

WHEN
JESUS
RETURNS

David Pawson

When Jesus Returns

David Pawson



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Foreword

While working on this book I preached at two funeral services, a rare experience for me since I began a traveling ministry. One was for my mother-in-law, who died at the age of ninety-eight; the other was for my daughter, who died some months later at thirty-six. Both lived and died with a personal trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

On each occasion I spoke of their present situation. They are fully conscious, able to communicate with others (though not with us) and, above all, enjoying the presence of Jesus.

But I went on to speak about their future prospects. One day they will have new bodies, subject to neither the frailty of brittle bones nor the ravages of septicemic leukemia. But they will not get them until they come back to live here on earth. This is not the ‘reincarnation’ of their souls, since they come back as themselves, but the ‘resurrection’ of their bodies.

It will happen when ‘the Lord himself will come down from heaven’ again (I Thess 4:16), for ‘God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep in him’ (I Thess 4:14). This event lies at the heart of Christian hopes for the future and shifts the focus of expectation in time and space.

The New Testament says very little about our existence immediately after death. While it is true that Christian believers ‘go to heaven to be with Jesus’ (language which even unbelievers dare to use when explaining death to children), this is not the main

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thrust of apostolic comfort. For heaven is only a waiting-room! The supreme moment will be the gathering of *all* believers, already dead or still alive, to ‘be with the Lord for ever’ (I Thess 4:17).

But this will not be in heaven. It will be on earth - or, at first, just above it, in the air, in the clouds (I Thess 4:17). If our immediate destiny after death is heaven, our ultimate destiny is earth, though we and it will have been completely recycled, restored to our original condition.

Christianity is a very ‘down-to-earth’ religion. It began when the Son of Man came down to earth. It continued because the Holy Spirit was sent down to earth. It will be consummated when the Father himself changes his address (‘our Father who art in heaven’) and makes his ‘dwelling-place’, his residence, ‘with men’ (Rev 21:3). At the very end, which is also the real beginning, we do not go to heaven to live with him; he comes to earth to live with us.

Before this can happen, the Son must pay a second visit. There are more things he needs to do here on earth before history can be wound up. This is the basic theme of *When Jesus Returns*, of which there are four parts.

The first is a reprint of a booklet with which some readers may already be acquainted: *Explaining the Second Coming* (Sovereign World, 1993). I am grateful to both publishers for agreeing to share this material. It represents what I preach about this subject. For reasons of space and objective I had to omit the controversies associated with this topic and simply present my conclusions, which is what I believe we should do in the pulpit. Faith is not aroused by tentative opinion but by confident declaration. But many have enquired how I arrived at my convictions. This volume attempts to answer that by sharing the thinking that went on in my study. There is therefore a radical contrast in style, content and vocabulary in the rest of the book. If the first part is condensed milk, the remainder is minced meat!

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The second is an introduction to the book of Revelation, the only book in the New Testament to major on the second coming. The aim has not been to write a commentary, though many puzzles and problems are faced, hopefully clarifying them.

The hope is that a fairly detailed overview will familiarize the reader with a book that has intimidated too many. I hope the reaction will be: 'Oh, now I can see what it's all about'.

The third tackles a major difference about what has come to be called 'the rapture'. Most Christians who have at some time been taught about the return of Christ are usually told to expect him at any time and that he is coming to take believers out of the world before the 'Great Tribulation' erupts. I have had to give the reasons why I believe this to be a false and dangerous assumption

The fourth plunges into a theological minefield! The 'millennium' has caused so many discussions and even divisions that many Christians don't even want to hear about it. The tragedy is that more know what they don't believe about it than what they do. I believe the main reason is that the options set before them have not included the view universally held in the church of the first few centuries, which we have called: 'classic premillennialism. I am convinced that this is 'an idea whose time has come' and make no apology for my impassioned advocacy.

I am no stranger to controversy (anyone who writes books about hell, water baptism and male leadership must expect it); but I have not sought it for its own sake. Of all the characters in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, I identify most readily with Mr. Valiant-for-truth That does not mean that I think I've got a monopoly on the truth or have always grasped it. But I find that honest debate sharpens my own mind and, I believe, that of those with whom I disagree.

And I do not think divisions from fellow believers are justified by differences in this particular area. The wise words of another writer spring to mind: Suppose you are not convinced.

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Shall we who are relying on the same Redeemer, begotten by the same God, inhabited by the same Spirit, incorporated in the same body, entrusted with the same gospel, assaulted by the same devil, hated by the same world, delivered from the same hell and destined to the same glory - shall we who have so much in common allow ourselves to be divided in heart or service because, just because we are of different minds on this secondary matter? God forbid'. (Norman F. Douty in *Has Christ's Return Two Stages?* Pageant, 1956.)

Mind you, I cannot agree that God's promises for the future are a 'secondary matter', though our interpretation of them may be. 'Eschatology', study of the end-times (from the Greek word *eschaton*, which means 'end' or 'last') is regarded as a branch of theology and a somewhat speculative one at that. Actually, the whole gospel is itself 'eschatological'. It is an announcement that the future has broken into the present. Tomorrow has become today. The coming kingdom is already here.

But not all of it. The kingdom of God cannot be fully 'realized' now, though it has been 'inaugurated'. It can be 'entered' now, but can only be 'inherited' later, when it is 'consummated' by being established worldwide. This tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' is fundamental to understanding the New Testament. It exactly corresponds to the first and second comings of Jesus to planet earth. To emphasize the present at the expense of the future, or the future at the expense of the present is to distort the good news.

I had hoped to include a whole section on the kingdom of God and another on the people of Israel, both topics extremely relevant to my theme. But space forbids; my manuscript has already exceeded the size specified in the publisher's contract. In any case, each deserves a whole book to itself. God willing, I may yet be able to give them that.

My next book is already on the stocks and deals much more fully with what will be for some the most provocative item in this work. If I say that its tentative title is: 'Once Saved, Always

FOREWORD

Saved? A Study in Perseverance and Inheritance', the reader will understand the issue which I am facing. Few questions could be more crucial to the Christian life. It is raised in an acute form by the purpose of the book of Revelation presented here.

It remains only to add that much of the content of this volume is available in more 'popular' form on audio and video. Those who prefer to listen as individuals or to look as groups are encouraged to use these resources.

My heartfelt prayer is that my efforts to complete this book under intense family pressures will ensure that some 'meet the Lord in the air' when he returns who would otherwise not be there.

J. David Pawson

Sherborne St John, 1994

The Fascinating Future

Our attitude to the future is ambiguous, a mixture of fear and fascination. We want to know what is going to happen to us and the rest of the human race — and we don't want to know! Were it possible, which one of us would wish to learn the date of our death or the end of the world?

We are the first generation to live with the possibility that these two dates might coincide. In one survey half the teenagers believed their death and the death of our planet would be simultaneous. Whether through nuclear holocaust (a diminishing fear) or environmental pollution (a growing fear), the days of life on earth seem to be numbered.

Again, our reaction is inconsistent, even contradictory. On the one hand, many try to forget the future and squeeze as much purpose and pleasure out of the present as possible. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (this is actually in the Bible! Isa 22:13, quoted in I Cor 15:32). 'Existentialism' is the name for this philosophy of life and it is widespread.

On the other hand, there is more interest in the future and efforts to change it than ever before, an enthusiasm that hovers on the border of panic. Attitudes cover a wide spectrum from elated optimism to depressed pessimism, sometimes swinging wildly from one extreme to the other, from faith to fatalism.

Broadly speaking, there are three ways in which we can pierce the veil that hides the future from us.

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First, the *superstitious* method. Divination is an ancient practice, but still very much alive. Clairvoyants and mediums, crystal balls and Ouija boards, tarot cards and tea-leaves — there are many forms. Six out of ten men and seven out of ten women read their horoscopes every day; no popular newspaper or magazine would dare to neglect the stars.

Yet it has been estimated that none of these channels has ever been more than 5% accurate, which means that they are at least 95% mistaken.. Only those willing or wanting to be deceived forget the errors and focus on the few fulfillments.

Second, the *scientific* method. Deduction from observation is the basic tool of modern science. To calculate present trends and project them is the concern of ‘futurology’, as the technique is now named. Professorial chairs in the subject are being established in universities, particularly those majoring in technology. Industrial, commercial and political spheres have their ‘think-tanks’. More than one computer program has calculated the likely date of the end of the world as 2040 (by taking into account population growth, food and energy resources, environmental decay, etc.).

Average accuracy of published results has so far been around 25% or, to put it negatively, up to 75% wrong. The short-term forecasts, as one would expect, are much more reliable than the long-term ones.

Third, the *scriptural* method. Declaration about future events is a major feature of the Bible. It claims to contain the words of God (‘Thus says the Lord’ occurs 3808 times!), the only person who is in a position to ‘make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come’ (Isa 46:10). Over a quarter of all the verses in the Bible contain a prediction about the future. Altogether 737 separate forecasts are made, from some only mentioned once to others hundreds of times.

Of these, 594 (over 80%) have already come true. Since those that have not are all concerned with the end of the world, which

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obviously has not happened yet, the Bible has actually achieved 100% accuracy. All that could have taken place already has done so, which should be ample grounds for confidence that the rest will also be fulfilled. (These statistics, with a detailed analysis of every prediction, may be found in the *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* by J. Barton Payne, Hodder and Stoughton, 1973.)

How astonishing then that people would rather consult satanic rigmarole or human reason than divine revelation. Part of the blame must lie at the door of the church, which has neither been clear nor confident enough in sharing her knowledge, the result of allowing scientific skepticism about the supernatural to undermine the authority of scripture.

The Bible reveals its secrets to those who read it with reverence and obedience, in a humble and teachable spirit. It yields more to simple intelligence than sophisticated intellectualism. It is written for ordinary people in ordinary language (New Testament Greek is taken from the streets, not the classics). It is meant to be taken at face value and taken seriously. When it is a clear picture of the future emerges.

Many things are predicted — personal and political, social and environmental, moral and meteorological. But one event stands out above them all: the return to this world of a person who lived here two thousand years ago, a carpenter from the village of Nazareth. Were he simply a human being, this would seem unbelievable. If he was what he claimed to be, divine as well as human, the one and only God-man, his return becomes credible and congruous. Rejected by an unbelieving world, it is only right that he should be publicly vindicated.

This event is more frequently predicted than any other and dominates the biblical preview. The question: ‘What is the world coming to?’ is changed into: ‘Who is the world coming to?’ or, better still: ‘Who is coming to the world?’

History will be brought to a conclusion. And by a human being. Not by pressing the button of a nuclear attack on earth but by

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breaking the seals of a scroll in heaven on which is already written the countdown of world events (Rev 5:1; 6:1). At the climax of the crisis, Jesus himself will reappear on the world stage to take personal control of the grand finale.

Such is the heart of the Christian hope for the future. Jesus is the only hope, the only person with sufficient ability and authority, character and compassion, to right the wrongs of this sick, sad and sinful world. On his first visit to our planet he demonstrated that he *could* do it; on his second he has promised that he *will* do it.

In theory, the Church of Jesus Christ gives his return a central place. The most regularly repeated creeds, the Apostles' and the Nicene, include it as a fundamental part of the faith. Bread and wine are regularly taken as a reminder of his former presence and current absence 'until he comes' (I Cor 11:26). The liturgical calendar includes Advent in December, the first part of which anticipates his return.

In practice, however, neglect of this vital truth is spreading. Even during Advent, any thought about his second coming is quickly forgotten in the celebration of his first, in the festivities of Christmas. Some have become so confused or impatient with the doctrinal differences over it that they have taken refuge in agnosticism on the subject. More have conformed to the world's obsession with the present by concentrating on the application of Christian insights and efforts to the personal and political needs of the day.

Now abideth faith, hope and love; but the weakest of these is hope!

That is a tragedy in a world of widespread depression and despair. The Bible describes unbelievers as 'without hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12). In such darkness, Christians should be shining beacons of hope. After all, they are the only ones who know how it will all end. They know that it will all end well, that good will triumph over evil, that their Lord

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will defeat the devil, that the kingdom of God will come on earth as it is in heaven.

This hope is ‘an anchor for the soul, firm and secure’ (Heb 6:19). The raging storm of world events will get worse rather than better, until every part of the globe is affected. May the reading of this book help you to get your anchor down now!

A. THE APPROACHING
ADVENT

CHAPTER ONE

Making Sense of his Return

With over three hundred references to the second coming in the New Testament, the problem is almost too much material rather than too little. Fitting it all together feels like assembling a jigsaw puzzle with interchangeable pieces.

Perhaps this explains why there are such differences of understanding, even among Christians with implicit confidence in scripture. They all agree on the central fact of his coming, but disagree strongly about what precedes and what follows that event.

Rather than add yet another chart or time schedule to the many already published, this study will take a topical approach. The data will be collected under five basic questions:

Who - will he come as the pre-existent Son of God or the incarnate Son of Man?

Where - will he come to the whole world at once or just to one place in it?

How - will the second coming be like the first or totally different?

When - will he come soon and suddenly or only after clear signals?

Why - what can he only achieve by coming back here, and how long will it take?

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Some of the answers may come as a surprise, even a shock, to those who have only been exposed to one school of thought or have already got fixed ideas on the subject. Readers coming with an open mind and an open Bible will get the most benefit.

WHO?

Who has not continued gazing into the distance long after a train or plane has taken a loved one out of sight, especially if that is expected to be a final parting? Is it a reluctance to acknowledge the departure, an attempt to postpone the pain? We are not so likely to do it if we are sure we shall see that person again, that they will return from their journey.

This is exactly what happened to the men of Galilee when Jesus went up into the clouds, less than two months after he came back to them from the dead. Long after he disappeared, they were still staring at the point of their final glimpse; it took two angels to reassure them and bring their attention down to earth again.

They assured the disciples that he would return, implying that they would not see him again until then. What interests us is the phrase they used: 'This same Jesus ... will come back' (Acts 1:11).

Two things are worth noting. First they used his human name, not any of his divine titles. Second, they emphasized that he will not have changed in the meantime.

One of our common fears is that during a long separation persons may change so much that a former relationship cannot be resumed. Disciples of Jesus need not worry. They may change, indeed should change for the better, but he neither will nor needs to. He is 'the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8).

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the divine Christ and the human Jesus are one and the same person. Both conscious attempts and unconscious impressions have driven a wedge between them. Even in Christian circles it has been assumed that

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the Son of God was only made flesh, 'incarnated', for thirty-three years and has now 'gone back' to his former state.

The truth is that he became human and keeps, his resurrected body for the rest of eternity. He has retained his humanity. He is the only mediator between God and man precisely because he is still 'the man' (I Tim 2:5). That is why he is the perfect high priest, who can both sympathize with us and represent us before God (Heb 4:15). Incredibly, a perfect human being is now in control of the universe (Matt 28:18)!

We must not forget that this person, who has 'ascended' to the highest heaven is the same one who 'descended' to lowest earth (Eph 4:9-10). The place of his baptism is, in fact, the lowest point on the earth's surface!

The exalted was first humbled - as a baby in Bethlehem, a boy in Nazareth. He was a woodworker for eighteen years, then a wonder-worker for three (the same proportion of six to one as his heavenly father: Gen 1). The latter period made him famous among his people, the focus of attention for friends and enemies alike. His ignominious death at an early age was terribly public.

All this meant that he was widely known and well-known. Of course, there were varying degrees of intimacy, different circles of acquaintance. Thousands listened to him; seventy were commissioned to spread his mission; twelve were chosen to follow him; three shared unique experiences with him (Peter, James and John at the transfiguration for example); one was closer than any other (John, the 'beloved', into whose care Jesus entrusted his bereaved mother).

This human knowledge of the human Jesus is enshrined in the four Gospels. From these emerges a clear portrait of a-unique personality, loved by sinners, hated by hypocrites, adored by the poor and feared by the powerful. His eyes could fill with tears of compassion for the oppressed and blaze with anger against the oppressor. His hands could lift the fallen and whip the greedy.

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His tongue could be softer and sharper than any other.

It is this Jesus who will return to the planet earth one day. He will not have changed. He will be no less human than he was when walking the dusty roads, reclining at meal tables, sleeping in a boat, riding a donkey or washing feet.

However, it must be pointed out that there had already been one major change in his humanity even before he left the earth. God gave him a new body when he raised him out of the tomb (for fuller details, see my *Explaining the Resurrection* in the series from Sovereign World).

This ‘glorious body’ (Phil 3:21) has the same appearance, even to the disfigurements of the crucifixion with scars on the head, back, side, hands and feet. But it was no longer subject to the ‘natural’ processes of aging, decay and death. When he returns it will be no older, still in its prime, still thirty-three — except that his hair will be snow-white (Rev 1:14 a symbol of his sharing the nature of his Father, the ‘Ancient of Days’; Dan 7:13).

This transformation of his body did not make Jesus less human but more human, which is what God had intended all human beings to be and, by his grace, what many will be. In this Jesus is our ‘pioneer’ (Heb 2:10), blazing a trail for us to follow. But he will not leave us to find our own way; he will come back and take us to be with him, for he himself is ‘the way’ (John 14:3-6).

Then we too will have ‘glorious bodies’ just like his. But we will be the same persons we have always been (which is why Christians speak about ‘resurrection’ rather than ‘reincarnation’; popular usage of the latter implies a change of identity).

We need to remember that Jesus was not always a human being. Indeed, he was not always ‘Jesus’; that was a name he acquired when he was incarnate, embodied, and when he became human (Matt 1:21). Unlike us he existed before he was conceived, and was the only person who ever chose to be born. He was the eternal Son of God, the Lord of glory, the Word. He was the divine

being before he was a human being.

It is therefore very significant that the angels used his human name when promising his return to planet earth. It is the ‘Son of man’ who will appear in the clouds (Dan 7:13; Mark 14:62). It is the embodied Jesus who will return to planet earth, not some intangible apparition of the Son of God (Dan 3:25).

Some, finding such a ‘bodily’ return difficult to accept, have ‘spiritualized’ his coming, identifying it with the ‘coming’ of his Spirit to the church at Pentecost or his ‘coming’ to each individual believer at conversion. But neither of these interpretations does justice to the promise that ‘this same Jesus ... will come back’ (Acts 1:11).

The Jesus who invited the disciples to touch him, who ate fish in their presence, who walked to Emmaus and broke bread, who told Thomas to examine his wounds, who cooked breakfast on the shores of Galilee — it is this Jesus who will return one day.

But we must face one implication of believing this: an embodied Jesus can only be in one place on earth at once. Even with his glorious resurrection body he could only be in Emmaus or Jerusalem or Galilee. He never appeared in two places at the same time.

Therefore, when he returns to this earth, he can only come to one geographical location. Where will that be?

WHERE?

If the return of Jesus is ‘physical’, it must also be local. His Spirit can be everywhere, but his body must be somewhere. Before he ascended, Jesus could not be in two places at once.

That is why he told the disciples it was for their good that he was leaving them and sending another ‘stand-by’ to take his place (John 16:7). He had promised to be with them always, even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20); yet they would be *scattered* to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The only way he could do it was to remove his body and replace his physical presence with

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his ever-present and omnipresent Spirit, unlimited by time or Space.

This situation will not be reversed when he returns. Believers will not lose his Spirit but will enjoy his physical presence as well. They will be doubly blessed!

However, since his body, like ours, must always be at one point on the surface of the earth, his return means that his disciples will have to be *gathered* together from every part of the globe. Only this could they experience his bodily presence. This is precisely what the New Testament promises will happen.

So where will he appear? Where will his people gather to welcome him?

Cities compete to host such prestigious events as the Olympic games. Which of them will have the honor of greeting the King of kings? Will it be one of the political capitals — Washington, Beijing, Brussels or Delhi? Will it be one of the financial centers - New York, Tokyo, London or Hong Kong? Will it be one with ecclesiastical fame - Rome, Geneva or Canterbury?

It will be none of these. They may be important to men but are not significant for God. He chose for his capital a most unlikely city, hidden in the hills, away from roads and rivers, an obscure mountain refuge that would be unknown had not God chosen to attach his name to it. Even today the nations of the world will not recognize it, by refusing to open embassies there. It has known more conflict and tragedy than any other and may yet prove the spark to ignite a conflagration throughout the Middle East.

The most important happenings in human history took place there; they divided time into two parts - BC and AD. It was there that the only Son of God was unjustly executed for crimes he had never committed, actually bearing the sins of the whole world. It was there that he defeated the last enemy, death, becoming the first person to have an immortal body.

It is from this city that he departed to return to his home in heav-

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en and it is to this city that he will return from heaven. He called it ‘the city of the Great King’ (Matt 5:35). It is the city he wept over, telling its citizens they would not see him again until they said ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ (Matt 23:37-39, quoting one of the ‘Hallel’ psalms sung by Jerusalem pilgrims to welcome their ‘Messiah’).

The history of this city is by no means over. Future events are unveiled in the book of Revelation, where it is described as ‘the great city’ (11:8) and ‘the city he loves’ (20:9). It is to this city that the nations will one day turn for the arbitration of international disputes, enabling multilateral disarmament (Isa 2:1-4; Mic 4:1-5). For this is Jerusalem, or ‘Zion’, where the Lord will reign

The city is strategically placed for an international function. It is quite literally at the very center of the world’s land mass and at the meeting-point of three continents — Europe, Africa and Asia. It would seem an ideal rendezvous for the gathering of Jesus’ followers.

But how many will there be, bearing in mind that the crowd will include Christians who have already died and are then raised again? Even today, that could be in the region of fifteen hundred million! No stadium on earth could hold such a number. Even the whole city of Jerusalem would be far too small.

The Bible gives a twofold answer.

First, it will take place *outside* the city. Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, a peak to the east with a panorama of the whole city on one side and the wilderness down to the Dead Sea on the other. It was on the slopes of this mountain that thousands of pilgrims to the three annual Jewish feasts used to camp, and it was here that they welcomed Jesus with palm branches when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Mark 11:8-10). The same prophet who predicted that event (Zech 9:9) also foretold: ‘On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives’ (Zech 14:4). Jesus is returning to the very same spot he left. Yet the

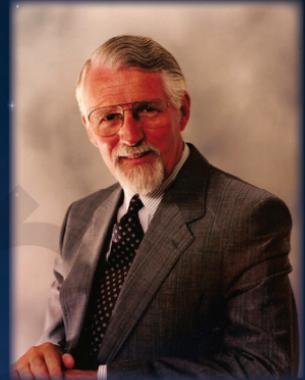
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Christians everywhere await Christ's return.

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