

INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter of his two letters, Peter focuses on our future hope. This message is about how to answer those sarcastic skeptics who ridicule the idea of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The early church lived every day expecting Jesus to return. They shared a greeting and salutation that literally meant, "the Lord comes." It was the Aramaic phrase, "Maranatha." When these first century Christians met they didn't say, "Good morning" or "Shalom." They said, "Maranatha!" (The Lord comes!)

One of my favorite stories is about a pastor told his congregation on Sunday that on the following Sunday he wanted each of them to greet each other with that Biblical phrase, "Maranatha!" He said, "Next Sunday, don't say, "Hello" or "Good morning" to each other, let's all say, "Maranatha!"

Next Sunday, two of the oldest ladies in the church approached the pastor. They knew they were supposed to extend a special greeting, but they had forgotten the word. Finally, one of them remembered. She reached out to shake the pastors hand and enthusiastically said, "Marijuana, brother!"

If you go around saying "Maranatha" these days, there will plenty of people who will call you a certified nut. Just as there are sarcastic skeptics today, they were around in Peter's day as well. Let's read what the Bible has to say about them beginning in II Peter 3:1:

"Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 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. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men. 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."

We've all seen the caricature of a weirdo Christian walking around with a sandwich board saying, "THE END OF THE WORLD IS NEAR-REPENT!" Is the end of the world near? It's nearer than it was yesterday, and it's certainly nearer than when Peter wrote these words 2,000 years ago. He said in the last days scoffers will come who mock Christ and ridicule the message of the church—and he was implying that *they* were living in the last days. It's not rocket science. If they were living in the last days 2,000 years ago, these days must certainly be the last of the last days!

For a skeptic, the idea of Jesus being born of a virgin, performing miracles, dying on a cross, and walking out of the tomb three days later is hard to swallow. But when we say Jesus is going to

return to earth, they really blow a gasket!

Here’s **THEIR ARGUMENT: “WHERE IS THIS ‘COMING’ HE PROMISED?”**

Let me give you a couple of current examples of high-profile Americans who ridicule the idea of the Second Coming of Jesus. Not everyone from East Texas is a theological and political conservative like I am. For instance, Bill Moyers, of PBS fame grew up in East Texas and is a licensed Baptist Minister. He has a right to his opinion, but his tone toward conservative Christians has become more vitriolic in the past few years. Earlier this year, he took aim at conservative Christians and what we believe about the Second Coming. He made the comments in a speech at Harvard and they were reprinted as an editorial in a Minneapolis newspaper last month. He said:

“The best-selling books in American today are the 12 volumes of the ‘Left Behind’ series written by the Christian fundamentalist and religious-nut Timothy LaHaye. These true believers subscribe to a fantastical theology, which is rather simple, if bizarre: Once Israel has occupied the rest of its ‘biblical lands,’ legions of the antichrist will attack it, triggering a final showdown in the valley of Armageddon. As the Jews who have not been converted are burned the messiah will return from the rapture. True believers will be lifted out of their clothes and transported to Heaven, where, seated next to the right hand of God, they will watch their political and religious opponents suffer plagues of boils, sores, locusts and frogs during the several years of the tribulation that follow. The invasion of Iraq for them was a warm-up act, predicted in the Book of Revelations. A war with Islam in the middle East is not something to be feared but welcomed—an essential conflagration on the road to redemption.”

I don’t believe all the things he wrote. And I have yet to meet a single conservative Christian who *wants* a war with Iraq or Islam. His comments are laced with caustic sarcasm.

Ted Turner, founder of CNN is a well-known skeptic of the message of Christ. He was once quoted as saying that “Christianity is for losers.” Here’s his take on the Second Coming of Christ: “Almost every religion talks about a savior coming. When you look in the mirror in the morning, you’re looking at the savior. Nobody else is going to save you but yourself.” (*The Tennessean*, March 17, 2001)

What should be our answer to these modern skeptics? “Stand by, He’ll get back to you...” Have you ever been talking on the phone and someone says, “Stand by, I’ve got to put you on hold?” Unless they are completely rude and dishonest, they are going to get back to you, so you wait until they come back on the line. Jesus is no liar and He promised He would return.

Notice in verse three Peter writes that these mockers ridicule the return of Christ because they are “following their own evil desires.” It’s not because they have legitimate logical or intellectual objections; they have a moral objection. They don’t want to consider the possibility that someone is going to come who will hold them accountable for their sin.

As we think about the Second Coming of Jesus, let’s be reminded of four important truths:

1. JESUS WILL RETURN FOR HIS BRIDE!

Forty days after the resurrection of Jesus, He gathered with His disciples on the Mt. of Olives. It was time for Him to return to heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. This is called the Ascension of Christ. The Bible says Jesus began to float up into the sky through the clouds. I can easily imagine the disciples standing there with their jaws dropping as they watched their Lord depart for heaven. The Bible says, "Suddenly, two men dressed in white (angels) stood beside them, "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." (Acts 1:10-11) Peter was standing there the day the angels made this announcement; years later, as he wrote these words about the return of Christ, he must have recalled that vivid promise.

The first question some people have about the Second coming is, "WHY is Jesus going to return?" The Bible teaches His return is like a Jewish bridegroom coming to take His bride to His Father's house. "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. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me." (John 14:2-3)

Understanding Hebrew wedding customs will give you a better grasp of the Second Coming of Christ. In American weddings, there are usually two stages: the engagement and the wedding itself. The main focus is on the bride, and her parents pay most of the expenses of the wedding. When the bride walks down the aisle, everyone stands and every eye is on the bride.

By contrast, in the time of Jesus, the focus was on the Jewish bridegroom. There were three stages: (1) The arrangement, in which the Father of the groom arranged a suitable bride for his son, agreeing on a dowry to pay the bride's father. (2) The betrothal period, in which the couple were legally pledged to each other, but did not live together. And finally, (3) the wedding celebration itself, which was held at the father of the groom's home. The groom's father paid for all the expenses. If you are a father with several daughters, you probably would like to reinstate this custom!

When it was time for the wedding celebration, the groom, and his friends (like groomsmen) would go to the bride's home. As they approached the bride's house, one of the groomsmen would blow a horn to announce the arrival of the groom. The bride would be waiting, dressed in her very best wedding clothes. Her friends (like bridesmaids) would be waiting and watching with her. It was a great time of expectation and celebration.

The church is called the Bride of Christ and there are some enlightening comparisons between a Jewish wedding and the return of Christ. Our Heavenly Father arranged for us to be a part of His Family before the foundation of the world—that's the arrangement phase. The price paid for us to be a part of God's family was the precious blood of Christ. We're in the betrothal period now—we've pledged our faithfulness to Jesus, but we're not yet living with Him in His Father's house. One day, when Jesus returns, He will be taking us to celebrate the Wedding Supper of the Lamb!

This is the metaphor Jesus employed in Matthew 25 when He told the story of the Ten Bridesmaids. In this story, the bride was at her home with ten bridesmaids waiting and watching for the groom to come. It was nighttime, so the bridesmaids had small lamps made of pottery. Their job was to accompany the bride and bridegroom to the Wedding feast by lighting the way.

Neither the bride nor the bridesmaids knew exactly what time the groom would appear.

The Bible says when Jesus returns there will be the sound of a trumpet, and the shout of the archangel. He said, "The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come and meet him!'" (Matthew 25:5-6) The danger we face is that of getting complacent and sleeping while we should be waiting and watching.

2. JESUS WILL RETURN SUDDENLY!

Today, people plan their wedding date months in advance, and even send out invitations. But the Jewish bridegroom would try to surprise the bride by showing up suddenly and unexpectedly. It was just part of the fun of a Jewish celebration. That's why in Jesus' story the groom showed up at midnight! He was trying to surprise the bride.

To shift the metaphor, in the next few verses, Peter conveys that the return of Jesus will be like a thief in the night. When Jesus returns He will come secretly, suddenly, and unexpectedly. The Bible says, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." (I Corinthians 15:5-52) Someone said that's a good verse to write over a church nursery—when babies are crying, there's not much sleeping, but there's plenty of "changing" going on!

But this isn't talking about babies, it's talking about the return of Jesus. We often use the phrase "in the blink of an eye" to describe something that happens quickly. If you're really fast, you can blink your eye in about 1/400th of a second. But this phrase, the "twinkling of an eye" describes the speed at which your eye can focus on an object. It's the flash of recognition. One Greek scholar described it as the time it takes light to travel from the front of your eyeball to the optic nerves leading to your brain—that's fast!

Every time I read this verse I think about an experience I had years ago when I was leading a Bible study for a group of college students. I was teaching on the Second Coming and these students were really into it. They had their Bibles open and they were taking notes as fast as they could. But there was one student who didn't have a Bible. He looked like what we used to call a "nerd" and he didn't seem to be paying much attention to what I was saying.

When I mentioned the thought about a "twinkling of an eye," he whipped out his scientific calculator and started punching away on the keyboard. I remember thinking, "this kid is doing his physics homework while I'm trying to teach the Bible!" I tried not to let him distract me.

When I was finished teaching, some of the students came up to speak to me and I noticed he was waiting in line. When he got to me, he showed me his calculator and said, "Point six

nanosecond." I said, "Excuse me?" He shoved his glasses up higher on his nose and said, "Point six nanosecond. Light travels at 186,234 miles per second, and the depth of a human eyeball is approximately so-and-so millimeters, so a the 'twinkling of an eye' is point six nanosecond." I said, "Is that fast?" He said, "That's fast!"

I only point that out because some people think when Jesus returns, He will parachute down slowly so they'll have plenty of time to repent at the last second. Even someone who mocks the Second Coming would change their mind if they had time to realize they're wrong. But his coming will be sudden.

3. JESUS WILL RETURN ON GOD'S TIMING!

Have you ever noticed time is relative? When you're watching a good movie, two hours can flash by like ten minutes. But when you're listening to a bad sermon, thirty minutes can seem like "From Here to Eternity."

One of the arguments skeptics offer to ridicule the Second Coming follows this logic: "All of the early Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, including Peter, Paul, and Mary. They were wrong. It's been 2,000 years. Do you expect me to fall for the same tactic?"

Yes, it's been 2,000 years, but that's according to man's timetable. We're all creatures of time and space. For all of our lives, we've followed the rhythm of six seconds making one minute, and sixty minutes making one hour. Twenty-four hours make a day, and 365 days make a year. A hundred years make a century and ten centuries make a millennia. But God is restricted by neither time nor space. II Peter 3:8 says, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." That doesn't mean according to God's clock a thousand years equals one day, it says a day is *like* a thousand years. To us, it seems as if Jesus has been gone for 2,000 years, but with God, it's only been a couple of days. It's as if Jesus went home last Friday!

There are two extremes when it comes to the Second Coming of Christ. On one hand, there are those who deny His return—the skeptics. But at the other end of the spectrum are those who are the "date-setters." In his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey predicted Jesus would return in 1984. He was wrong, and he laughed all the way to the bank.

You can be certain if you read or hear someone who says they know the exact day and date Jesus will return, they are mistaken at best and heretical at worst. Jesus said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." (Matthew 24:36-37)

As I've said before, when it comes to the Second Coming, I'm not on the scheduling committee, I'm on the welcoming committee!

4. WE MUST GET READY AND STAY READY!

A Jewish bride didn't know the exact day or time when her bridegroom would come. But she

didn't want him to come when she was not ready. So, as the general time of her wedding banquet approached, she had to dress up and *stay* dressed up. She had to get ready and stay ready. In Matthew 24:44 Jesus said we have to do the same thing. "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." (Matthew 24:44)

But just being saved isn't necessarily being ready. There are some Christians who are living in disobedience. If Jesus came back today, would you be ashamed? The Bible says, "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." (I John 2:28)

The great Bible teacher Ray Stedman was correct when he wrote: "There is a false teaching that has arisen within Christian circles that suggests that the day of the Lord's appearing will be a day only of the giving of rewards—that there will be no regrets, no shame, no negative notes at all. But this passage warns that it is all too possible that some Christians will shrink in shame before him at his coming." (Discovery Papers, I John, Palo Alto, CA)

Let's face it; if you are involved in some kind of unholy behavior when Jesus returns, you may be pretty embarrassed. Whenever I do a Q&A session with high school or college students I'm often asked, "How far can a Christian go on a date?" They realize sexual intercourse before marriage is wrong, but they wonder where you draw the line. I always say, "Just don't do anything with the opposite sex that if Jesus came back and found you doing it, you'd be ashamed." That's good advice for any kind of moral issue for any age Christian as well.

Are you ready? Jesus is going to return whether you are ready or not. I can remember playing "Hide & Seek" as a kid. It was pretty simple. Whoever was "It" would close their eyes and count to 100 while everyone else ran and tried to hide. I can remember learning to count fast when I was it. I could make it to 100 by saying, "one, two, three, four ...forty, sixty, eighty, ninety seventy, ninety eight, ninety nine 100! Then I'd say, "READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!!!!"

CONCLUSION

Don't be surprised when you encounter skeptics who mock and ridicule you because you believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This isn't some fantasy doctrine that has been dreamed up in the past 100 years by nutty American preachers. Since the beginning of the creation, God has been moving this world toward an event that will serve as the culmination and climax of His dealing with mankind. The Second Coming of Jesus isn't just an obscure minor doctrine of scripture. It is the final and convincing proved of God's absolute sovereignty over His creation.

When you meet one of these sarcastic skeptics who poke fun at the fantastic idea of the return of Jesus, suggest they travel to Washington, D.C. and visit the United States Capitol Building. Because inscribed on the ceiling of that soaring dome are these amazing words: "One God, one law, one element, and one far-off divine event toward which the whole creation moves." There once was a farmer who had an old grandfather clock in his farmhouse. He cherished the old clock, and he faithfully wound it and made sure it was keeping the correct time. The grandfather clock rewarded him and his family with the faithful chiming of the hour—every hour on the hour. As the farmer slept at night he unconsciously counted the number of chimes and then drifted

back to sleep. It was a comfort to hear the tick-tock of the clock and the reassuring chimes throughout the night.

On one particular night the mechanism in the clock malfunctioned and the clock chimed 10 times, then 11 times, then 12 times, then 13 times, then 14 times, and then it stopped ticking. Alarmed, the farmer jumped out of his bed and said to his family, “Wake up, family, get up! It’s later than it’s *ever* been!” The church needs to wake up, too because it truly is later than it’s ever been before.

OUTLINE

THEIR ARGUMENT: "WHERE IS THIS 'COMING' HE PROMISED?"

THE ANSWER: "STAND BY, HE'LL GET BACK TO YOU..."

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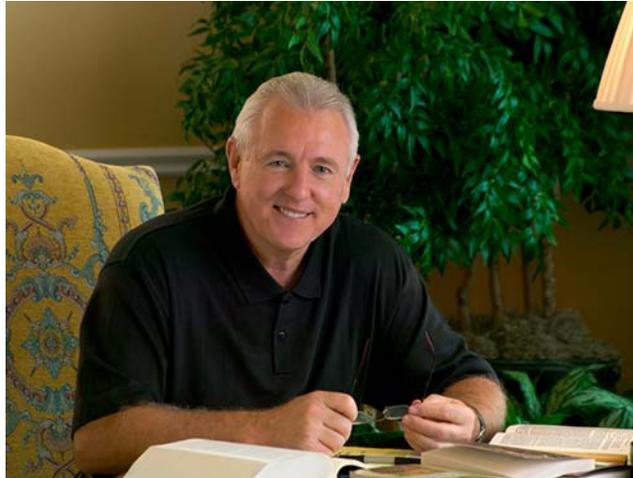
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes