**Foundations (57 of 60) The Return of Christ - RC Sproul**

Many Christians eagerly anticipate the second coming of Christ. Yet there is no end to the debate as to when and how He will return. That's our topic on Renewing Your Mind.

Welcome to Renewing Your Mind with the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. The return of Christ has excited Christians ever since Jesus ascended into heaven. There are dozens of interpretations as to when and how Jesus will return to this world.

Famous predictions have been made as to the date and time He would arrive, and one by one those predictions have failed. Is there anything we can know for sure in the face of so much confusion? Well, today we'll discover three things we can know about the second coming. R.C. Sproul has titled this message, The Return of Christ.

Back in the late 40s, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth made an observation after the Jewish people had returned to the state of Israel and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Karl Barth said at that time, he said, the time has come in church history where Christians are to be reading their Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another. I don't think anything in the last several centuries has done more to provoke heightened interest in the return of Jesus than the restoration of the Jewish state, unless it was the subsequent events that took place in 1967 when the Jews, after almost 2,000 years, recovered the city of Jerusalem.

We go back to New Testament days and the Olivet Discourse, which is recorded for us in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, and in Luke's version when Jesus predicts the coming destruction of the temple and of the city of Jerusalem, He makes the observation that Jerusalem will be trodden underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Now, that was an interesting element to Jesus' specific predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem because He indicated at that time that not only would Jerusalem fall, but would also fall into pagan hands, but that that occupation of the holy city of Jerusalem would not be permanent. There would be a terminal point to it, He said, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.

Now, that's the only time in the Gospels that we encounter that phrase, the times of the Gentiles. But there's one more time when that phrase, that specific phrase, is used in the New Testament, and there it is used by the Apostle Paul in the eleventh chapter of his epistle to the Romans, because that's another chapter that has piqued so much interest in future things and also with respect to the return of Christ, because, as you know, in chapter 11, Paul labors the question, what about Israel? What about the Jewish people who had rejected the Messiah when He came? Is God finished with them? And in that text, he talks about how we as Gentiles have been grafted in to the holy root that was Israel, and we are those people of whom Hosea spoke the word of the Lord, saying, we who were no people are now God's people. But God has not cast off His original people forever, and Paul then speaks in Romans 11 again about the future work that God will do among the Jewish people when the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Now, there's a lot of speculation, a lot of disagreement on exactly what Paul means in Romans 11, not to mention the whole question of the program that God has for ethnic Israel. But because of the events of this century surrounding the Jewish nation, and of which the hold that even now Israel has on Jerusalem is precarious, many have come to the conclusion that perhaps we are on the very threshold of the final days of redemptive history, and that the return of Christ is near. Add to that the turning of the calendar in the millennial year to a new millennium is all the more fuel for the speculation of the imminent return of Jesus.

Now, all I intend to mean at this point is simply to say that we are at a time in church history where the expectation for the return of Jesus is at a fever pitch. Now, I mentioned earlier that two-thirds of the doctrinal material that we find in the New Testament relate to future aspects of the kingdom of God, and there is no element of the New Testament future prophecy more important to the people of God and to the history of the Christian church than that body of prophecy that relates to the return of Jesus. The promised return of Christ to this world has been understood by the church for two thousand years as the blessed hope of the people of God, and it is something that keeps people going in the time of distress and persecution and difficulty.

But again, the question of the time of Jesus' return, the manner in which He will come, both of these are issues of ongoing debate and controversy. Let me take a second here to go to the record in the book of Acts of Jesus' departure from this world, the account of the ascension that takes place in chapter 1 of Acts beginning at verse 9, where we read these words. Now, when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven. Now, this is only one of the many predictions in the New Testament of the return of Jesus. And when we read about the return of Jesus, we see certain elements that accompany these predictions.

The one is that the return of Christ will be personal. That is, it's not just going to be the ongoing influence of His teaching, but that the church is expecting Christ to return to this planet personally. Secondly, we see that the promise is that Christ will come back to this world visibly.

And third, the promise is that His return, His personal visible return, will be a return in glory with all kinds of majestic accouterments surrounding it. Now, before I go any further on this, let's see how that in this text these three elements are to be found. This same Jesus, this person whom you are standing here gazing into heaven, watching His departure, this same Jesus will return in like manner.

Now, that's critical to me for reasons that I'll explain in a few moments, because here in the book of Acts, the mode of Jesus' return is said to be parallel to the mode of His departure. And His departure was visible. And He ascended on clouds of glory, on the Shekinah cloud.

And the expectation is that His return will be just as visible and just as glorious when He comes at the end of the age. However, in spite of these clear prophecies of the New Testament, the subject of Christ's personal, visible, glorious return to this world has been one of the most controversial issues in the last couple of hundred years with respect to the question of the authority and integrity of sacred Scripture. In my book, What Jesus Says About the Last Days, I give a summary of the critical theories that have emerged in that time frame that I just mentioned with the rise of higher criticism and the unprecedented assault against the reliability of the New Testament documents and of the reliability of the teaching of Jesus.

I went to a seminary where I was exposed to this kind of critical theory virtually every day, and the New Testament professors who denied the return of Christ constantly pointed to texts in the New Testament where the prophecy of the return of Jesus was couched in a certain frame of reference with respect to time. And the arguments that I was hearing were the arguments that had its roots in nineteenth-century critical theory. Albert Schweitzer, for example, in his quest for the historical Jesus, described Jesus as one who had a critical sense of awaiting for God to intrude into history and bring His kingdom from on high in a decisive manner that Jesus expected to transpire during His lifetime.

And Jesus was disappointed because He expected when He sent out His seventy disciples on a mission that that would be the occasion that God would use to bring the kingdom from heaven. It didn't happen. Jesus thought then when He came into Jerusalem amidst the shouts of Hosanna from the populace there that maybe that would be the occasion where God would bring the kingdom, but He didn't.

And Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested, to go through the scourging and the humiliation of the beatings that followed and so on, and was even willing to be taken to the cross because He fully expected that when He went to the cross that while He was on the cross then at the last minute the Father would intervene, rescue Him, and bring the kingdom. While He was dying, suddenly realized it wasn't going to happen, and so He cried out, "'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' and died in disillusionment." That's the Jesus that was portrayed by Albert Schweitzer. Now, subsequent scholars following after Schweitzer said, yes, we have to take seriously these passages in the New Testament that seem to indicate that Jesus expected and taught His personal return within the lifetime of His own disciples, within the time frame of the first generation of Christians.

And again, the first theory was that this is what the New Testament taught, the New Testament was wrong, and Jesus was wrong, therefore we can safely discard the New Testament documents as being unreliable, and also understand that this Jesus of Nazareth, who was a wonderful person and a model of love and an existential hero and all of that, obviously had it wrong with respect to His own future predictions. As I say, subsequent generations, for example, in England, C. H. Dodd developed a response to this critical theory in which he spoke of what was called realized eschatology, the idea being that all of the prophecies that the New Testament made with respect to the future and Christ's return were in fact fulfilled in the first century. Jesus said, for example, you won't go over all of the cities of Jerusalem or of Israel until you see the Son of Man coming in power, or some of you will not taste death until you see the coming of the kingdom and so on.

And what Dodd did with those texts was he said what Jesus was referring to was not a future return but to His visible manifestation in glory that took place in the transfiguration, in the resurrection, and in the ascension. But of all the texts in the New Testament that came under attack by the critics, it was the text in the Olivet Discourse, particularly in Matthew's gospel, where when Jesus makes a prediction specifically about the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem when He says the day was coming that not one stone would be left upon another, Jerusalem would be surrounded and be defeated and so on, and that also that the Son of Man would come in glory. And the disciples asked Him pointedly, when will these things take place? And in direct response to the disciples' inquiry, Jesus spoke to them and said, this generation will not pass away till all of these things be fulfilled.

Now, do you see why the critics jump on that? That statement by Christ seems to be unambiguous, straightforward, and clear that He is saying that the three things that He's predicting, the destruction of the temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and His return, all will take place within the framework of a single human generation, which in Jewish terms means approximately forty years. Now, if the dating of Christ's crucifixion took place somewhere in and around the year 30 A.D., one would expect the outer limits of the fulfillment of that prophecy to be forty years later, which happens to be the date for the actual destruction of the temple and the defeat of the city of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 70. Now, again, the critics look at that and say, okay, we grant that the temple fell.

We grant that the city was captured, but Jesus didn't come back. Two out of three is not good enough. That would only make you a false prophet in the Old Testament.

And I've anguished over that. I have found that very vexing for this very reason, that I don't think anything more clearly proves the identity and integrity of Jesus Christ than these specific prophecies that He made unquestionably years before the events take place, and He made predictions of events that were utterly unthinkable to Jewish people. They thought that the temple was indestructible, and not only was the temple indestructible with a Herodian stone and everything, but the holy city of Zion would never perish under the protection of their God.

And yet Jesus specifically and unquestionably predicted those events before they took place. That is astonishing. And the thing that's so ironic is that the very text that should function as proof positive of the trustworthiness of Christ and of the biblical documents has become the text that the critics have turned on its head and used to repudiate the trustworthiness of the New Testament and of the integrity of Jesus because He didn't come back in that time frame.

Now, how have conservatives and evangelicals dealt with this? Usually by saying that the word generation in the Olivet discourse does not refer to a span of life or to a group within a particular time frame, but rather refers to a type of people. That is, they take the word generation, and they say what Jesus really meant was this kind of people that we're encountering here every day will still be around until I come back, and all these things are going to happen before these kinds of people, these generations pass away. Now, I personally think that is a possible interpretation of the Scripture, but I think it is so remote and so unlikely that it appears to any sober critic of the New Testament that it's a pure grasping at straws because the way in which the term generation is used consistently throughout the gospels is not in that manner but with specific reference to a particular age group of people.

Others have looked at that text and say that what Jesus is saying when He says all these things, that He only is incorporating in the all these things the first two elements of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, and He's kind of telescoping history together by including broadly His return. Now, another theory, the theory that I evaluate and find in some ways wanting in my book is the theory that's called full preterism that teaches that actually Jesus did return in 70 A.D. and that all of the future prophecies with respect to the coming of Christ actually took place when Jesus returned in judgment on Jerusalem, though it was invisible. And the argument that the preterists use at this point is that the language of future prophecy even is found in the prophets, for example, in the Old Testament.

Whenever an event of divine judgment is predicted, catastrophic imagery is used commonly, upheavals and turbulence in the heaven. For example, when God visited wicked cities in the Old Testament, the prophets described that in terms of the moon turning to blood and so on, the same kind of language that is used with respect to the coming of Jesus. They believe that Jesus came in judgment to judge the Jewish nation in 70 A.D. That was for all purposes the end of Judaism and the distinctive innovation of Christianity as a group that was distinguished from Judaism rather than a sect within Judaism.

It was Christ's punishment on His people for rejecting Him. It was the last judgment. It was the end, not of all history, but the end of the Jewish age.

Remember, he talks about the age of the Gentiles. Well, if there is an age that refers to the age of the Gentiles, that can only be meaningful in contrast to some other age, and the obvious one here would be the age of the Jews. And so the full preterist says that the Jewish age ended in 70 A.D. with the return of Christ in judgment and the beginning of the age of Gentiles took place.

They even argue for a secret rapture and an invisible final resurrection at that point. And I disagree with that because I believe there are other texts in the New Testament, such as the one I've already read, that indicate that we still have every reason to hope for a future personal visible return of Jesus. However, I do think that partial preterism has to be taken seriously, that a most significant event did take place in 70 A.D., and I am persuaded that what Jesus was talking about in the Olivet Discourse was in fact His judgment coming on Israel.

But I don't think He was referring to His final consummation of His kingdom. Now, the other theory that you meet here frequently, that's something that does take place in biblical prophecy, where a future event will be predicted where you have a typological fulfillment of it in a near-term situation, but where its final full fulfillment takes place long into the future. And we see that with some of the Old Testament prophecies.

Out of Egypt have I called my Son. That was fulfilled immediately with the exodus, but fully and finally with Jesus' return from Egypt, after the flight into Egypt during the slaughter of the innocents by Herod, and so on. You have that kind of phenomenon.

And so I'm saying in the final analysis, I'm not sure when Jesus is going to come, and in fact the only thing I know for sure is that nobody knows for sure when Jesus is going to come, but I still think that we as the people of God have a very blessed hope, every reason to believe in the integrity of Jesus' Word and His promises are without fail, and we look forward to a personal, visible, and glorious return. General Revelation, the Bible, the nature of God, the sacraments of the church, miracles, the atonement, eternal punishment, and more. This series is available to you right now as part of a special and limited time package.

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The Bible often references a final judgment when people will be measured by everything they have done and said in this life. How should Christians view this judgment? Do we need to be afraid, or can we anticipate our verdicts with joy? I'm Lee Webb. Next weekend, Dr. Sproul continues our series with a lesson on the final judgment.

Join us again next time for Renewing Your Mind.