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What if Christ had Come Yesterday?

John Allen Chalk

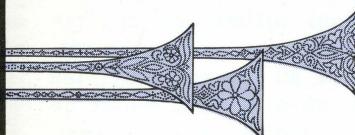
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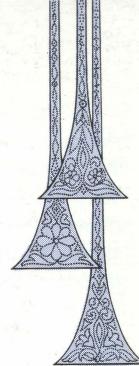
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What If Christ Had Come Yesterday?



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What If Christ Had Come Yesterday?

Today is forever!" shouts the common voice of our age. Everywhere one turns — jobs, homes, churches, parks, theaters, schools — the same fundamental proposition colors all that we think and all that we are. Things will always be as they now are! Nothing will change! Life is guaranteed! Man has the peculiar capacity to live as if everything will always be as it now is. Paul detected the same attitude in New Testament times. "When they are saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall in no wise escape" (I Thessalonians 5:3).

In the face of this blatant affirmation of "no-change" and "never-ending happy land" comes the witness of God's Word talking, of all things, about "the end." "Then cometh the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death" (I Corinthians 15:24-26).

The Apostle Paul in this passage speaks without embarrassment about a definite point in time when our historical period will conclude. He calls it "the end" without explanation, without footnote, without any condition. Why is it that most of us simply can not face the certain reality of the final conclusion of our individual lives and of our epoch?

Christ's followers are even directed to anticipate His return which will signal the end of our brief era in the history of the universe. Jesus urged this posture on His disciples. "And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:27, 28).

Rather than fear such an event Christians believe that "the end" will come as the Bible promises. In fact, Christians openly welcome such an event. We live and prepare ourselves spiritually for that moment in history when Christ will return and we will "look up, and lift up our heads" to see our redemption drawing near.

The angels ministering at Jesus' ascension reminded His Apostles that "this Jesus, who was received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Peter, years following that incident, wrote, "But, according to his promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (II Peter 3:13). Instead of plying ourselves with ease, comfort, and deceptive pleasures Christians are instructed to expectantly await and hopefully anticipate the Lord's return!

Yet most of us are thoroughly conditioned by the past. We make our decisions on the basis of our own personal history. Any new situation is measured by similar situations of the past. We think in terms of the past rather than the future. All of which indicates that either the question, "What if Christ should come tomorrow?" or the query, "What if Christ were to come today?" hopelessly loses its effectiveness on a mentality and outlook shaped almost exclusively by yesterday. This leads to the more pertinent and, we pray, more provocative question, "WHAT IF CHRIST HAD COME YESTERDAY?"

Make no mistake, Christ could have come yesterday! Every Biblical indication or sign of the last "last days" is favorable for our times. The Apostles asked Christ at the end of His ministry, "Tell us, when shall

these things be? What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3). The disciples were not only concerned about the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:1, 2) but inquired on the same occasion about how they (and us for that matter) might know the "end of the world" — the return of Christ — was imminent. Jesus then presented signs of that great event in Matthew twenty-four and in other parts of the New Testament. Notice how well they portray OUR AGE!

First, Jesus says He will return during a time of great religious confusion. "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and shall lead many astray" (Matthew 24:5). Dr. Eugene Carson Blake accurately described the religious turmoil of our times when he said, "Americans more than ever see the churches . . . as competing social groups, pulling and hauling, propagandizing and pressuring for their own organizational advantages" (Eugene Carson Blake, "Reunion for Protestants," *Time*, December 19, 1960, p. 64). We must agree that so-called Christian groups present a repulsive spectacle to the intelligent observer. When religious confusion, moral decay, spiritual quackery, and Biblical ignorance prevail Christ says He will come!

Second, the time for His return will be one of natural and civil unrest. "For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines and earthquakes in divers places. But all these things are the beginning of travail" (Matthew 24:7, 8).

Political intrigue, civil war, rebellion, border conflict, espionage and counter-espionage indicate ripeness for the end! Africa is but one example of world-wide upheaval. "The swift and bewildering changes in a continent nearly four times as large as the United States might well deter the observer from rash pronouncement on Africa's future. Thirty-one new states within a mere fourteen years have brought a host of new and complex problems," an observer has remarked. ("Continent in Crisis," *Christianity Today*, July 31, 1964, p. 1006.) And as the political currents are stirred so famines and earthquakes — natural disorders — from Alaska to Australia are experienced!

Third, the gospel will be preached around the world. Jesus pictures this great event as a definite sign of the end. "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14). Never

have God's people more earnestly attempted to utilize every available means to preach the gospel. Millions are hearing Christ proclaimed every day for the first time. Radio, television, the printed page, and ever-increasing numbers of missionaries foretell a world to whom the searchless message, God's forgiveness through Christ, has been announced. Yes, Christ could have come yesterday!

Peter offers a fourth "sign of the time" when our Lord will return. He sees the "last days" as a time of impiety and hatred toward religion. "Knowing this first that in the last days mockers shall come with mockery, walking after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? for, from the day the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation'" (II Peter 3:3, 4).

Many prominent pulpits of our day cry out, "Where is the promise of his coming?" even as Peter predicted of the last days. Described either as a symbol or as a myth the Biblical doctrine of the second coming of Christ is rejected by liberal, humanistic theology. Peter has properly caught the spirit of our times.

Distinguishable signs, definite conditions, prevalent attitudes, and marked indications are what the New Testament presents by way of warning that the Lord is "at hand." "If we can be sure of anything about Jesus, we can be sure that He would come again to this earth, visibly, in glory, accompanied by the heavenly beings, and at a time of terrible distress and suffering among men and nations." (Clarence E. Macartney, *Twelve Great Questions About Christ*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956; p. 150).

The Apostle Paul was also concerned about the essential characteristics of the "last days." The following passage from his pen is more contemporary than today's newspaper. "But know this, that in the last days grievous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, haughty, railers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control fierce, no lovers of good, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power thereof: from these also turn away" (II Timothy 3:1-5.)

Every Biblical indication, every Scriptural picture of the last days points clearly to times just like those in

which we are now living. There is no doubt, Christ could have come yesterday!

Most of us have persuaded ourselves that more time will elapse before Christ returns. We have assumed that many generations will come and go before that great day of the Lord. Yet, such an attitude is in direct and open violation of the teachings of Peter when he warns, "But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (II Peter 3:8). Time is of no consequence to God! He is God and therefore not limited to time and space. So it has only been nineteen hundred years since Christ lived among men. Peter remarks, "Do not let that fool you. Remember one thing above all else my brethren, one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Regardless of the time when Christ returns, which could have been yesterday, his return will be an unexpected one. The New Testament writers searched their minds for figures of speech to describe this aspect of the Lord's coming. They needed something forceful, vivid, and consistent with the surprise element. Paul used the picture of a thief in the night. "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that aught be written unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (I Thessalonians 5:1, 2). Obviously the Thessalonian Christians were unlike their twentieth-century counterparts. There was no need to warn them that Christ would return at an unexpected hour!

Jesus reminded His apostles, "Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh" (Matthew 24:42). Even His closest disciples who knew Him personally would have no prior knowledge of His return. Attempting to deeply impress this on His followers Christ likened His return to lightning in the night. "For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west: so shall be the coming of the Son of man" (Matthew 24:27).

This aspect of Christ's return receives little attention in our daily meditations. But the New Testament emphasis on it should lead us toward a deeper and more continual consideration. Jesus feared the lethargy that often overtakes men and spoke for the third time in Matthew twenty-four saying, "Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh" (Matthew 24:44). Here Jesus actually warns

that He will come at the **very time** we least expect Him! The matter does not end when we have said that Christ's return will be unexpected. Jesus will appear when we are thinking and living as if He **could not** come at that time!

Yes, Christ could have come yesterday. Did you give one fleeting thought to Him and to the prospect of His return? Think about your activities yesterday. Would it have been advisable for Christ to have come during your family's breakfast hour? What about during the first activities of the morning on your job? During your lunch period? Or at some other time of the afternoon or evening? It looks like yesterday was a perfect day from all the signs and from the insignificant amount of time you took to think about Christ!

The final day of the Lord will be **unforgettable**. We have all had things we wanted to remember and other things we wanted to forget. Despite our predilections Christ's coming will be totally unforgettable.

The sounds that attend His return will be awesome. "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (I Thessalonians 4:16). The voice of the archangel shouting the Lord's coming, the trumpet of God making sounds never before heard by human ear, the noise and stirring of the dead coming to life, eternity will not be long enough to forget these sounds. The memory of them will either make hell even more horrible or heaven more wonderful!

Observe the effect of Christ's return on the universe. Just when we are becoming more familiar with the almost limitless expanse of the universe comes Christ. "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (II Peter 3:10). Can you now imagine that noise as the planetary bodies about which we know so little pass away? What of heat so intense that the elements — the basic materials out of which everything is made — will be dissolved! My friend, such phenomena cannot be forgotten. It will either make hell more unbearable or heaven more enjoyable.

The nature of this unforgettable happening is described by Jesus and Paul as a "glorious" event. Jesus told those who questioned Him about His return, "And

then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:17). Paul describes it as "the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire" (II Thessalonians 1:7). What sounds, what universal upheaval, what glory and brilliance! "In terms of tremendous imagery, an extinguished sun, a dimmed moon, stars falling from heaven, the powers of heaven and earth shaken, the whole universe in convulsion, He describes the conditions which shall exist when the Son of man cometh" (*Ibid.*, p. 149).

Not only are we taught the unforgettability of Christ's return but the Bible specifically reveals that every person regardless of spiritual condition will witness these happenings. John reminds us, "Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him" (Revelation 1:7). Your business will wait that day! Your club will not even take time to adjourn when Jesus comes! Nothing on the face of the earth or in the universe will be more important than every person witnessing His appearance.

Imminent, unexpected, and unforgettable are the three Biblical themes that picture the day of the Lord. Yet the fact of His return as it has been established from these Biblical passages is really only the beginning. Once Christ has returned we will then answer for our deeds!

Jesus described the events immediately following His second coming as the day of great separation. "But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31, 32). Husbands from wives, mother from daughter, father from son, friend from friend, and on go the various and frightening separations that the great judge will effect among the gathered billions! It will be a time of either the most intense sorrow and anguish or the sweetest joy and peace ever known to man!

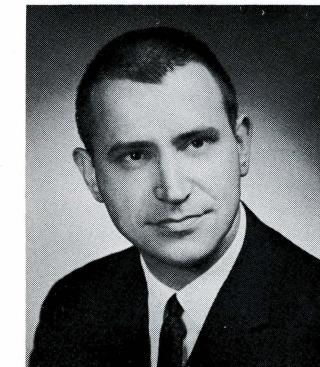
Paul describes this unexpected and unforgettable day as the great reckoning. "For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (II Corinthians 5:10). Is it possible to imagine being unable to cover or hide a wicked deed? Think of having

one's every thought revealed! Nothing hidden but everything made known — that is the judgment ushered in by Christ's return.

Let the Apostle John present his powerful and poignant picture of the day Christ returns. "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and the books were opened: and another book was opened: which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works, And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11-15).

If Christ had come yesterday where would you be today? Were you concerned about your sins yesterday? Were you a firm believer in Christ? Were you penitent and believing enough to obey His request that you be baptized for the remission of your sins yesterday?

You may have every good intention for tomorrow but tomorrow is future while yesterday is fact. Think about every activity and every thought of your life yesterday. **WHAT IF CHRIST HAD COME YESTERDAY?**



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.