

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 10: THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Lesson 30

The Second Coming

The Blessed Hope of the Church

He Who Came Will Come Again

Key Texts: Acts 1:11; Titus 2:13; Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:36–44; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

“We Are Looking for the Blessed Hope and the Appearing of the Glory of Our Great God and Savior, Christ Jesus”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

The series has now arrived at the penultimate unit: the Return of Christ. Units 1 through 9 have traced the entire arc of the Person and Work of Christ from the pre-existent Sonship through the incarnation, the hypostatic union, the sinless life, the threefold office, the atoning work, the resurrection, and the ascension and present heavenly ministry. All of this, the entire sweep of Christological teaching from Bethlehem to the right hand of the Father, moves toward a single event that has not yet occurred but that the entire New Testament announces with unwavering certainty: the bodily, personal, visible, glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ in judgment and in consummating victory. The return is not an afterthought appended to the gospel; it is the gospel's eschatological completion, the event toward which all of history has been moving since the ascension, the moment when the 'not yet' of the present age gives way to the fully consummated 'already' of the age to come.

This lesson approaches the second coming from within the amillennial framework that has shaped the eschatological convictions of this series, the conviction that Christ is reigning now from the right hand of the Father (established in Lesson 28), that the present age is the age of the kingdom already inaugurated in the resurrection and ascension (established in Lessons 19 and 26), and that the return will not inaugurate a millennial earthly reign but will bring the immediate, final, and permanent consummation of the reign that has been exercised invisibly since the ascension. Within this framework, the return is the most anticipated and the most personally urgent event in the horizon of the Christian's eschatological vision.

The lesson examines the return under six headings: the promise of the return from Acts 1:11 and the connection to the ascension; the nature of the return as personal, visible, bodily, glorious, and universal (Revelation 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17); the amillennial framework and the return as consummation rather than inauguration of the kingdom; the signs of the times and the proper posture of readiness rather than calendar calculation (Matthew 24:36–44; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12); the return as judgment and as hope (Acts 17:31; 2 Timothy 4:1; Titus 2:13); and the doxological conclusion that the return is the final and most comprehensive expression of what Christology is ultimately about, the glory of the Son of God filling all in all, revealed before every eye, confessed by every tongue.

I. THE PROMISE OF THE RETURN: ACTS 1:11 AND THE ASCENSION'S PLEDGE

This Jesus Who Has Been Taken Up Will Come in Just the Same Way

A. The Angelic Announcement as the Return's Ground

The promise of the return is rooted in the event of the ascension itself. When the disciples stood on the Mount of Olives watching the risen Christ ascend into the glory cloud, the angelic announcement that followed was not merely a comfort for their bereavement but a theological declaration of the structure of eschatological history: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11, NASB 1995). The promise is the perfect symmetry of the return with the departure: ‘in just the same way’ (ὁν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, *hon tropon etheāsasthe auton poreuomenon eis ton ouranon*), the manner of the ascent defines the manner of the descent. He went visibly, bodily, from a specific geographic location, witnessed by a specific group of people; He will return visibly, bodily, from the same heavenly location, witnessed by every eye.

The connection between the ascension and the return is more than a promise of symmetrical events. It is a declaration about the nature of the present age. The period between the ascension (Acts 1:9) and the return (Acts 1:11) is the period of the Spirit’s mission (Acts 1:8: ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’, NASB 1995). The ascension initiates the age of mission; the return will conclude it. Every act of Christian witness in the present age is an act performed in the interval between the ascension and the return, in the age of the Spirit’s mission, under the authority of the exalted Lord, moving toward the consummation that the return will bring.

B. The Certainty of the Return

The return of Christ is not a theological possibility or a pious hope; it is the declared intention of the one who ascended, guaranteed by the same divine authority that guaranteed the resurrection. The New Testament’s treatment of the return is as certain and as factual as its treatment of the ascension that preceded it. John 14:1–3 records the Lord’s own promise: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (NASB 1995). The grammatical structure of the promise (‘if I go... I will come again’) makes the return logically dependent on the ascension: because He went, He will come. The ascension is not the permanent departure of Christ from His people but the temporary absence that will be resolved in the return.

II. THE NATURE OF THE RETURN: PERSONAL, VISIBLE, BODILY, GLORIOUS, UNIVERSAL

Every Eye Will See Him, The Comprehensive Character of the Return

A. Revelation 1:7: Every Eye Will See Him

The most compressed and the most universally inclusive description of the nature of the return in all of the New Testament is Revelation 1:7: “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen” (NASB 1995). The verse gathers four New Testament characterizations of the return into a single declaration: the cloud-coming (echoing Daniel 7:13–14 and the ascension cloud of Acts 1:9), the universal visibility (‘every eye will see Him’, not a private appearance to select witnesses but the cosmic revelation that no one will miss), the inclusion of enemies (‘even those who pierced Him’, even the hostile, the rejecting, and the long-dead will see the one they crucified), and the mourning of every tribe of the earth (echoing Zechariah 12:10–12, not the mourning of repentance but the mourning of those who recognize, too late, who they rejected).

The personal character of the return is established by Acts 1:11’s ‘this Jesus’ (ὁ Ἰησοῦς οὗτος, *ho Iēsous houtos*), not a symbol of Jesus, not a representative of Jesus, not a spiritual presence of Jesus, but Jesus Himself, the specific, historically particular Person who walked in Galilee, died on the cross, rose from the tomb, and was taken up into the glory cloud. The one who returns is not a different being from the one who ascended; He is the same God-man, in His glorified humanity, returning as He departed. The visibility of the return is absolute: every eye will see Him. The return will not be ambiguous, not local, not interpretable as a natural event. It will be the most unambiguous, most universal, most unmissable event in the history of the cosmos.

B. 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17: The Resurrection and the Gathering

1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 provides the most detailed account of the specific events that accompany the return: “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (NASB 1995). The passage establishes the relationship between the return and the resurrection of the dead: the Lord descends (the return), the dead in Christ rise first (the general resurrection of believers), and then the living believers are caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air.

The primary purpose of the passage is pastoral consolation for those who have lost believers in death: they will not miss the return, because the dead in Christ will rise first. But the passage also provides important theological data about the nature of the return. It is the Lord Himself who descends (‘the Lord Himself’, the personal, bodily return). It is accompanied by cosmic phenomena (a shout, the voice of the archangel, the trumpet of God, the great public, unmissable, universal announcement of the most significant event in cosmic history). And it results in the permanent, unending communion of the redeemed with the Lord: ‘we shall always be with the Lord’ (πάντοτε σὺν Κυρίῳ ἐσόμεθα, *pantote syn Kyriō esōmetha*), not a temporary reunion but the permanent eschatological communion of the new creation.

“We are looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” | “Every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.”

TITUS 2:13; REVELATION 1:7, NASB 1995

III. THE AMILLENNIAL FRAMEWORK: THE RETURN AS CONSUMMATION, NOT INAUGURATION

Christ Reigns Now, The Return Completes What the Ascension Began

A. The Kingdom Already Inaugurated

The amillennial eschatological framework maintained throughout this series shapes the understanding of the return in a decisive way. The return is not the inauguration of the kingdom (as if the kingdom does not yet exist and will only begin when Christ returns for a millennial earthly reign); it is the consummation of the kingdom that has already been inaugurated in the resurrection and ascension of Christ. The exalted Christ is already reigning (Ephesians 1:20–21; Lesson 28); the kingdom is already present (Mark 1:14–15; Matthew 12:28; Lesson 19); the enemies are already being subdued (Psalm 110:1, ‘until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet’, a process already in progress). The return is the moment when the ‘until’ of Psalm 110:1 is finally fulfilled, when the progressive, invisible, Spirit-and-Word subduing of the enemies gives way to the visible, universal, eschatological subduing of every enemy.

1 Corinthians 15:24–28 provides the most theologically precise account of the relationship between the present reign and the eschatological consummation: “Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death” (NASB 1995). The present reign (‘He must reign’) is a fact of the present age, not a future hope; the abolition of the enemies is the eschatological goal toward which the present reign is moving; and the final enemy to be abolished is death, whose abolition at the return will complete the victory already secured at the resurrection. The return does not initiate the reign; it consummates it.

B. The Signs of the Times in the Amillennial Reading

The amillennial reading of the signs of the times in Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians 2 understands the signs not as precise predictors of the imminent return but as the characteristic features of the entire age between the ascension and the return: false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecution of believers, the spread of the gospel to all nations, and the great apostasy. These are not events that will occur only in the final days before the return but the recurring, intensifying patterns of the present age that will reach their fullest expression as the return approaches. The specific sign of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, the revelation of the ‘man of lawlessness’ (ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, anthrōpos tēs anomias) who sets himself against God and demands

worship, represents the ultimate expression of the antichrist spirit that has characterized every era of church history in its various forms, reaching its final and fullest embodiment before the return.

The gospel of the kingdom preached to all nations (Matthew 24:14: ‘this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come’, NASB 1995) is the most significant sign of the times in the amillennial reading, and it is the sign that most directly shapes the church’s missional posture in the present age. The church does not wait passively for the return; it proclaims the gospel actively, knowing that the completion of the global missionary task is itself one of the signs that precede the consummation. Every act of faithful gospel witness is therefore an act of eschatological significance: it participates in the fulfillment of the sign that precedes the return.

IV. THE POSTURE OF READINESS: MATTHEW 24:36–44 AND THE UNKNOWN HOUR

Of That Day and Hour No One Knows, Readiness Rather Than Calculation

A. The Unknown Hour and Its Pastoral Implication

The most personally significant eschatological declaration in all of the Synoptic Gospels, for the practical formation of the Christian community in the present age, is Matthew 24:36: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (NASB 1995). The declaration is absolute and comprehensive: no one knows, not the angels, not even the incarnate Son in His human knowledge (the limitation of the human nature’s knowledge in this respect, consistent with the genuine cognitive development examined in Lesson 13). The ignorance of the timing is the divinely ordained condition of every generation of the church from the ascension to the return, and the pastoral implication drawn by Jesus immediately is the posture of constant readiness.

Matthew 24:37–44 develops the readiness theme through the analogy of the days of Noah: the people of Noah’s generation were ‘eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:38–39, NASB 1995). The analogy establishes two points: the return will be sudden and unexpected for those who are not watching, and the proper response to the unknown timing is not calendar calculation but faithful readiness. The two men in the field, the two women at the mill (vv. 40–41), one taken, one left, are not descriptions of a secret rapture that precedes a public return; they are descriptions of the discriminating judgment that the return brings, separating the faithful from the faithless in the most ordinary circumstances of the most ordinary life.

B. Readiness, Not Calculation

The New Testament's eschatological posture is consistently the posture of readiness rather than the posture of calculation. The fascination with eschatological charts, prophetic timelines, and date-setting that has characterized significant streams of evangelical culture since the nineteenth century is a departure from the consistently emphasized posture of the New Testament. Jesus explicitly refused to disclose the timing ('it is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority', Acts 1:7, NASB 1995); Paul warned against those who claimed that 'the day of the Lord has come' already (2 Thessalonians 2:2: 'not to be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come', NASB 1995); and the consistent New Testament metaphors for the return, the thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2; Matthew 24:43), the bridegroom who comes at an unexpected hour (Matthew 25:1–13), the master who returns at an hour his servants did not know (Matthew 24:45–51), all presuppose an unknown timing and commend a watchful, faithful, prepared posture rather than a precisely calculated anticipation.

V. THE RETURN AS JUDGMENT AND AS HOPE

The Most Sobering and the Most Consoling Event in the History of the Cosmos

A. The Return as Judgment: Acts 17:31 and 2 Timothy 4:1

The return of Christ is inseparable from the judgment that the return brings. Acts 17:31 records Paul's declaration in Athens: "He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (NASB 1995). The resurrection is the divine appointment of Jesus as the judge; the return is the day of judgment He has been appointed to execute; and the judgment is universal in scope ('the world'), personal in agency ('through a Man', the specific, historically identified Person of Jesus Christ), and righteous in character ('in righteousness'). The God who has been patient with human sin throughout the present age (Romans 2:4: 'or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?', NASB 1995) has fixed a day on which the patience will give way to the judgment.

2 Timothy 4:1 adds the solemnizing reminder of the judge's identity: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom" (NASB 1995). The charge to Timothy (to preach the word, to be ready in season and out of season, to reprove, rebuke, exhort) is framed by the reality of the coming judgment and the appearing of the one who will execute it. The return functions here as the most powerful possible motivation for faithful, urgent, uncompromising ministry: the one who comes in the return is the

Judge of the living and the dead, and the minister who knows this will preach as one who must give account before that Judge.

B. The Return as Hope: Titus 2:13

The return is simultaneously the most sobering and the most consoling reality in the Christian's eschatological horizon. Titus 2:13 provides the most explicitly hopeful description: "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (NASB 1995). The return is the 'blessed hope' (μακαρίαν ἐλπίδα, makarian elpida), not a dreaded event to be endured but a joyful expectation to be embraced. It is the 'appearing of the glory' (ἐπιφάνειαν τῆς δόξης, epiphaneian tēs doxēs) of Christ, the unveiled, unrestrained, unmediated display of the divine glory of the Son that the present age veils and that the return will reveal in its full, cosmic, undeniable splendor. And it is described in the form that the early Christian confession takes: Jesus Christ is 'our great God and Savior', a declaration of full deity that makes the return not merely the arrival of a powerful being but the appearing of the God who came the first time in humility and who will come the second time in glory.

The contrast between the first and second advents is the eschatological backdrop against which the hope of the return is most clearly set. The first coming was characterized by hiddenness, humility, and veiled glory: the manger, the carpenter's son, the rejected prophet, the crucified criminal. The second coming will be characterized by universality, glory, and unveiled majesty: every eye will see Him, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess. The one who came the first time 'without form or comeliness' (Isaiah 53:2) will come the second time as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). The contrast is the theological ground of the hope: the one who humbled Himself to the uttermost will be exalted to the uttermost; the one who was despised and rejected will be confessed by every creature in every domain; and the one who died for His people will receive them into the permanent, unending, face-to-face communion of the new creation.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: LIVING BETWEEN THE ADVENTS

Titus 2:11–14 provides the most comprehensive account of how the first advent and the second advent together shape the ethical and devotional life of the community that inhabits the interval between them: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (NASB 1995). The first appearing (the grace of God has appeared) is the doctrinal ground of the ethical life ('instructing us to deny ungodliness'). The second appearing (the blessed hope) is the motivational horizon of the ethical life ('looking for', an active, engaged, oriented expectation). And the community that lives between the two appearances is

defined by the double formation: the past grace that has appeared and the future glory that is expected.

The church that lives in the interval between the first and second advents is not a community that is merely waiting, in the passive, disengaged, world-withdrawing sense of those who have decided that the world is about to end and are therefore uninvested in its present condition. It is a community that is actively, faithfully, joyfully engaged in the mission of the age of the Spirit (Acts 1:8), proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom to all nations (Matthew 24:14), loving God and neighbor with the full resources of the redeemed life (Matthew 22:37–40), and doing so with the specific urgency and the specific hope that belong to those who know that the one who ascended will return and that the return will bring the definitive judgment of all that opposes God’s purposes and the definitive completion of all that those purposes have ordained.

The eschatological hope does not produce withdrawal from the present age; it produces the most engaged, the most urgent, and the most cosmically grounded form of present-age faithfulness available to the creature. The community that genuinely believes that the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father will return in glory and judgment will take seriously the consequences of that return for every dimension of human life and activity. Every act of faithful witness, every act of justice and mercy, every act of obedience in the ordinary circumstances of ordinary life, all of these are acts performed in the light of the return, by those who know that the one who sees all things will return to judge all things, and who are therefore most motivated to be found faithful when He comes.

The return is the final word of Christology, or rather, the penultimate word, because Lesson 31 will develop the cosmic dimensions of the consummation and Lesson 32 will gather everything into the doxological conclusion. But the return is the decisive event toward which the entire Christological narrative has been moving: the one who came in humility will come in glory; the one who was rejected will be confessed; the one who bore the sin of His people will receive those people into the permanent communion of the new creation; and the one who governs all things from the right hand of the Father will complete the governance with the final, eschatological, irresistible triumph of the kingdom of God. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen” (Revelation 22:21, NASB 1995).

Key Texts: Acts 1:7–11; John 14:1–3; Revelation 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Matthew 24:14, 36–44; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; Titus 2:11–14; Acts 17:31; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Corinthians 15:24–28

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Second Coming / Parousia	The bodily, personal, visible, glorious, and universal return of Jesus Christ from the right hand of the Father to consummate His kingdom, execute final judgment, raise the dead, and inaugurate the new creation. The Greek term <i>parousia</i> (παρουσία, 'presence,' 'arrival,' 'coming') is the primary New Testament term for the return (Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:1; James 5:7–8; 2 Peter 3:4). Distinguished from the first coming (the incarnation) by its character: the first coming was humble, hidden, and rejected; the second coming will be glorious, universal, and unmissable ('every eye will see Him', Revelation 1:7). The return is the decisive eschatological event toward which the entire present age of the Spirit's mission is oriented.
Blessed Hope (Makaria Elpis)	The description of the second coming in Titus 2:13: 'looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.' The hope is 'blessed' (<i>makaria</i> , supremely happy, beatified) because its content is the appearing of Christ in glory, which is the completion of every redemptive benefit already received in the first advent. The term establishes the affective character of the Christian's eschatological posture: the return is not a dreaded event to be endured but a joyful expectation to be embraced. The present participle 'looking for' (<i>prosdexomenoi</i>) indicates an active, engaged, oriented waiting, not passive resignation but alert expectancy. The hope is grounded in the same Christ whose grace has appeared in the first advent (Titus 2:11) and who will appear in glory in the second.
Acts 1:11 Promise	The angelic announcement at the ascension that provides the ground, the guarantee, and the manner of the return: 'This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.' Theologically significant for: (1) the identity of the one returning ('this Jesus', the specific, personally identified God-man who ascended, not a different being); (2) the manner of the return ('in just the same way', bodily, visible, from heaven, witnessed by those on earth); (3) the connection between the ascension and the return (the ascension is the pledge and the precondition of the return: because He went, He will come). The promise frames the entire interval between the first and second advents as the missionary age of the Spirit (Acts 1:8).
Return as Consummation	The amillennial understanding that the return of Christ does not inaugurate the kingdom (as if the kingdom does not yet exist) but consummates the kingdom that has already been inaugurated in the resurrection and ascension. Christ is already reigning (Ephesians 1:20–21; Psalm 110:1); the enemies are already being subdued ('He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet', 1 Corinthians 15:25); and the return is the moment when the 'until' of Psalm

Term	Definition
	110:1 is finally fulfilled, when the invisible, Spirit-and-Word advance of the kingdom gives way to the visible, universal, eschatological consummation. Distinguished from premillennialism (the return inaugurates a millennial earthly reign) and postmillennialism (the kingdom is gradually established through Christian cultural influence before the return).
Imminence and Readiness	The New Testament's consistent eschatological posture regarding the return: because no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36), the proper response is constant readiness rather than calendar calculation. Imminence does not mean 'certain to occur in the near future' but 'possible at any time, with no preceding events that must first be completed before it can occur.' The New Testament metaphors of imminence (the thief in the night, the bridegroom at an unexpected hour, the master returning at an unknown time) all commend watchful, faithful, prepared engagement with the present age rather than passive waiting or excited speculation. Date-setting is implicitly prohibited by Matthew 24:36 and explicitly warned against in Acts 1:7 ('it is not for you to know times or epochs').
Man of Lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2)	The figure described in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 (ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, anthrōpos tēs anomias) who will be revealed before the day of the Lord, who opposes and exalts himself against every object of worship, and who sets himself up as God in the temple of God. In the amillennial reading, the man of lawlessness represents not a single individual to appear in the final days but the ultimate embodiment of the antichrist spirit that has characterized every era of church history in its various forms (see 1 John 2:18: 'just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared'), reaching its fullest, most explicit expression before the return. The sign is therefore present throughout the age, intensifying as the return approaches.
Parousia and Epiphaneia	Two primary Greek terms for the return: parousia (παρουσία, 'presence,' 'arrival') emphasizing the personal coming of Christ; and epiphaneia (ἐπιφάνεια, 'appearing,' 'manifestation') emphasizing the visible, glorious display of the one who comes. Titus 2:13 uses epiphaneia for 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus'; 2 Thessalonians 2:8 combines both in 'the appearance of His coming' (tē epiphaneia tēs parousias autou). The two terms together establish the return as both a personal arrival (parousia) and a glorious revelation (epiphaneia), the one who comes is the one who is revealed, and the revealing is the coming.
Matthew 24:14 and the Mission	The only sign of the times in Matthew 24 that is also a missional mandate: 'This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.' Theologically significant for: (1) the missional implication of eschatology, the completion of the global missionary task is itself one of the signs that precede the return, motivating rather than undermining missional urgency; (2) the nature of the sign, not a geopolitical

Term	Definition
	event or a natural disaster but the church's own faithful obedience to the Great Commission; (3) the amillennial reading of the present age as the age of missionary proclamation, framed between the commission of Acts 1:8 and the consummation of the return.
Two Advents Contrasted	The theological contrast between the first coming (incarnation) and the second coming (return) that gives the return its distinctive eschatological weight. First advent: humble, hidden, rejected, in weakness ('no stately form or majesty', Isaiah 53:2), voluntarily veiled glory, born in a manger, crucified as a criminal. Second advent: glorious, universal, unmissable, in power ('every eye will see Him', Revelation 1:7), unveiled glory, returning as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). The contrast is the theological ground of the hope: the one who humbled Himself to the uttermost at the first advent will be exalted to the uttermost at the second; the one who was despised and rejected will be confessed by every tongue; and the contrast between the two advents is itself the most complete demonstration of the sovereignty of God over the entire arc of redemptive history.
Maranatha	Aramaic: 'Our Lord, come!' or 'Our Lord has come!' (transliterated in 1 Corinthians 16:22). One of the earliest liturgical prayers of the Christian community, preserved in the Aramaic of the earliest Palestinian Christianity and already in use in Paul's Greek-speaking congregation at Corinth. Also appears in Didache 10.6 in a eucharistic context, establishing the Lord's Supper as a forward-oriented anticipation of the return. Revelation 22:20 provides the Greek equivalent: 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.' The Maranatha prayer is the most compressed possible expression of the Christian community's eschatological posture, the active, expectant, joyful longing for the return of the one who promised to come.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the return of Christ is not a theological appendix to the gospel but its eschatological completion, the event that will bring to its final, visible, irresistible culmination everything that the first advent set in motion. The cross secured the redemption; the resurrection vindicated it; the ascension extended it into the present age through the Spirit and the intercession; and the return will consummate it in the transformation of every believer's body, the execution of the final judgment, and the inauguration of the new creation that will be the permanent dwelling place of the redeemed. The congregation that understands the return in this comprehensive

theological context will receive it not as a peripheral eschatological detail but as the most personally urgent and the most cosmically significant event on the horizon of the present age.

We must also believe, within the amillennial framework of this series, that the return is the consummation of a kingdom already present rather than the inauguration of a kingdom not yet begun. This conviction should produce a specific present-age posture: engagement rather than withdrawal, urgency rather than complacency, confident faithfulness rather than anxious calculation. The church that knows that the King is already reigning, that the enemies are already being subdued, and that the return will complete what has already been decisively won does not wait for the kingdom to begin; it lives and proclaims the kingdom that has already come, with the urgency of those who know that the consummation is approaching.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the return of Christ be a genuine object of longing rather than merely a theological conviction held at arm's length. Titus 2:13's description of the Christian posture is 'looking for' (prosdechomenoi) the blessed hope, an active, eager, engaged expectation. The early church expressed this longing in the Maranatha prayer: 'Come, Lord Jesus.' The congregation that prays this prayer with genuine desire, not as a liturgical formula but as the honest expression of a soul that has been formed by the hope of the return, is a congregation whose present-age engagement has been shaped by the eschatological horizon. They are not settlers in this age; they are pilgrims moving toward the consummation.

Desire also a congregation whose grieving is transformed by the eschatological hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is the New Testament's most direct pastoral engagement with the grief of bereavement in the light of the return: 'But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope' (v. 13, NASB 1995). The hope is not the suppression of grief but the transformation of grief: the community does grieve the loss of those who have died, but not as those who have no hope. The return of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead in Christ transform the character of the grief from despair to a grief that holds within it the certain hope of the reunion.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach the return of Christ explicitly and regularly, not only in an annual eschatology sermon but as the eschatological horizon that frames the Christian's understanding of every dimension of present-age life. The cross, the resurrection, the ascension, and the return together constitute the four corners of the Christological narrative; and the congregation that regularly hears all four will have a more complete, more cosmically grounded, and more personally motivating account of the gospel than the congregation that hears only of the cross and the resurrection and treats the return as an eschatological afterthought.

- Preach 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 as the primary text for the pastoral care of the bereaved, grounding the specific hope not in a general belief in life after death but in the specific, christologically grounded hope of the return and the resurrection of the dead in Christ. The congregation that knows that ‘we shall always be with the Lord’ (v. 17) is the congregation that has received from the New Testament the most specific, most personally consoling, and most theologically grounded hope available for the grief of losing a beloved member of the community.
- Resist the temptation to engage in eschatological chart-making, date-setting, or the identification of current events with specific prophetic fulfillments. The New Testament’s consistent eschatological posture is readiness, not calculation; faithfulness, not speculation; engagement with the present age, not withdrawal from it in anticipation of imminent catastrophe. Every generation of Christians has believed that its own generation would see the return, and every generation has been mistaken about the timing while being correct about the certainty. The proper response to the unknown timing is the faithful stewardship of the present moment, not the paralysis of eschatological speculation.
- Use the return as the motivational ground of the congregation’s missional urgency. Matthew 24:14’s connection between the gospel of the kingdom preached to all nations and the coming of the end provides the most powerful possible eschatological motivation for faithful gospel witness: every act of faithful proclamation participates in the fulfillment of the sign that precedes the return. The congregation that understands this will understand missionary giving, prayer, and sending not merely as acts of obedience to the Great Commission but as acts of eschatological participation in the approach of the consummation.
- Preach Titus 2:11–14 as the most comprehensive biblical account of how the two advents together shape the ethical and devotional life of the community that inhabits the interval between them. The first appearing (the grace of God has appeared) grounds the ethical formation; the second appearing (the blessed hope) motivates and orients it. The congregation that lives between the two advents is shaped by both: formed by the grace that has already appeared and directed toward the glory that has not yet appeared. This double formation produces the most complete and the most theologically grounded account of the Christian life available in the New Testament.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. How prominent is the return of Christ in your congregation’s theological consciousness and devotional life? Is ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ a prayer that your congregation actually prays with genuine

longing, or has the return become a peripheral eschatological doctrine affirmed in the creed but not functionally shaping the way the congregation lives, prays, and engages with the present age? What specific pastoral circumstances or preaching emphases in your ministry context have most shaped your congregation's relationship, or lack of relationship, to the hope of the return?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

- 2.** Read Acts 1:6–11. What question do the disciples ask in verse 6, and what is Jesus' response regarding times and epochs (v. 7)? What does Jesus say will occupy the disciples' attention instead of eschatological calculation (v. 8)? What is the specific manner of the ascension described in verses 9–10, and how does the angelic promise of verse 11 mirror the manner of the ascension in the promised return? What is the theological significance of 'this Jesus' (ho Iēsous houtos) in verse 11 for understanding the personal character of the return?
- 3.** Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Identify: (a) the specific pastoral problem Paul is addressing (who are 'those who are asleep,' and what is the congregation worried about regarding them?); (b) the specific description of the return in verses 16–17 (at least five specific elements: who descends, what accompanies the descent, what happens to the dead in Christ, what happens to the living, where they all go); (c) the temporal sequence of events (dead in Christ rise first, then the living are caught up); (d) the ultimate result in verse 17 ('we shall always be with the Lord'). What is the specific pastoral comfort Paul draws from this account (v. 18)?
- 4.** Read Matthew 24:36–44. What is the specific declaration about the timing of the return in verse 36, and who does Jesus say does not know the day or the hour? What analogy does Jesus draw from the days of Noah, and what two specific points does the analogy establish (the suddenness of the return for the unprepared, and the separation of the prepared from the unprepared)? What is the specific posture Jesus commends in verses 42–44 ('be on the alert'), and how does the thief-in-the-night metaphor establish the reason for this posture?
- 5.** Read Titus 2:11–14. Identify the two 'appearings' described in this passage (v. 11: 'the grace of God has appeared'; v. 13: 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior'). What is the ethical instruction associated with the first appearing (vv. 12)? What is the posture associated with the second appearing (v. 13: 'looking for')? What is the description of Christ's first advent work in verse 14 ('who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people'), and how does this description connect the first and second advents?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

- 6.** The lesson presents the return as the 'consummation' of the kingdom already inaugurated rather than the 'inauguration' of a kingdom not yet begun, the amillennial position. How does the combination of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 ('He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His

feet') and Psalm 110:1 ('sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool') establish the present reality of the reign and the future consummation of the return? What are the main premillennial objections to the amillennial reading, and how would you respond to them from the texts you have studied in this series?

7. The lesson argues that the New Testament's consistent eschatological posture is readiness rather than calculation, and that date-setting is implicitly prohibited by Matthew 24:36 and explicitly warned against in Acts 1:7. How would you engage pastorally and theologically with a member of your congregation who has become deeply invested in a specific eschatological timeline (whether dispensational pretribulationism, specific prophetic interpretation of current events, or another system)? What would you affirm in their concern for eschatology, and what would you correct in the approach?

8. The lesson contrasts the two advents: the first coming in humility, hiddenness, and rejection; the second coming in glory, universality, and unmissable revelation. How does this contrast shape the theological understanding of why the cross was not immediately recognizable as the work of the King, and why the return will be immediately recognizable by every eye? What does the contrast establish about the divine freedom to accomplish the divine purposes through means that appear to contradict them, and what pastoral resources does this theological principle provide for those who see the church in the present age as weak, marginalized, or defeated?

9. The lesson presents Matthew 24:14 ('this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come') as providing the most powerful possible eschatological motivation for faithful missionary engagement. How does this text shape the relationship between eschatology and missiology? Does the hope of the return increase or decrease missionary urgency in your congregation's experience? And how do you understand the question of whether this sign has already been fulfilled (in which case the return could occur at any moment) or is still being fulfilled (in which case the completion of the missionary task is still a precondition of the return)?

10. The lesson closes with the observation that the eschatological hope produces engagement rather than withdrawal, urgency rather than complacency, and confident faithfulness rather than anxious calculation. How has eschatological belief historically produced both of these tendencies, the engaged, mission-shaped hope and the withdrawn, world-denying despair, within the same Christian tradition? What specific theological convictions and what specific pastoral practices most reliably produce the former rather than the latter?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends preaching 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 as the primary pastoral text for the bereaved. Think of the most recent funeral sermon or pastoral engagement with grief in your

ministry. Was the specific, christologically grounded hope of the return and the resurrection of the dead in Christ the center of the comfort offered, or was it a more general hope for 'life after death'? Draft a three to four paragraph section of a funeral sermon that grounds the specific hope in the specific text: the Lord Himself will descend, the dead in Christ will rise first, and we shall always be with the Lord. How does the specificity of the hope, 'the Lord Himself,' 'the dead in Christ,' 'always with the Lord', provide a more theologically grounded and more personally consoling comfort than a general affirmation of spiritual immortality?

12. The lesson recommends using the return as the motivational ground of the congregation's missional urgency. Think of the current state of the congregation's missionary engagement, its giving, its prayer, its sending. Is the hope of the return functioning as a motivational resource for that engagement, or is the missionary urgency grounded primarily in the imperative of the Great Commission? How would you preach Matthew 24:14 ('this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world... and then the end will come') in a way that connects eschatological expectation to missional urgency in the specific context of your congregation?

13. The lesson recommends preaching Titus 2:11–14 as the most comprehensive account of how the two advents shape the ethical life of the community between them. Design the outline of a sermon from this passage: what is the main point, what are the major moves, and what is the pastoral aim? Specifically: how would you communicate the double formation of the two advents (first advent grace forming the ethical life, second advent hope orienting and motivating it) in a way that gives the congregation the most complete possible christological account of why they live as they live?

14. This lesson opens Unit 10 on the Return of Christ, which contains two lessons. Lesson 31 will address the cosmic dimensions of the consummation, the new heavens and new earth, the eternal reign of Christ, and the beatific vision. As you look ahead to Lesson 31 and then to the concluding Lesson 32, what dimensions of the eschatological hope most need to be developed in your congregation's theological understanding? And how does the return of Christ, established in this lesson as the decisive eschatological event, serve as the theological hinge between the present age of the Spirit's mission and the age to come of the consummated new creation?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a reading of Revelation 22:12–21, the final words of the entire canon of Scripture, which are eschatologically oriented from first word to last. Read the declaration of the one who is coming ('Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done', v. 12), the divine self-identification of the Alpha and the Omega (v. 13), the beatitude for those who have washed their robes (v. 14), and the invitation and the prayer that close the canon: 'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." ... He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord

Jesus' (vv. 17, 20, NASB 1995). The entire canon ends with the prayer of the church for the return of the Lord. Let the group inhabit this closing prayer of the canon as the most authentic expression of the community that has read all of Scripture and understands what it is moving toward.

Spend time in the Maranatha prayer, not as a liturgical formula but as the genuine, honest, personally felt longing of the community for the return of the one they love. Pray it slowly and deliberately: 'Come, Lord Jesus.' What would the return mean for the specific suffering your congregation is experiencing? For the specific injustice that remains unremedied? For the specific longing for the full knowledge and enjoyment of God that the present age only partially satisfies? For the specific grief over those who have died in Christ and who will be raised when He comes? Let each specific pastoral reality in the group become a specific reason for the Maranatha prayer.

Pray through the eschatological dimension of the congregation's mission. Bring before the Lord of the return the specific nations, peoples, and communities that the congregation is seeking to reach with the gospel of the kingdom. Receive Matthew 24:14 as both a promise and a motivation: the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all nations, and then the end will come. Ask the returning Lord to use the specific witness of the congregation to participate in the fulfillment of this sign, knowing that every act of faithful gospel proclamation is an act of eschatological participation in the approach of the consummation.

Close with the great eschatological hope of Titus 2:13, spoken together as the corporate declaration of the community that lives between the two advents and that embraces the blessed hope as the horizon of every act of faithfulness in the present age:

"We are looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.", Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.

TITUS 2:13; REVELATION 22:20, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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