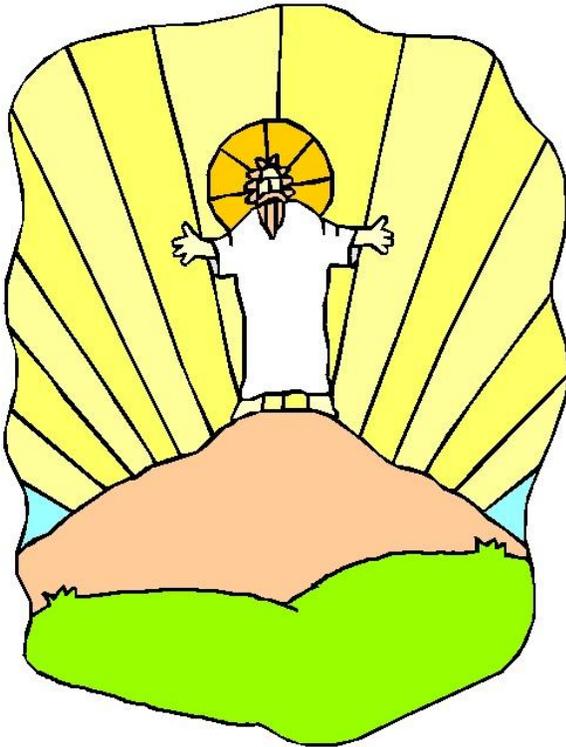


## THE BLESSED HOPE



Closely related to the historical resurrection of Jesus, our Lord, is the future hope of resurrection at the end of the age. Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised ... then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Co. 15:17-19). The ancient Greek ideal was that matter was evil while only spirit was good, and therefore, the hope for an afterlife was that of a disembodied spirit. Unlike this, the Bible affirms the goodness of both matter and spirit inasmuch as God created both. Hence, the hope for all men and women is the hope of wholeness, that is, resurrection and immortality in their bodies. For Paul, with his background in the Old Testament, the state of disembodiment was akin to being naked. But God has given to believers the Holy Spirit's guarantee that they will not be disembodied at the end, but rather, they will be clothed with an immortal, heavenly body (2 Co. 5:1-5). Death will indeed be swallowed up in victory (1 Co. 15:50-55)!

This marvelous transformation will occur when Christ appears at the end of the age (1 Jn. 3:2). It is the Christian's blessed hope (1 Jn. 3:3; Tit. 2:11-14; Ro. 8:22-25; Ep. 4:4) no less than the hope of Israel (Ac. 2:26-27; 23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8; 28:20). When the New Testament describes the salvation which is in Jesus Christ, it does so in three verbal tenses, past, present and future. For those who believe, there is a sense in which salvation can be spoken of as an event in the past. Paul, for instance, says, "We were saved" (Ro. 8:24). Salvation as a past event rests in the finished work of the cross. The cross was a "once for all" event (He. 9:26b-28; 1 Pe. 3:18), and when believers have come to faith, they "have been justified" (Ro. 5:1). At the same time, there is a present character to the salvation which is in Jesus. Paul can also say, "We are being saved" (1 Co. 15:2). The implications of salvation are to be worked out in Christian living (Phil. 2:12). There is an ongoing, maturing process which is at work in the life of every Christian (Ep. 4:11-13; Ja. 1:2-4; 2:14-24). Finally, there is a future character to salvation. The same Paul who says, "We were saved," and who speaks of "being saved" also says, "We shall be saved" (Ro. 5:9). When Christ appears at the end, he shall appear "to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (He. 9:28). It is this future aspect of salvation, which involves resurrection and transformation at the second coming of Christ, that is the blessed hope of Christians.

But just how will this all happen? How will human history come to a close, and what does it mean to say that Jesus is coming again? When shall those events all take place? Christians use several terms to refer to the second coming of Christ such as, the "second advent" and the "rapture." Neither of these terms appear in the Bible (though the ideas represented by them are surely there), but there are three primary words used in the New Testament to describe the return of the Lord Jesus. They are *apocalypse*, *epiphany* and *parousia*. The Greek word *apokalypsis* refers to the revelation or disclosure of the Lord. Some forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into the heavens while his disciples watched (Ac. 1:9). Since that time, he has been hidden from the view of his followers while he has remained in the heavens (Ac. 3:21). However, at the end Christ shall appear once more for the final salvation of his people (He. 9:28), and in fact, he will once more become visible to everyone (Re. 1:7). This is what the

New Testament writers referred to when they spoke of the apocalypse of our Lord (1 Co. 1:7; 2 Th. 1:7b; 1 Pe. 1:7, 13; 4:13).

The second word, *epiphaneia*, is similar to the former in that it means the appearing or visible manifestation of the Lord, but especially, the glorious splendor of his return. It carries the nuance of what is remarkable, wonderful and marvelous, and hence it is sometimes translated in ways which reflect this nuance (2 Th. 2:8). Because the word epiphany applies equally well to the first and the second coming of Jesus, it is employed when speaking of both events. New Testament writers can refer to the earthly life of Jesus as his epiphany (2 Ti. 1:9-10), and they can equally refer to his future coming by the same term (1 Ti. 6:14; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:13).

The third word, *parousia*, is the most frequently used of the three, and it refers to the coming or presence of the Lord. The parousia emphasizes the fact that in the end, Jesus will once again be bodily present among his people (1 Co. 15:23; 1 Th. 2:19; 4:15-18; 2 Th. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:28). At his return, Christ will be accompanied by all his holy ones (1 Th. 3:13), and the glory and suddenness of that event is described by Jesus himself "as the lightning that flashes from the east to the west" (Mt. 24:27). It will be as abrupt as the flood of Noah (Mt. 24:37, 39). On occasion, more than one of the three words might be used in a single passage, such as when Paul speaks of the "*epiphany* of his [Christ's] *parousia*" (2 Th. 2:8). At his return, God's people will rise to welcome the Lord in the air as he descends (1 Th. 4:17), and their union with Christ will never be broken. Paul uses a technical term here, a term which normally is used for the ancient civic custom of publicly welcoming an important visitor to one's city. Similarly, God's people will rise to meet Christ in the air as a public welcome to his return to earth.

Of course the question might well be asked, "When shall this glorious event occur?" No one knows. Many people have tried to figure it out. In fact, just about every year some well-meaning Christian calculates by one means or another that this is the year, and some even set specific dates! This speculation is unfortunate, first because it often injures the faith of simplistic Christians who are terribly disappointed when the event does not happen, and second because Jesus himself said no one could know the time of his return, not even the angels (Mk. 13:32-35; Mt. 24:36-43). The disciples posed this same question just before Jesus ascended into heaven, but he plainly told them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Ac. 1:7).

Instead of speculation and calendar projections, Jesus left his followers with a single admonition—to watch (Mk. 13:34-37; Mt. 24:42). It is the fool who thinks that he has much time (Mt. 24:45-51). For all believers, regardless of when they live, the coming of the Lord is near (Ro. 16:20; 1 Co. 7:29-31; Phil. 4:5; 1 Th. 5:1-3; Ja. 5:8-9; 1 Pe. 4:7; Re. 22:7, 12, 20). Though doubters may pose the mocking question, "Where is this coming he promised?" (2 Pe. 3:3-4), the fact remains that God does not reckon time in the way we do (2 Pe. 3:8). He is not slow by divine standards, even if he may seem slow to us (2 Pe. 3:9). It is just as the writer of Hebrews says, "In just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay'" (He. 10:37). With the early Christians we heartily concur, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Re. 22:20b).



TROY CHRISTIAN CHAPEL

400 East Long Lake Road • Troy, Michigan 48085  
(248) 689-2046 • [www.troychapel.org](http://www.troychapel.org)