

Di223 We Believe

Lesson Di223-24 The Rapture of the Church

In the early days of 20th-century Pentecostal and Holiness groups, the belief in the soon return of Christ was strong. Believers made no plans for death or retirement, because no one expected to die before Jesus came back. Some churches refused to build larger church buildings because it would not be used very long. Today, the opposite extreme is happening. We are so caught up in our everyday lives, that we think of Christ's return as far in the future. Maybe we don't think of it at all.

The Rapture is the glorious appearance of Jesus in the clouds, coming for believers. Rapture means 'catching away' or 'rising' of the saints by supernatural power. The Rapture is also called the 'Blessed Hope.' Jesus' return is mentioned many times in the New Testament. Both First and Second Thessalonians are written around the theme of Christ's return. The apostle Paul writes: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Thess 4:16-17).

All believers, both the dead and the living, will be raptured at almost the same time. The "dead in Christ" will come to life and go up first. Then the living believers will rise with them and meet Jesus in the air. The Rapture will happen "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (1Cor 15:52). Suddenly millions of believers from around the world will disappear. They will be missing from their homes, schools, or jobs. Jesus said his coming would be like a thief in the night—sudden and unexpected. He described how his coming would happen: "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matt 24:40-42).

The Living Bible says, "All the Christians who have died will suddenly become alive, with new bodies that will never, never die; and then we who are still alive shall suddenly have new bodies too. For our earthly bodies, the ones we have now that can die, must be transformed into heavenly bodies that cannot perish but will live forever" (1Cor 15:52-53, LB).

What promise did Jesus give that he would return? Jesus said, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). Jesus said he is preparing a place for us in heaven.

What should be our attitude about the second coming of Christ? On the day that Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection, his disciples were looking up into the sky. They watched as he went up into the clouds. Suddenly, two men dressed in white stood beside them and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

It has been nearly 2,000 years since Christ's return was first promised, so why hasn't he come yet? The Bible gives two reasons in the apostle Peter's writing. He warns the early Christians that in the 'last days' there would be scoffers and sinners who would laugh at the idea that Jesus was coming back to earth. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." Peter continues to write that these ungodly men deliberately forget that the heavens and earth are "reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2Peter 3:4-7).

What is the first reason Peter gives for the delay? God measures time differently than man does. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

What is the second reason Peter gives for the delay? God delays his coming because he desires that more people will come to repentance through his patience. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2Peter3:8-9).

How do you feel about the delay? Some people are frightened, thinking that Jesus might return in the middle of their worldly pleasures. He may find them not ready to go. They ignore world events, which according to the Bible, indicate that Jesus could come at any time. The signs of his coming are all around us. Other people seem unconcerned, when told that Jesus is coming soon. They don't seem to believe that those who are not ready will be judged and punished. They are satisfied with the present. They are willing to risk their future, because they don't really think Jesus will return. They are asleep spiritually, when they should be awake and watching for Jesus to come.

Those who love Jesus are excited about the reminder that he is coming soon. They see that everything around seems threatening; trouble and persecution are everywhere. Even though economies are in trouble and nuclear war could destroy the world, these true believers have a deep assurance about Christ's return. He will take them out of the world's difficulties. They live the promise of Luke 21:28: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Old Testament prophets foretold the birth of Jesus hundreds of years before his first coming. Each of their prophecies was fulfilled. Jesus' Second Coming will happen just as surely as his first coming.

What should be our attitude about the rapture of the Church? You have learned in this lesson that your attitude should be one of eagerness, looking forward to it. And, we all want to be ready for his coming. We can be ready by confessing our sins, believing in Jesus, and accepting him as Savior. We stay ready by living for him every day, reading the Bible, praying, and meeting with other Christians to worship. In our next lesson we will discuss the second part of the second coming of Christ and the signs that let us know Christ's coming is soon.

This lesson is **important** because Jesus is coming back soon to receive to himself all who have believed on him as Savior—both those living and those who have died. We must be ready.

Prophets have foretold the conditions we see all around us. We must also warn others, who do not know Christ, that the time could be short.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that the prophecies of Christ's return are true. He could return at any time. Christ himself promised his return. The delay in Christ's return has been to give more people an opportunity to be ready.

Let's **review** this lesson—

1. On the day of Christ's ascension into heaven, what did the two men dressed in white tell the disciples? [Pause.]
 - A. If you answered, "The two men said Jesus would come back in the same way he went to heaven," you answered correctly.

2. What are the two reasons God has delayed the second coming of Christ? [Pause.]
 - A. If you said, "God has delayed the Second Coming because God measures time differently than man does and because God is giving an opportunity for more people to accept Christ as Savior," you are correct.

3. What should be our attitude about the second coming of Christ? [Pause.]
 - A. If you answered that our attitude should be one of eagerness, looking forward to it, and making sure we are ready, you are right.

Your **assignment** is to memorize our twelfth *Statement of Faith*: "We believe the blessed hope of the Church is Christ's return from heaven to 'catch up' the Christians who have died, together with those who are alive, to be with him forever." Also learn the **Memory Verse**: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). Share with at least two other persons about the rapture of the Church and how to be ready for Christ's coming.