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Introduction

A few decades ago, any mention of the end of the age or the imminence of Christ's return was dismissed by most Christians as 'doomsday preaching'. But not any more. The questions that seem uppermost in believers' minds are these: Is the return of Jesus Christ imminent? Will Christ's coming take place in our time? Are we truly living in the last days? In an age that is growing darker and darker, the truth of Christ's return to this world is a ray of hope that shines like an ever-brightening beam. The world's leaders once talked about the idea that through technology, science and education, humankind would be able to work out its human dilemmas and establish an ideal society. No serious thinker believes that today. Some of the world's leaders, of course, live in hope that the countries of the world can be brought together to form a universal utopia. It is a pipe dream. True peace will only come to this world when Christ returns to rule and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The last one hundred years have demonstrated, as no other period in history, the futility of trying to organise life without God. People have tried on a massive scale to thrust God out of the universe He has made. W.E. Henley depicted the feelings of modern society when he wrote,

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

What vanity! The master of his fate and the captain of his soul! Because the men and women of this age found it hard to believe in God, they transferred their faith to humankind. 'Glory to humanity in the highest' is their creed. Walt Whitman said he loved cattle and all dumb

animals because they did not kneel down and say their prayers! The years went by and this worship of human nature grew popular because it pandered to the egotism in people's hearts. It was nice to be told that there was no such thing as original sin, that the Golden Age was inevitable and that, by gradual steps, humankind would move unaided to perfection. This belief made redemption unnecessary, emptied the cross of meaning and made the Church a joke. And then came two world wars. The first one, they said, would be the war to end all wars. But then came the second greater and more terrifying. Now here we are in the twenty-first century with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and in danger of blowing our planet to pieces. For the first time in history we have the potential for global destruction.

Another concern is that conservationists tell us our natural resources are dwindling, and unless something dramatic takes place, demand will soon exceed supply. We are burning up the earth's oxygen at a faster rate than it can be replaced. A car, travelling a distance of just over 600 miles, uses as much oxygen as a person breathes in a whole year. A large jet burns up fifty tons of oxygen in a single Atlantic crossing. Stephen Travis, in his book *The Jesus Hope*, says:

The United States produces only 60 per cent of the oxygen it consumes and if we go on polluting the oceans and thereby killing the oxygen-producing sea plants, we could reach the stage where there is no longer enough oxygen to support human life. Then man will be like a beast of prey who runs out of victims – and starves to death.¹

And what of pollution? Who would think that an innocent thing like aerosol spray could rise into the atmosphere and be a threat to our survival? We have littered the earth with items like indestructible plastics, poisonous chemicals

and many other things; little realising that, by so doing, we are threatening our very existence.

These points are not unfounded pessimism but gritty realism. Apart from the fact of Christ's personal return, there is no hope for the inhabitants of this tiny planet we call earth and it is impossible to live either effectively or happily without hope. Psychologists are unanimous in maintaining that no personality can be healthy unless there is within that personality a sense of true optimism or hope – 'an expectation based on reality, that whatever one's current state may be, the future holds brighter and better experiences'. Isn't it interesting that many writers, poets and lyricists reflect in their works a deep sense of melancholy and gloom? Take, for example, George Orwell's *1984*, or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Both young and old alike combine to reflect a pessimism concerning the future that in its way is eloquent and strangely moving. Most people, when faced with such gloom and uncertainty as I have described, reach out for a substitute. They try such things as occultism, transcendental meditation, drugs, etc. But they are false hopes. They pick you up but they soon let you down. Everything outside of Jesus Christ is blind optimism. He, and only He, can supply the human personality with the power it needs to function effectively in an age that is falling apart at the seams. How thankful we Christians ought to be that in the midst of the world's dark and dismal problems, we have a hope for the future.

1. Stephen Travis, *The Jesus Hope* (London: Word Books, 1974 and Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980).

WEEK 1

Basis of Belief in the Second Coming

Opening Icebreaker

King George V said, ‘... the English Bible, which is the first of national treasures. Its spiritual significance is the most valuable thing the world affords.’ How do most people now view the Bible?



Bible Readings

- Daniel 7:13–14
- Isaiah 53:1–9
- John 20:30–31
- Acts 1:1–11
- 2 Timothy 3:10–17
- 2 Peter 1:16–21





Opening Our Eyes

Before we begin we must ask ourselves a piercing question: On what grounds do we base our belief that one day Jesus Christ is going to return to this world? Is it based on Christian myth and legend or is it based on something more authoritative? The answer is, of course, that we base this belief entirely on what God's Word, the Bible, teaches us about the subject. One in every thirty verses of Holy Scripture predicts our Saviour's return, and for every single mention of His first advent, there are eight allusions to His second advent. Some might object to this and say, 'But how do we know the Bible is true?' This question is becoming one of the battle cries of our generation. I am amazed at the number of evangelical believers who are adopting a stance towards the Bible which goes something like this – 'The Bible is partly the Word of God and partly the word of humans. In part it has authority and in part it has not.' This position leads to a view of the Bible that makes the Scriptures utterly useless and valueless. We are faced with a basic question: Who decides what is true? Who decides what is of value? The Bible declares for itself that *all* Scripture is God-breathed and that '... men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet.1:21). It is fully inspired by God but fully written by human agents. Christ Himself regarded the words of Isaiah and Moses as being the very words of God (Mark 7:5–13). Its amazingly fulfilled prophecies are just another indication of its divine inspiration.

When we examine the New Testament, we find that not only do writers such as John, Peter and Paul predict Christ's coming, but that Christ Himself taught us that one day He would return. 'I will come back,' He said (John 14:3). Amongst our Saviour's last words, in the book of Revelation, are these: 'Behold, I am coming soon' (22:7). Truly, as James Culross expresses it, 'If Christ were not to

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come, He would break His word.’ Let us be quite clear about this. If Christ does not mean to return to this earth, if it is no part of His purpose personally to reappear in human history, if He really does not intend to come back to earth as corporeally as He once walked on earth, then He has perpetrated upon His followers a most cruel and heartless hoax. But Christ is coming back. In words that are crystal clear, He has told us so. Ian Macpherson, in his book *Dial the Future*, says

I expect to see Him [Christ] as literally as I have looked on David Ben Gurion. I await no disembodied wraith, no ectoplasmic emanation, no thin, impalpable apparition. I await the real Jesus, the One who ascended from Olivet and is to return to the same spot.¹

Some Christians take the view that Christ returns each time a Christian dies, whilst others say that Christ returned in the power of the Spirit at Pentecost, but this was quite distinct and separate from His promised personal and physical return. Didn't the angels say, when Christ was taken up into heaven from Mount Olivet, 'This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven'? How did He go? Visibly and physically. And that is how He will return.

1. Ian Macpherson, *Dial the Future* (Eastbourne: Prophetic Witness, 1975).