand. I remembered that the Egypt Air flight went down about 37 minutes into the flight. I checked my watch about ten times during the first 37 minutes of the flight. After that I felt a little bit more relaxed.

The truth is I have no idea when a plane will crash. It could be any time in flight or not at all on my flight. Once it blows up there is nothing I can do to get ready for eternity. Then it will be too late. So, I need to be ready all the time. I must live as if any flight can crash. I must live as if any car trip will end in disaster. I must live as if I could die today of a heart attack. I need to be ready all the time.

Jesus is making this same point. He could come back at any time and we should be ready because when the time comes there isn't going to be enough time to do anything to get ready. Be ready. Keep priorities straight. Don't be tricked. Some day ordinary life will be interrupted and all will be radically changed. Be ready. Until God's kingdom comes to earth, may Jesus Christ be your king on the inside so that God's will in your life as it is in heaven.

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)  
©Leith Anderson