

Biblical prophecy and the return of Jesus

Jim Smith

There are so many ideas and theories around about the return of Jesus, that it is hard for God's people sometimes to know what to believe. The only way to get a clear and firm understanding of this event is to see what the Bible teaches.

In this material, we are going to take a look at what the Old and New testaments have to say to us. Then we should be in a good position to make our judgment, and find firm ground for our hopes.

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"Freshfields", Mutton Hall HillHeathfield TN21 8NL

1. The Old Testament: “one who is to come...”

We begin our study with a look at what the Old testament teaches about the return of Jesus. Many of God's people want to go straight to the book of Revelation, but when they do this they make a big mistake. If the Bible teaches about the return of Jesus, it will do so with a consistent voice. If we cannot find the seeds of the return of Jesus in the Old Testament, we will not so confident about what we find in the New testament. We need the whole Bible to speak to us.

The believers of the Old testament clearly expected “one who is to come”, a person who would be the fulfilment of God's promises, and the fulfilment of their prophetic hopes. They expected this coming one to carry out a number of functions:-

Prophet (Deut. 18:15-18)

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet, like me from among your brothers. You must listen to him.”

This prophet was to be a powerful man, full of power and of the voice of the Lord. God promises that “I will put my words in his mouth.” The people understood that this prophet would be different from the prophets they had known already. This was to be a very special man.

Shepherd (Isa.40:11)

“He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart, he gently leads those that have young.”

The shepherd would gather the sheep of the Nation, protect them and lead them into still waters. (Psalm 23.)

King (Zech.9:9)

“See your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The King was one who was expected to rule the Nation with justice, and to throw back the oppressors of the people. (Isaiah 9: 2-7)

Priest (Ps 110:4)

“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.”

The coming one was to have priestly functions, which were so important to God's Old testament people.

Sacrificial lamb (Isaiah 53:7)

“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter..”

This function is powerfully linked to that of priest. The Old testament people founded their relationship with God on sacrifice, so the coming one would, in some mysterious way, be a part of the perfect sacrifice God needed.

Messiah/Saviour

God's old covenant people expected the one who would come to deliver them from political oppression, and establish them as the dominant people on the earth. These themes can be found in the major prophets, but reveal themselves more clearly towards the end of the Old Testament. For example:-

“In my vision at night I looked, and before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples, Nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one which will never be destroyed.”(Daniel 7:13-14)

“The suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his Temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come.” (Malachi 3:1)

Sadly, they could not separate this vision from their desire for personal vindication and triumph. For this reason many of God's people were shocked at the radical nature of Jesus teaching, where he claimed to be both the Son of Man and the suffering Servant. Jesus clearly saw himself as the fulfilment of the one expected in the Old Testament. Consider these verses for example:-

John 8:56 “Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day.”

John 5:46 “Moses-wrote of me..”

Matt 22:45 “David thus calls him Lord...”

Jesus also took on the role of :-

The shepherd. (John 10:11)

The priest. (although it was left to the writer to the Hebrews to make this clear to us - Hebrews 4:14)

The King. (Mark 15:26)

The lamb. (John 1:29)

In one very famous passage, he did not accept the prophet concept as understood by the people of his day. (Mark8:28) He also went much further, uniting in himself the concept of suffering servant with that of the Son of Man. (Matthew 26: 62-68) The revelation of God never stands still. In the new covenant, God is not only consistent with his old covenant revelation, he also develops our understandings.

It is clear, even from these few verses, that the Old testament believers were looking forward to the return of someone, and that Jesus picked up these expectations and claimed that he was the fulfilment of these hopes.

If this was all there were, we would already be justified in saying that the return of Jesus was clearly prophesied in the Old Testament. But there is much more. The Old Testament lays out in great detail the details of this coming one. Here are some of the verses which need further thought and study.

The Old Testament speaks about Jesus, telling us:

His birthplace	Micah 5:2
Nature of ministry	Isa. 61: 1-3
His gentleness	Isa. 42: 1-4
His universal appeal	Isa. 49: 1-6
His submissive attitude	Isa. 50: 4-7
He would be rejected and killed	Isa. 52: 13-53:12
He would be silent before accusers	Isa. 53:7
He would be sold	Zech.11:12
He would be betrayed	Ps. 41:9
He would be forsaken	Zech.13:7
He would be pierced	Ps. 22:16
He would be mocked	Ps. 22:6-8
At execution:	
Lots cast for clothes	Ps. 22:18
Vinegar to drink	Ps. 69:21
Bones not broken	Ps. 34:20
Resurrection	Ps.16:8-11 Isa. 53:10-12
Ascension	Ps. 110:1

The early Church used many of these verses in their teaching. Study these for example:-

- Acts 2:24-36
- Acts 3:21-26
- Acts 4:10-12
- Acts 13:32-41

Jesus saw his life as part of the Old testament hope of a coming one. He linked his life with much of th Old testament. So did the New testament Church. Study these verses for example:-

Passover lamb	Ex.12:1-20 and John 19:36
Scapegoat	Lev.16:1-22 and Hebrews 13:12-13
Suffering servant	Isa.50: 4-7; 52-53 Acts 8:27-35 1 Peter 2:21-25.

Did the Old testament expect “one who is to come?” Clearly it did, and God’s people have built their understanding of the return of Jesus on these verses. Let’s turn now to the New testament.

2. Jesus’ teaching

The clearest teaching on the return of Jesus is to be found in Matthew chapter 24, where the sequence of his return - those things which would happen before it, and it’s effects are clearly seen.

Matt 24: The framework of the return- what Jesus teaches.

Political chaos

“ Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming “I am the Christ” and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against Nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginnings of birthpangs. “

As the people of God, we are expected to read the signs of the times. So we must ask ourselves the question - “is this true today?” We must consider the facts of world history, to see if we are indeed entering an end times experience.

Persecution

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all Nations because of me.”

Throughout history, Christians have been persecuted, but it's hard to imagine a time when persecution has been so widespread or systematic. In the West we have grown used to freedom to be or not to be Christians. Today, there appears to be growing persecution in many places - from other faiths, from atheism and from the occult. Is this just another phase of persecution, or part of the end times experience?

Apostasy

“At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

The advance of the end times process brings a great apostasy. The oppressions and struggles will drive many away from the faith, and cause some who once served God to turn against God's people. It's a grim scenario. False prophets and false teachings will begin to circulate, presumably telling God's people that all is well, and that those who speak about the pain which precedes an imminent return of Christ are either deluded, or are unable to accept that this experience will be a joyful one. Either way, the voice of the prophet will be silenced - or muffled. Then comes the greatest sorrow of all - “the love of most will grow cold.”

Proclamation

“And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the Nations, and then the end will come.”

The great apostasy is followed by the great proclamation - what a great joy and relief. It's natural that those who are surviving the persecution will want to speak of Jesus - who else?

Distress & great deception

“For then there will be great distress unequalled from the beginning of the world until now and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you “Look here is Christ!” or “there he is!” do not believe it. For false Christ's and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.”

A time of great distress and spiritual confusion follows the proclamation of the Gospel. Much of this confusion will be spiritual, as the enemy launches a savage attack on God's people, sensing his own imminent demise. False Christ's will appear in many guises, using spiritual power to perform counterfeit miracles to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

The coming of Jesus

“For as the lightning that comes from the east is visible in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man.”

The story, from our human point of view draws to its close with the triumphant return of the Lord Jesus Christ. There will be no mistaking his arrival nor his person. All deception will be at an end. Once again he will stand on his earth, this time to be seen for who he really is - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He then takes the end times process to its natural conclusion. We have to move a little beyond Matthew 24 to get the fuller picture:-

1. The Angels

Immediately after the distress of those days, ***“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”***

All those of the elect who have survived the end times are now gathered together to be with Jesus. Here in Matthew, that gathering task is given to the angels. The Apostle Paul gives us another glimpse of this process: “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. 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.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17) John the writer of the Apocalypse gives us a much fuller picture of the process, but whichever way we read it, there is a great ingathering of God's people. As John puts it in Revelation 19 verse 6 “Hallelujah!”

2. The judgement

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.” (Matthew 25:31)

So the Lord carries out the inevitable consequences of his return. His very presence causes the Nations to mourn - realising how they have abandoned and abused him, and have insulted his people.

They realise with an acute suddenness the reality - that they were utterly and irrevocably wrong, and that now there is no turning back.

3. Be ready

**“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. “(Matthew 24:42)
 “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household, to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.”
 (Matthew 24:45-46)**

This is clear teaching from Jesus. He makes it plain that there is a sequence of events which must take place before his return, and that we have to make sure that we know where we are in this process, and what is expected of us, as individuals and as a Church.

3. Paul’s teaching

From the Old testament and from Jesus, we move on to the teaching of the Apostle Paul concerning the return of Jesus. In two key passages - 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thess. 4 & 5 - he adds to our understandings about the end times return of Jesus. In many ways, we finish up with a list of events and circumstances as we did with our study of the Old testament. It’s amazing how precise so much of the teaching of the Bible is on the return of Jesus. Here are the verses to study:-

It will be sudden	1 Thess. 5:1-11
No mistaking it	Phil 2: 9-11
We receive new bodies	1 Cor 15:49. Phil 3:21
Appear with Him in glory	Col 3:4
Christians eagerly await	1 Cor 1:7. Phil 3:20 1 Thess.1:10
Soon	1 Cor.16:22
Eager in evangelism and service	Phil.2:16
Holy & Pure	Phil.1:10; 1 Thess 3:13
Endure	Phil.1:6

In Paul’s teaching, a very important theme begins to emerge - the prophetic material about the return of Jesus is to make us ready **and to encourage us to keep working**. It is so easy to be overwhelmed with excitement and joy to the extent that we do nothing but gaze up into heaven. The angels rebuked the first apostles for this at the ascension of Jesus, and Paul would rebuke us as well. End times teaching and prophecy should increase our willingness to watch and work and pray, not diminish it.

4. John’s teaching

So we come at last to the book of Revelation, and the Apostle John’s prophetic teaching. But we have come here last, not first. And we come armed with much prophetic understanding from other parts of God’s words. What does John teach us? His prophecy specifically concentrates on the events which accompany the return of Jesus:-

Parousia of Christ	19:11-16
Defeat of evil	19:17-20:3
Revelation of Christ’s kingdom to world	20:4-10
The Last judgement	20:11-15
The new creation	21:1-5
The new Jerusalem	21:9-22:5

It’s clear, even from this simple study, that there is a vast amount of biblical prophecy around the return of Jesus, and much of it is very specific. I want to finish by looking at one question - **why has Father included so much about this subject in His word?** We may answer “because the return of Jesus is so important to Father” and we would be right. But what is Father trying to teach us? Why does he want us to know so much about this event? Here are some suggestions, which might make good teaching material, or good discussion questions in small groups.

1. So that we will be ready

Jesus taught that if we had known at what time the thief was going to come to our house, we would be there on guard. (Matthew 24:43) He also taught us to “watch and pray.” (Mark 14:38)

One of the saddest things which can happen to God’s people is that they should be caught out by the return of Jesus. Biblical prophecy is there to help us avoid such a sadness. We should be inspired by the teaching on the return to live good quality Christian lives, free from deliberate sin. We should be inspired by the teaching on the return to be found in our ministries, using our gifts, building the kingdom, preparing the way.

Off all the people in the world, we should not be caught out.

2. So we can stand the pressure

There is no mistaking the turmoil of the end times which will precede the return of Jesus. There will be pressure on the Church, on families, marriages and individuals. The enemy will stop at nothing to destroy God's people. We are best prepared for this by knowing that it is part of the struggle. I am amazed how, again and again, God's people call for the return of Jesus, expecting that experience to be one of unending joy. Of course when Jesus appears it will be a joyful time, but that which precedes it is far from joyful.

But suffering and pain are joy for God's people, for they are the footsteps of Jesus, in which we follow. (1 Peter 2:21) Indeed they were the very hallmark of the ministry of Jesus, who, "for the joy set before him endured the cross.." (Hebrews 12:2)

We must learn to wear and use the armour of God (Eph 6:11); we must learn to recognise the strategy of the enemy; (1 Peter 5:8) and learn the lesson which Moses was taught - "stand firm and see the salvation of your God. (Exodus 14:13). Sometimes I feel that there is a weakness in many of God's people - the inability to endure, to struggle, to overcome. Many need to take Habbakuk's lesson to heart:- "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour." (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

3. The weakening of the love of many

It is clear that before the return of Jesus, faith will burn low in the Church and in the hearts of God's people. I have heard many challenge this view, pointing to the great increase of God's people during times of revival. But we are not talking about revival, but about the return of Jesus, and this event has certain events which come before it - and revival is not one of them. In the lead up to the return, faith will grow cold in the hearts of many people. We need to know this, so that we will not be filled with despair, but hope. This apostasy is part of the process which will end in the return. We also need to know it so that we can guard our own hearts and our own faith. We need to know how the enemy might weaken our faith; we need to keep our armour bright; we need to learn to be strong in the joy of the Lord. We need to try, as far as we are able, to be sure that our faith does not grow cold, so that we can strengthen and encourage others.

4. The need for constant vigilance

Again and again, the Bible commands us to watch and pray. We have to be constantly standing in our watch tower, looking out for the coming King, reading the signs of the times, and guarding against the manoeuvring of the enemy. I find that many of God's people are slack in their watching. But the more we understand the events which come before the return, the more we will be called to our watch towers. The watch towers must not be found empty, either by the returning King, or the deceiving and scheming enemy.

5. It is not possible for the Church just to continue as it is.

There have to be changes, so that we can mature into end times Churches. What is Jesus looking for?

The releasing of gifts, so that the Church can fulfil the great commission, of reaching men and gathering the harvest.

The willingness to take on the spiritual battle in the heavenly places, so that the enemy is not unopposed.

The willingness to sacrifice everything for the coming King - to lay aside our own desires, and serve Him, that his Kingdom may come.

A deep understanding of what is happening, so that we are strong.

We are going to be facing a tough time. But we are marching to God's eternal plan, revealed in the whole of the Bible. So, let us, with joy, continue to watch and pray, to serve and worship. Marana tha. Come Lord Jesus.