



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • Rick James

In 1 Thessalonians 4:18 after concluding a discussion on the Second Coming of Christ, Paul says, “Encourage each other with these words.” At different stages in the history of the Christian church there has been great focus on the teaching of the Second Coming of Jesus. Sometimes the teachings have been taken to excess. Jesus clearly states that no one will know the exact time and date of His return; “It is not for you to know the times or dates the father has set (Acts 1:7).” Yet it has not been uncommon for certain teachers to actually give dates and times.

There have been some unfortunate ramifications of this kind of errant teaching. One of those is that many Christians, with a desire to separate themselves from such fanatics, avoid the topic altogether. As a result they do not follow Paul’s injunction “to encourage each other with these words.” While the reaction is understandable it is not without effect. When we fail to keep in the forefront of our thinking that Christ may return at any moment, we can lose a sense of anticipation, hope, urgency and eternal perspective: we can become mired in the here-and-now.

As we look at the Spiritual lives of Christians who have made some of the greatest impact for Christ’s kingdom, such as the Apostle Paul, often we find their lives were marked with a great sense of urgency and anticipation of the Lord’s return. This urgency propelled them to heroic efforts in spreading the gospel.

Biblical teaching to the soul is a lot like basic vitamins to the body. Often we can go awhile without a specific vitamin without feeling the effects, but eventually we begin to experience a lack of energy and motivation. Similarly the teaching of Christ’s return is a central biblical theme that is meant to provide great comfort, motivation and encouragement for Christians. As Christians, we can only go so long without “encouraging each other with these words” before we begin to feel the motivational effects.

As we look at the teaching of Christ’s return in Scripture, we see three themes emerge.

Be Ready

In Luke 12:40 it says, “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” This idea is repeated in many other places connected to Jesus’ Second Coming. What does it mean to be ready? What seems to be implied is that we should be living our lives in such a way that we would not need to make any dramatic changes in how we are living, even if we knew Christ was going to return tomorrow.

A helpful way to gauge your readiness would be to ask yourself, “If I knew Jesus was going to return a year from now, how would I live my life differently?” There really should be no need for radical changes if you are living in a state of readiness.

In our culture most people think that they will live to age 90 or even 100. When we have this attitude we tend to lose a sense of urgency in living our Christian life. Living the Christian life is a lot like running a race. When we think about living to age 90, it puts the finish line a long way off. We begin to plan for the “long haul” and think about ways to make the journey as comfortable as possible. The nearness of Christ’s return puts the finish line squarely in front of us, and urges us to pick up the pace and throw off any encumbrances that may slow us down from getting to our goal.

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A Practical Example

I Timothy 6: 13-14 gives us a picture of how this effects our motivation. In this passage Paul says to his disciple Timothy, “Keep this command without spot or blemish until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul is encouraging Timothy to persevere because the finish line (Christ’s return) is very close. It is the possible nearness of this event that provides the encouragement to persevere. When we lose sight of the nearness of Christ’s return we begin to pad our lives with comforts and securities, because our eyes are on a finish line that might be 60 or 70 years away. As we run the Christian race we see the finish line way off in the distance and therefore make the journey as comfortable as possible.

Keep Focused

There is a second reason that many Christians may not be “ready” for the return of Christ. This reason doesn’t deal as much with accumulating too much comfort or wealth, but rather with a turning aside to sin.

In I Peter 1:13, Peter is concerned that Christians, in the face of trials and persecution, will turn back to old habit patterns of sin they had lived in as unbelievers. He says, “Set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” If picturing the finish line of our Christian life at the age of 90 causes us to slow our pace down and make the journey comfortable, it can also cause us to turn aside and take frequent “water breaks” in streams of sin we used to drink from as nonbelievers.

Peter realizes these Christians are experiencing stress and will be tempted to turn to sin for relief and comfort. What Peter is trying to get them to do is focus on the finish line (Christ’s return) and the comfort they will receive at His Coming. Peter is basically saying, “Don’t look to sin for comfort and relief, but focus on the finish line and the comfort you will receive when you cross it.”

To illustrate the point consider this practical example. Compare if Jesus were to say to you, “Keep yourselves sexually pure until I return, which could be any day,” or if he were to say, “Keep yourselves pure for the next 60 years.” Do you see how Christ’s impending arrival moves up the finish line, keeps us focused, and encourages us to persevere in holiness?

Today there is a great lack of holiness in the church, for which there are manifold reasons. Yet, one of those reasons is clearly the loss of the hope and urgency that the teaching of the nearness of Christ’s return provides.

Pick Up the Pace

In Hebrews 10: 25, it says “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” The idea expressed by “all the more” is one of picking up the pace of our Christian lives as we see the Day of Christ’s return approaching.

As You See That Day Approaching

Jesus clearly taught that no one would know the day or hour of His return. But passages like Hebrews 10:25 suggest that Christians will have a sense of that Day’s approaching. In I Thessalonians 5:4 Paul says concerning the Lord’s return, that, “This Day should not surprise you like a thief.” Christians should have a growing awareness that Christ’s return is immanent.

Jesus was asked on one occasion what would be the signposts of his return. Rather than discouraging the question, He gave several signposts that believers might reference with a growing awareness that the hour was drawing near.

In Matthew 24:14, we read of one of the major signposts, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come.” What is exciting to realize is that while in 2,000 years this has not occurred, there is great reason to assume that all nations of the world will hear the gospel within this generation. For example, in just the last 30 years, over 2 billion of the world’s 6.5 billion people have



seen the Jesus Film (the gospel of Luke put to film by Campus Crusade for Christ). This is just one of many significant events that are going on around the world that is bringing Christ's words to their fulfillment. While we can not know the day or hour, where we stand in history related to this signpost is extremely significant, and should prod us to pick up the pace.

All the More

It is always enjoyable for me to watch the NBA playoffs, as some of the greatest athletes in the world compete for the Championship of the NBA. In watching the first several quarters it would seem that everyone is unreservedly giving their best effort to win the game. Yet, amazingly, in the final minutes these athletes actually raise the intensity of their play. Every in-bounds pass becomes an opportunity for a steal or a basket. Every dribble of the basketball seems contested. All eyes keep glancing up at the clock as the game winds down to the final seconds. What you realize is that no matter how important the game, competitors play differently in the final minutes, than they do in the first quarter.

This is the sense and motivation of "all the more" that we only get as we keep our eyes on "that Day approaching."

As the gospel makes its final lap around the globe, we as Christians should have a sense of anticipation that causes us to pick up the pace of our Christian lives and ministry. There should be a feeling of leaning in toward the tape to finish the race. It is this "all the more," and alertness that Christians need right now. The motivation for this exerted effort comes from "encouraging one another with these words" concerning the return of Christ.

End 

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