



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.3 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

The Visible Return of Christ

Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven and two angels appeared, saying: **“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven”** (Acts 1:11), believers in Jesus have been awaiting the visible return of Jesus to this earth. Jesus Himself referred to His second coming many times in His ministry. In His parable of the tares and the wheat Jesus said: **“Let both (tares and wheat – unbelievers and believers) grow together until the harvest”** (Matthew 13:30), and then He explained: **“The harvest is the end of the age. ... The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father”** (Matthew 13:39-43).

Jesus’ second coming will not be like His first coming. The first time He came in humility, but the second time He will come in glory. Jesus said: **“The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works”** (Matthew 16:27). In the last week of His earthly life Jesus said to His disciples: **“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him”** (Matthew 25:31-32). It will be a day of reckoning for all human beings. Jesus said: **“Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels”** (Mark 8:38).

Jesus’ apostles also clearly taught that their Lord and Savior would return visibly to this earth on the Last Day. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“The Lord Jesus Christ ... will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom”** (2 Timothy 4:1). The letter to the Hebrews points out that Jesus’ second coming will mean final salvation for those who trust in Him: **“To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”** (Hebrews 9:28).

According to Scripture many things will take place when Jesus returns visibly. The present world will come to an end. The dead will be raised. All persons will be judged, and a separation will be made between those who will be saved and those who will not be saved. Surely it will be a momentous day. Peter explains: **“The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. ... The heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat”** (2 Peter 3:10-12).

Since it has been almost two thousand years since the words of Jesus and His apostles have been spoken and Jesus has not yet returned as He said He would, there are many today, even professed Christians, who do not believe that Jesus will come again, as He said He would. The apostle Peter foretold that this would happen. For he wrote: **“Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation’”** (2 Peter 3:3-4). There does not seem to be any evidence that the world will come to an end and Jesus will return. But Peter compares the

end of the world with the great flood of Noah's time. The people dwelling on earth at that time were not expecting the flood either, even though it had been foretold. But it came. **"The world that then existed perished, being flooded with water"** (2 Peter 3:6). And so it will happen on the Last Day. **"The heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men"** (2 Peter 3:7).

We can be sure that what Jesus and His apostles said would happen will happen. **"Beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:8-9). The Lord has delayed His return in order to give more people an extension of their time of grace.

Because it has been so many years since Jesus said He would come again, it may be difficult for us to believe that Jesus could come in our lifetime. But we should remember how many of God's prophecies have already been fulfilled. Just think of the many prophecies that were fulfilled when Jesus came the first time. Paul wrote to Titus: **"God ... cannot lie"** (Titus 1:2). Everything will happen, just as God has promised. We can be sure of it.

But we do not know and we cannot know when it will happen. Jesus told His disciples: **"Heaven and earth will pass away"** (Matthew 24:35), and then He added: **"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only"** (Matthew 24:36). In His state of humiliation Jesus Himself did not know, for we read in the Gospel of Mark: **"Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"** (Mark 13:32). If we cannot know when Jesus will return, then we should be ready for His return at any time. **"Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is"** (Mark 13:33). **"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect"** (Matthew 24:44).

At that same time Jesus warned: **"Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth"** (Luke 21:34-35). Jesus told His disciples the story of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to come. But five of them were foolish and did not have enough oil for their lamps, and so they were not ready when the bridegroom came, and they were not permitted to participate in the wedding celebration. Jesus concluded this story by saying: **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming"** (Matthew 25:13).

Despite the clear words of Jesus, false teachers have arisen from time to time who claim to know exactly when Jesus will return. All such predictions have been wrong, and they will continue to be wrong. Such groups as the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others have set dates and years for the time of Christ's coming, and their prophecies have failed. Yet others continue to try, ignoring Jesus' clear warning that no one can know the time. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians: **"You yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape"** (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3).

Besides Jesus' prophecies of His return at the end of time, Jesus and His apostles made other prophecies of future events that have already come to pass. For example, Jesus told His apostles that Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed. In saying this He was only repeating what God had revealed to the prophet Daniel many years earlier, that **"the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary"** (Daniel 9:26). Just a few days before Jesus' death, His disciples pointed out to Him the magnificent temple that King Herod the Great had built in Jerusalem. Jesus then said to them: **"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down"** (Mark 13:2).

The disciples then asked Jesus for a sign when this would happen, and Jesus gave them a sign. He said to them: **“When you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, ... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ... For in those days there will be tribulation”** (Mark 13:14, 19). What was this sign? It is explained more fully in the Gospel of Luke. **“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. ... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people”** (Luke 21:20-23).

These words were fulfilled when the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem about forty years later. The Christians living in Jerusalem and the surrounding country remembered Jesus’ warning and fled from the city to a place called Pella and they escaped the terrible judgment that fell on Jerusalem in 70 AD. This was what Jesus was talking about when He told the weeping women of Jerusalem as He was led to His death on Calvary: **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children”** (Luke 23:28). Everything Jesus foretold happened, just as He said. The Jewish historian Josephus was present when Jerusalem was destroyed, and he described the gruesome events of those days.

The destruction of Jerusalem took place, as Jesus said it would. Therefore, we can be sure that the end of the world will also take place, as Jesus has said. But then there will be no sign of His coming that will allow Christians to make special preparations; He will come as a thief in the night. Nevertheless, Jesus and His apostles did make many predictions of things that will happen in the world before Jesus returns. We could call these signs preceding His coming, even though they are not signs of His coming in the sense that they will help us determine when He will come.

It seems that all these signs have already been fulfilled to some extent, although greater manifestations of fulfillment may yet take place in the future. Already back in the days of Noah, after the great flood, God made this promise: **“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease”** (Genesis 8:22). God has kept this promise up until now, and we can be sure He will continue to keep it until Jesus returns. We do not have to be afraid of any climate change that will alter God’s promise.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **“In the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”** (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Paul told Timothy: **“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers, and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables”** (2 Timothy 4:3-4). These things have happened and are happening today.

Paul wrote to Timothy: **“The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving”** (1 Timothy 4:1-3). In history there have been many such groups making rules about marriage and food that go beyond anything God has said.

What Paul told the elders of Ephesus came true in Ephesus, and it has come to pass in many other places as well. He said: **“After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves”** (Acts 20:29-30).

Besides the prevalence of false teachers in the world, we can also expect unrest in the world and calamities in nature: **“wars and rumors of wars. ... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom**

against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places” (Matthew 24:6-7). **“You will be hated by all for My name’s sake”** (Luke 21:17). These things happened already in the days of the apostles, and they continue to happen in our day.

But the Lord Jesus also foretold great blessings that would come to the world after His departure. Shortly before He ascended to heaven, He said: **“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses of Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8). The Gospel of Christ has gone out into the far corners of the world and continues to go out even today. Jesus said: **“This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations”** (Matthew 24:14).

Through all these years Christians have endured; Christ’s Church of believers remains. Although things may get even worse, much worse, before our Lord Jesus returns, we must keep on living the Christian life without becoming overly upset about events in the world. What Paul wrote to Titus applies to us now in this present time. **“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”** (Titus 2:11-14).

Questions

1. Why should we believe that Jesus will return to this earth visibly?
2. What are some of the differences between Jesus’ first coming and His second coming?
3. What events will take place when Jesus returns?
4. Why is it that there are so many who do not think Jesus will return?
5. Why is it wrong to try to determine when Jesus will return?
6. What promise of Jesus was fulfilled in 70 AD?
7. Why did the Christians in Jerusalem succeed in escaping the danger?
8. Name some of the things that Jesus and His apostles said would happen.
9. Why do we not have to be afraid of climate change?
10. Are any of the predicted things happening in your locale currently? If so, mention some of them.
11. Why can Christians remain calm when evil things happen?