



The Lord Jesus is coming again

The Lord Jesus will return, this time to judge the living and the dead. The second coming is the end of three ages. The first age stretches from the creation up to the birth of Jesus Christ, and it is called the time of God the Father. Upon this follows the time from Jesus' birth up to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and this is referred to as the time of God the Son. The third age is from Pentecost and will end with the second advent. This is called the time of God the Holy Spirit. During all three times the Holy Trinity is at work, but during each there is one of the persons of the Triune God that comes more clearly to the fore.

Last days

Are we living in the last days? Yes, the second age (the time of the Son) and the third age (the time of the Holy Spirit) are collectively referred to as the *time between the times*, because they stand *between* the first and second advents. We are living in this time. The Bible refers to this period in several places as the last days. When the Holy Spirit is poured out on the morning of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stands up before the amazed crowd, and moved by the Holy Spirit he tells them: What is happening here God announced hundreds of years before through the prophet Joel. In the last days, God will pour out his Spirit on all people (Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews also says: "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*".

It is therefore clear, no matter how long this will still continue, we are living in the last days. Almost two thousand years ago the apostle Peter already had to do with careless people scoffing at the idea of the second coming and saying: Everything is still going on as it has from the time of creation. No, says Peter, the Lord does not delay his

coming, on the contrary. He is patient with us (also with the scoffers!), because he does not want anyone to be lost, but wants everyone to repent (2 Peter 3:3-9). The apparent “slowness” of the second coming is a manifestation of godly love. It is godly patience wanting to give everyone a chance of salvation (2 Peter 3:15).

Unexpected

O yes, the Lord will certainly come *unexpectedly*! The coming of the Son of Man will be as quick as lightning, says Jesus. No-one knows when he will return. Not the angels in heaven. Not even the Son. Only the Father knows when it will be (Matthew 24:27, 36). This is why the Lord Jesus warns us through parables such as the one of the ten virgins to be always ready, because we do not know the time of the second coming (Matthew 25:1-13).

The apostle Paul told the congregation in Thessalonica that they knew very well that the Lord would come suddenly, like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Because of this, some unfortunately came to the conclusion that the Lord had already come and that they could stop working. This is why Paul writes a second letter to warn against this belief. The unexpected coming does not necessarily mean that the coming is immediately at hand (2 Thessalonians 2:2). We must work while it is day, following the example of Paul and his co-workers. No one should be idle or meddle in other people’s business as seems to be the case. Who does not want to work, should also not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). We must continue to work and wait for the coming of the Lord precisely because we do not know when it will happen.

The intermediary state

Where are all the people who have already died and where will those who are still to die before the Lord’s return go? This place is usually called the *realm of the dead* (in the Hebrew Bible *sheol* and in the Greek Bible *hades*). This is the place of death, the last enemy of God, and it has already been conquered through Jesus’ death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:26; Revelation 1:17-18). The earthly body returns to dust or ashes. But what happens to the soul? The Bible gives very little information about this. We cannot, for example, use the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to make conjectures about this (Luke 16:19-31). In parables only the main idea is pertinent and this parable is about the giving of the more fortunate to the less fortunate in our midst. Maybe it is still possible to conclude from these parables that all who are to die before the second coming will have a foretaste of what awaits them after the final judgment.

The most detailed description of what awaits believers after death is: they will be with Christ. Jesus assures one of the criminals by his side that he will be *with Jesus* in paradise on that same day (Luke 23:43). Paul, in turn, writes that he longs to go to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23).

The second advent itself

Christians sometimes do not agree about how the Lord will return. Some maintain, for example, that he will come suddenly to take away those believers who are really ready surreptitiously. Those who stay behind will experience great tribulation. Only long afterwards the Lord will return visibly and with the loud sounding of trumpets to make

everything new. This view amounts to a twofold return. The New Testament, however, speaks only of one return. What does the Word teach us in actual fact?

- The second advent will be accompanied by great changes in the heavens (Matthew 24: 29).
- The Lord will return on the clouds, with power and great glory, suddenly like a thief in the night or like lightning, with the voice of the archangel and with trumpet call (Matthew 24:27, 30; 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 1 Thessalonians 4:16).
- Everyone will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the nations and peoples will mourn because of him (Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:30).
- He will send his angels with loud trumpet call to gather his children all over the world (Matthew 24:31). Those who died in Christ will rise first and will be taken together with those living in Christ on the clouds to the Lord where they will be with him always (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The hereafter

According to the Bible the hereafter, that is, the place and state after the second coming consists of heaven and hell.

Heaven

We read in 1 Corinthians 2:9 that *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”*. This heavenly splendour is described in terms of different earthly images. The names of the faithful are written in heaven and his name will be on their foreheads (Luke 10:20; Revelation 22:4). There the righteous will shine like the sun (Matthew 13:43). With the splendour of transfigured bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35-58) they will see God as he is because of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:8; John 17:24; I John 3:2; Revelation 22:4). His servants will serve him, receive their inheritance and reign forever as (Revelation 22:3, 5; Matthew 25:34). Together with Christ, they will share in a feast in his Father’s kingdom (Matthew 26: 29).

John describes the hereafter as a new heaven and a new earth with the new Jerusalem and a wonderful garden coming down from heaven (Revelation 21:1-22:5). Here are situated the river of the water of life and the tree of life that carries fruit the whole year through and whose leaves will heal the nations (Revelation 22:1-2). There will be no more thirst, trouble, sadness, illness, dangers, death or curse. God and the Lamb are the light chasing out all darkness. Here God lives together with his people of the covenant from all nations (Revelation 21:3). This is the fulfilment of God’s covenant with Abraham (Galatians 3:8). In this world to come God will be *“all in all”* (1 Corinthians 15:28). This is the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), where God says: *“I am making everything new!”* (Revelation 21:5).

Perdition

The prophet Daniel calls perdition or hell a place of shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). The New Testament describes hell in different ways. It is a place of eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46) where there is no rest, day or night (Revelation 14:11). It the place of darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth

(Matthew 25:30). It is the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41) where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48). This last description is reminiscent of the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem in the time of the apostles where there was a continual fire burning and worms devoured the rotting carcasses. Paul gives the following gripping description of hell: here is found punishment with everlasting destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

In his great mercy the Lord does differentiate between the degree of punishment for those who knew and those who did not know (Luke 12:42-48), and according to what has been done, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The signs of the second coming

The Bible lists numerous signs of the second advent. Jesus cites, for example, wars, rumours of wars, famines, earthquakes (Matthew 24:6-7) and all kinds of diseases (Luke 21:11). Even the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD^o70 is seen as part of the second coming. At that time many Judeans did what Jesus told them to do in Matthew 24:16-18 and fled from Jerusalem and Judea. The fall of Jerusalem is so entangled here with the second coming that one cannot really make a difference between them. In this way numerous happenings between Jesus' first and second advents are signs and mirrors of the latter.

False christs and false prophets

The apostle Paul warns the Thessalonians against the temptation of the antichrist under the power of Satan (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12). The writer of Revelation sees the antichrist in one of his visions in the form of a beast coming from the sea (Revelation 13:1-10). The apostle John points out that there have already come many antichrists in his time (1 John 2:18-22, 4:2-3). This is also true throughout history. Think of tyrants such as Stalin of Russia, Hitler of Germany, Mao Zedong of China, Kim II Sung of North Korea and Idi Amin of Uganda. The same goes for false prophets who taught people wrongly about Jesus. While the writer of Revelation sees a beast coming from the earth causing people to worship the antichrist (Revelation 13:11-17), the apostle John points out that many false prophets have gone into the world (1 John 4:1). Jesus himself already warns against false christs and false prophets (Matthew 24:4-5, Matthew 24:23-24).

Persecution as sign

Any major persecution of Christians is a sign of the second coming. Jesus says if these days had not been shortened, no-one would survive (Matthew 24:21-22). However, the Lord says also that the second advent will take place in a time such as Noah's time, just before the flood: people were eating and drinking, and getting married up to the time of the catastrophe (Matthew 24:38-39). The thought is here of people living without the Lord, continuing with their daily routine with no expectation of his coming.

Mission as sign

An important sign of the second coming is the preaching of the gospel all over the world, to all nations, before the

end comes (Matthew 24:14). Every believer can and must joyfully take part in this sign of the second coming! This can be done, for example, through your loyal prayer for the worldwide propagation of the message (Colossians 4:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1), by your gracious and wise actions in dealing with non-Christians (Colossians 4:5-6) and through material aid and support to missionaries and missions (3 John verses 5-8). Blessed are those who will be busy in this way when the Lord returns!

We joyfully await the second coming

That the Lord Jesus will return is certain. We believe and confess it. And we are eagerly expecting it; it is our hope. We pray for this with anticipation. We, the church, call like a bride to the bridegroom: Come! And we invite others: Come! Let the wedding feast begin so that everyone that has thirst can drink the free water of life! (Revelation 22:17). To this the Lord Jesus answers: *“Yes, I am coming soon”*. (Revelation 22:20).

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