

Top Secret

The future's greatest secret is the date of Jesus' Return. Jesus clearly stated no-one knows the time of his return including himself, only the Father knows (Matt. 24:36). Despite this, some preachers and various religious groups have announced they know the day of Christ's return. They have all been wrong. Should you hear a preacher say they know the time of His Return they are deceiving themselves and their listeners.

Luke records the words of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection. They had asked him, "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). Jesus gave a clear answer, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (1:7). Luke uses two different words in the answer Jesus gave.

Times: *chronos* the precise time of an event, the time on the clock,
chronos is earth's time

Dates: *kairos* a crucial or decisive moment, the right time
kairos is God's time

A paraphrase could be, "The Father has set the precise time of Christ's Return; when it happens, it will be shown to be the very right time. When earth's time connects with heaven's time, Christ will come."

The day and hour of the Return of Christ are unknown to man but known to the Father. He has "set" them by his own authority; set meaning to establish, put in place, appoint. Acts 1:7 infers God has determined the moment of Christ's Return and written the day on his calendar.

In the culture of Bible days, when a son chose a bride with his father's approval, the young man would make additions to the family home. The wedding ceremony would happen only after the building additions were complete; the bride's role was to be ready. When the additions met the father's satisfaction, the groom would go and get his bride or send servants to tell her this was the day. This is exactly what Jesus said;

"In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And 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 14:2-3

If God has already written in his calendar the day and hour of Christ's return, how do we reconcile this with the words of Peter?

“You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

2 Peter 3:11–12

The word speed, *speudo*, can mean to desire earnestly, strive towards, have eager anticipation. However, the predominant use of *speudo* means to hasten, hurry, progress something forward and advance the cause. God's sovereignty allows for our participation in two ways.

Firstly, the bride must make herself ready (Rev. 19:7). This is the context of 2 Peter 3:11–12, “you ought to live holy and godly lives”, “make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (3:14). If the oil in the lamps of the virgins (Matt. 25:1–2) is a picture of the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit is the ‘church-preparing’ power of God.

Secondly, the Church must actively participate in missions; “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). In *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, activity was at its peak between 5pm and 6pm. God wants the world to be saved and continues to recruit and release workers in the final hour. Are we playing ‘extra time’; is the ‘Referee’ pausing to blow the final whistle while so many are coming to Christ?

Living holy lives and participating in his global plan not only advances the cause of the kingdom, it accelerates the time of the King's return.

The Time of the Return in relation to the Tribulation

Jesus said in the End Times “there will great distress” (Matt. 24:21), and “days of distress” (Mark 13:19). Distress is *thlipsis*, meaning oppression, affliction, pressure, tribulation. Whilst trouble and tribulation are a normal part of life, the Bible speaks of cataclysmic events, “Hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand” (Rev. 6:16–17).

The man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3), the beast (Rev. 13:4–7), “the ruler who will come” (Dan. 9:26–27) are titles for the Antichrist (1 John 4:3). His greatest activity is during the Tribulation when he appears in person to dominate the world.¹

¹ Some commentators distinguish between the Tribulation, when the Antichrist appears and the Great Tribulation when he seeks to dominate the world with a universal, political, economic and religious kingdom.

What is the time frame of the Return of Christ in relation to the Tribulation? Some commentators distinguish between the Rapture of the Church when Christ comes for his bride, and the Return of Christ when he comes with his bride; this view considers them as sequential events. Others consider the Rapture and Return to be simultaneous events, that is, they occur at the same time. There are three general views with regard to the timing of the Rapture and the Tribulation.

The Pre-Tribulation Rapture

This view considers the sequence of end time events to be the Rapture of the Church, followed by the Tribulation, culminating in the Return of Christ. In this view, the Tribulation is both God's judgement against a world that has rejected his Son, and the Antichrist trying to destroy Israel.

The Mid-Tribulation Rapture

Very similar to the Pre-Tribulation view with the sequence of events to be a Tribulation lasting around 3½ years, the Rapture of the Church, followed by the Great Tribulation (Rev. 7:14) also lasting around 3½ years (13:5) culminating with the Return of Christ.

The Post-Tribulation Rapture

This is quite different to the previous views as it considers the Rapture and Return as simultaneous events. The Tribulation is considered the Antichrist persecuting the Church that God uses as a means of perfecting the Church.

It is important to understand that a person's view of the timing of the Rapture does not determine their salvation, and that each of the three views may have positives and negatives. Therefore it is wise to know what you believe but not to be dogmatic about it.

It is helpful to identify the purpose of the Tribulation. The Tribulation includes "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16–17); it is difficult to think a bridegroom would punish his bride. It is equally difficult that God needs to use persecution to refine the Church, inferring Jesus' blood is insufficient. This adds weight to the Pre and Mid-Tribulation views.

The Time of the Return in relation to the Millennial Reign

The Millennial reign refers to the Kingdom of God being established on the earth. Millennial, referring to one thousand years, is mentioned six times, (Rev. 20:1–7). Some commentators claim the Reign of Christ will be literal and based in Jerusalem; others have a more spiritual or figurative view. How does the Return connect with the Millennial Reign?

The Pre-millennial view

This view considers the Rapture/Return will occur before the Millennium as Christ returns to establish a physical kingdom on the earth. The unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament have a spiritual application for the Church and some kind of literal application for Israel.

The Post-millennial view

This view considers the Church will establish the physical kingdom of God on the earth. The world will be won and society totally transformed by the gospel. Old Testament prophecies find their only fulfilment in the Church, which has replaced Israel in God's plan. After an undetermined period of time Christ Returns, time ceases and eternity begins.

The A-Millennial view

This view is very similar to Post-Millennialism; A-Millennial meaning no millennium as an A-theist believes there is no God. There will be no physical kingdom; the Kingdom is the Church and the Church is the Kingdom. Unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies are to be claimed by the Church. At some point in the future Christ Returns.

Considerations

The pre-millennial view sees Revelation as futuristic; the other two views consider it has already happened. There is a major problem with an historic interpretation of Revelation as commentators who hold that view rarely agree on the events they claim have already happened.

The Post and A-Millennial views see only spiritual applications to unfulfilled prophecies. Over allegorising Scripture decreases its authority and we become lost in a labyrinth of human opinion. A literal approach to interpreting Scripture allows for the prophet's use of symbols and imagery without being over literalistic.

The Post and A-Millennial views consider the Church has replaced Israel and the events in modern day Israel are entirely coincidental. This disagrees with, "God is able to graft them (Israel) again" (Rom. 11:23). The Post and A-Millennial views consider the covenants God made with Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, and others have no validity today.

The key to all this is to know what and why you believe what you believe; be honest in your interpretation of the Bible; and stay focussed on Jesus and his plans for your life and the church.

Next week, session 8, Judgment: the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.