

Does the Bible Teach that Jesus' Second Coming is Now at Hand?

Why is this question important?

Many people who study the Bible believe that the Second Coming of Jesus is imminent. They believe that the signs of the Last Days can be clearly seen in our times. For this reason, on the following pages we would like to take a closer look at some Bible passages which we consider crucial in this context. We want to show why it is not in keeping with the Christian spirit to speculate about the time of Jesus' second coming. Jesus calls us to follow Him, to serve Him faithfully in humility and obedience. We know that he is coming—but for Christians it is not important when.

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✚ **1 Can We Know Approximately When Jesus Will Return?**

After the Lord's resurrection, when the disciples were once again looking forward full of hope to the beginning of the kingdom of God, they asked him:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (*Acts 1:6-8*)

With his answer, Jesus turns their attention on the one hand to the task they should fulfil. On the other hand, he clearly states that any preoccupation with the time of his return is not their business. Times and points in time (Greek "chronos" and "kairos") include both time periods and concrete points in time. So whoever speculates about the time or even the point in time of the Second Coming of Christ must ultimately consider himself to be greater than the apostles, otherwise he would adhere to Jesus' word, just as they did.

Jesus had told his disciples about his return earlier:

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the

Son, but the Father only. (*Matthew 24:36*)

Even the Son doesn't know! How arrogant must someone be who believes they can know or guess the time of the return? Some of these interpreters refer to Jesus' words and say that although no-one knows the day and hour, the approximate time is discernible. Jesus did not mean, however, that he or the angels did not know exactly (so to say: no one knows the hour and day, but the week or year we can know) but not at all. He also makes this clear by his words about the thief in the night:

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (*Matthew 24:42-44*)

Peter (2 Peter 3:10) and Paul also use the parable of the thief in the night to show that it is impossible to foresee the time of Jesus' coming:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security", then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. (*1 Thessalonians 5:1-5*)

This passage proves that "day and hour" means nothing more than "times and points in time". We do not know when the Lord will come, nor can we know it! The Sons of Light are not concerned about the particular time of His coming, but they can look forward every day to the Day of the Lord, because they live every day for His good pleasure.

⚓ 2 Why Does the Lord Nevertheless Speak of Discernible Signs?

Much of what Jesus said to his contemporaries is also of continuing relevance for all future generations. His announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem, however, was first and foremost aimed at his listeners, the apostles. These men and the Christians of Judea should recognize the signs that precede the disaster and act accordingly. An important approach to the Bible which also saves us from jumping to conclusions is to first consider what the direct addressees were supposed to understand. This applies above all to the so-called apocalyptic discourses in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21.

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (*Matthew 24:3*)

Did the disciples really want to know when their Lord was coming back? Wouldn't that presuppose that they had at that time [1] already understood and accepted that Jesus would be rejected, abused and executed, and would then rise, go to the Father and only then come back? Though the Greek word "parousia", which is rendered here with "coming", can also mean "return", but the Gospels clearly show that the disciples did not even comprehend when Jesus made direct announcements of his suffering (Luke 18:31-34).

Consequently, even here, when they asked Jesus for the signs of his coming, they did not think of a possible second coming. However, with his coming they connected the visible beginning of his power as Messiah, as the undisputed King of Israel. The question of the close of the age here is not linked to the end of the world, but rather with the concept that when the promised king takes over his reign, it marks the beginning of the new, messianic age.

In his answer, Jesus first of all responds to the signs before the coming destruction of Jerusalem, in which the Christians of Judaea should recognize when his day would come, so that they must leave the city in time. He describes this judgment as his coming, that is, his coming as a judge of the disobedient nation. Starting from this event, he then refers back to his return, in which he will also come as a judge, but for which there will be no sign whatsoever. In Appendix 1 of Matthew 24 we will discuss this in more detail.

At first glance, it may seem hard to understand why Jesus describes the destruction of the city as his coming or his day, but in the Old Testament the prophets sometimes proclaimed the judgment of the disobedient people in this way:

Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. (*Joel 1:15*)

Thus says the Lord God: Disaster after disaster! Behold, it comes. An end has come; the end has come; it has awakened against you. Behold, it comes. Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come; the day is near, a day of tumult, and not of joyful shouting on the mountains. (*Ezekiel 7:5-7*)

The end that Ezekiel proclaims is that of the city and the temple. His words were fulfilled within a few years of his prophecy: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Starting from his announcement of the destruction of the temple, Jesus also speaks to his disciples of the end, meaning the end of the city:

And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once. (*Luke 21:9*)

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written. (*Luke 21:20-22*)

In other places he calls the same event the Day of the Son of Man, for here too he urges his listeners to flee:

... so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. (*Luke 17:30-31*)

Because of their great rebellion against the commandments, the Israelites often lost God's protection. But when was Israel's resistance to God greater than at the time when he sent his only beloved Son to them? And who could therefore foresee the coming judgment better than the Son of Man himself?

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even

you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade round you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44)

Jesus also referred to this event on other occasions. This is what he says to his disciples:

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:23)

In the preceding verses 16-22, Jesus predicts severe persecutions, especially by their fellow countrymen. He comforts them with the fact that they will always find refuge until his coming, namely, when God will judge the people for the rejection of the Messiah. If he had meant here his return in the lifetime of his disciples, we would have to reject him and ultimately his entire message, for then he would have been mistaken [2]. But it is not a mistake, but by this saying Jesus emphasizes the meaning of the destruction of the temple, which some of the disciples were still to experience. This coming as judge over Israel is a precursor of the Last Judgement, which will ultimately overthrow all those who despise God and are religious hypocrites. The spiritual connection between these two “Judgement Days” becomes clear in the following statement, for example:

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (Matthew 16:27-28)

Without a doubt Jesus speaks in verse 27 of the judgment at his return. It is therefore obvious that verse 28 is also about Jesus’ judgment, which some of the disciples will even experience. Jerusalem was destroyed about 40 years after Jesus spoke these words. At that time some of the disciples were no longer alive, but some had not yet tasted death.

3 The Fulfilment of Time, the Last Days, the Last Hour—What Is It All About?

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus spoke of the fulfilment of time and urged his listeners to repent:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14-15)

The time was fulfilled, not because the end of the world was near, but because God’s grace stood before them in person. It was high time for the Jews to give up their misconceptions about the Messiah[3] and their special position before God [4]. Rather, they should learn to serve the Lord in faith, that is, in deep trust.

The New Testament shows us that the last days began with Jesus' first coming.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (*Hebrews 1:1-2*)

The Letter to the Hebrews [5] begins with these words. We can see that not only the people of the 20th or 21st century lived in the end times, but also the first Christians. Jesus' life in perfect obedience shows us the way to the Father, much more powerfully than the prophets did before. In addition, as a son he is the very image of God's nature. He is the strongest and thus the last revelation of God in history. The next event in the history of salvation will be his second coming. The expression "in these last days" does not say anything about the duration of this period.

Paul writes to Timothy about the last days:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. (*2 Timothy 3:1-5*)

Unfortunately, throughout all eras, most people were selfish, money-loving, boastful, as the story of the Flood teaches us. Paul does not want to say here that people in general were better earlier than in the last times. Nor does he talk about an era that would only begin much later. It would make no sense to inform Timothy about the corruption of the people of the 21st century. As verse 5 shows, they both already live in the last days, because Timothy should keep away from such people. In the time after Jesus there will be many people who feel close to God and "... who have the appearance of godliness, but deny its power". Paul thus predicts, on the basis of the development in his own time, the appearance of pseudo-Christianity, whose roots actually reach back to the first century. This is also explained in chapter 4:1-5. He warns that many believers or those interested in faith will turn away from the truth and turn to fables, and therefore urges Timothy to hold fast to the right doctrine. The fact that this situation does not only occur in later times, but that it was already a reality in the time of Paul is also evident from 1 Timothy 4:1-11, 6:20-21, Acts 20:29-30.

The distortion of Christian doctrine is the background of the Apostle John's statements about the coming of the antichrist:

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. (*1 John 2:18*)

John did not want to arouse in the readers of his letter an expectation of the imminent Second Coming of Jesus [6] —there is not even the slightest reference to this in the rest of the letter. But the appearance of the first false teachers in the New Testament churches reveals the truth of the words of Jesus:

And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to

sin." (*Luke 17:1-2*)

So temptations will come. The early churches were threatened mainly by the work of Judaizers^[7] and the influence of Gnosis^[8]. Self-conceived teachings already existed before Jesus, but the clarity of his words and his absolute claim to truth made the deceptions even more subtle. Satan, the father of lies, wants to distract people away from the truth with statements that appear to be scriptural. In his letter, the apostle shows us that apart from the differences in the content of the doctrine, above all, the lack of brotherly love is a sure testimony to the deceitfulness of the false teachers. This is also true today, so that for an honest person, despite many heresies, it is possible to judge whether a fellowship follows the commandments of Jesus faithfully or not.

⚓ 4 What Is Jesus Talking About When He Speaks of His Return?

Jesus constantly emphasizes the importance of sincerity and vigilance. All the words we find in the Gospels concerning his return never talk about recognizable signs, but about a life of integrity and truthfulness:

"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!" (*Luke 12:35-38*)

Only sincere love for the Lord saves us from having a hypocritical attitude. This is confirmed by Jesus with the following parables of the thief in the night^[9] and the faithful and unfaithful servant:

Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming', and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. (*Luke 12:43-46*)

Jesus teaches with downright urgency that it is always important to serve him obediently and with an undivided heart and not to be occupied with other things let alone follow one's own desires. The fact that no one knows when he is coming should also make us aware that there is no other way to God.

Furthermore, we must bear in mind that most people experience the day of the Second Coming when they die. The unfaithful servant does not represent the last generation of mankind. Striving for self-denial and obedience is always necessary, because resistance to the commandments of God will soon lead to hardening. We should not be "merciful" with ourselves and think that we can still repent later on. We don't have that under our control! That is why Jesus warns his Churches and speaks of his coming without meaning that his return on earth is imminent:

Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not

know at what hour I will come against you. (*Revelation 3:2*)

Jesus uses the image of the thief here to warn the self-confident believers of the church of Sardis so that they do not fall away. It is impossible to persist in disobedience despite warnings and yet to participate in the heavenly banquet with Jesus.

The absolute urgency of sincerity and obedience, even in severe persecutions, is the focus of John's Revelation. Unfortunately, this book has been the focus of speculation about the time of the Second Coming for many centuries. It is no coincidence that many earlier and current commentators read a precise course of history into the numerous pictures. Being able to predict the future or even the Second Coming can be a very appealing prospect. At the same time, the exponents of these predictions usually belong to religious organizations in which the call of Jesus to deny oneself and actually follow him, to love the brothers and sisters, and to live with them in the unity of the Spirit is practically bypassed by a series of false teachings.

But Christ did not give us Revelation as a source of speculation, but so that we might not be deceived by the world.

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (*Revelation 3:10-13*)

Jesus praises the church of Pergamum for its obedience and promises her protection in times of trial. The phrase "I am coming soon" is to be understood here and generally in Revelation rather as an encouragement for the faithful to hold fast to obedience under all circumstances, because redemption is near.

There are many other passages where Jesus and the apostles call us to keep to the pure teachings of Christ and to walk in them. We hope that, despite the brevity and imperfection of the thoughts outlined here, we have been able to help the reader gain more clarity about the meaning of the statements on the last days. We are grateful for every letter and look forward to getting in touch with interested readers to exchange more about this and other matters of faith.

⚓ **Appendix 1: Matthew 24**

In the following section, we will roughly retrace the train of thought of this chapter in order to deepen the arguments already listed in the main text. The signs mentioned by Jesus can only be signs for the destruction of Jerusalem. His coming as a judge of all people is certain, but when he comes cannot be predicted.

The disciples marveled at the magnificent buildings of the temple, which seemed to symbolize the greatness and invincibility of God. It must have moved them very much, therefore, that instead of being impressed, Jesus predicts the destruction of this building. They not only wanted to know when this would happen, but they imagined such an event only in connection with the completion of the age, with the beginning of the Messianic time.

In verses 4–28 and 32–34 Jesus answers the question of when it happens and what signs there are for it, and the deceivers in verse 5, who come in his name [10], are the false Christs also mentioned in verse 24. Indeed, during the war with the Romans, some rebel leaders claimed the title of Messiah for themselves.

In the following verses 6–13, Jesus makes clear the deterioration of the general circumstances and also foretells persecution and deception. It is vital to hold fast to the historical significance of these prophetic words of Jesus! Jesus later emphasizes clearly that there is no sign at all for his return. Unfortunately, there are many people who refer the signs mentioned in Matthew 24:3–28 [11] to the signs of wars and earthquakes just before Jesus' return. They see the Last Days as heralded by such events in their own time. As a result, they claim that Jesus will soon come. Unfortunately, at all times many people were deceived by such spectacular interpretations. The falseness of earlier predictions of this kind has become evident on the one hand through the progress of history. But on the other hand, one has to ask oneself the fundamental question: Was there ever a time in this world without wars and earthquakes? Certainly, a limited territory can remain untouched by natural disasters for many decades and experience longer periods of peace. For the people of such an area, a threat of war will be the first sign of a marked deterioration in the situation. But from a global perspective, however, there have never been longer periods of peace, which is why rumours of war would be completely unsuitable as a sign for the Last Judgement, if there were any at all. In addition, technological progress has made weapons much more powerful, so that the number of deaths in armed conflicts has increased tremendously since the 19th century. In addition, the world's population has increased many times over since the time of Jesus, which is why wars and natural disasters often cause many more casualties than in earlier times. And above all, we are exposed to a flood of bad news every day through the development of the mass media, so it may seem that the frequency of such events has increased rapidly. But Jesus did not want to encourage his disciples or us to gather statistics on the number of current wars and natural disasters, on the basis of which we could then derive an important spiritual insight. His words are addressed to his disciples who should draw the right conclusion from the signs in their own time.

Verse 14 is also understandable in the contemporary historical context of the generation of the first Christians. In the first century, many Jews did not live in Judea and Galilee, but scattered all over the world [12], i. e. in the Roman Empire and beyond. Nevertheless, most of them were probably strongly connected to the land of their fathers, not least because of the important feasts in Jerusalem which they often visited as pilgrims [13]. Although these diaspora Jews were influenced by Greek culture and therefore perhaps felt a little less committed to the Law than those in Palestine, they too were filled with Messianic expectations. It is very likely that many of them sympathized with their brothers fighting against the Romans at the time of the Jewish War (66 – 70 AD). The end that Jesus talks about, the terrible end of the temple, the city and all the fighters who were fighting for (the false understanding of) God's kingdom would have been an inevitable cause of complete despair for all those people, if they had not already experienced the message of the gospel of Jesus through the missionary activity of the apostles. And it was also good for all the other inhabitants of the world to be able to understand the deeper meaning of this defeat.

Verses 15–28 now deal directly with the coming tribulation. It is also not an exact description of events, but by reminding us of an earlier time of distress, Jesus emphasizes that the saints must by all means flee. At that time, during the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes, who, in addition to many other evils, desecrated the temple, the Jews who remained faithful to the Law had to flee to the mountains. The abomination of desolation must still have been a symbol for every Jew of a time of great tribulation. Judaea's Christians are to pray that the escape would not take place in winter or on a Sabbath. Moreover, no one should be deceived by the marvelous successes of the rebels in the fight against the Romans. All hopes of a rebel victory are unrealistic. The eagles (the symbol of the Roman legions) come and will consume the carrion, the doomed fighters trapped in the city. This is the unmistakable condemnation and

judgment of God on his people who rejected his Son and his message of peace^[14] .

In verses 29–31, Jesus draws the connection from the tribulation of the Jewish war to his visible return^[15] . The ancient nation of God loses its position (v.29), while the church of the Lord is the sign of the Saviour, through which Israelites will still mourn, that is to say, find repentance (v.30). Finally, all Christians are gathered together with the Lord (v.31).

In verses 34–36 Jesus emphasizes that his prophecy will be fulfilled with certainty, for his words are God's words. In verse 34, he states a clear time frame for the arrival of the Judgement on the Jews: This will happen in the generation of his listeners. In contrast, it is impossible to know when "that" day will come, namely the final judgment already mentioned in verse 31, so that Jesus — as a human being — includes even himself among those who have no knowledge of it.

All the statements following verse 36 have this common denominator: there is no sign at all for this day! Christians will not concern themselves with the "signs" because they know from the words of Jesus that such signs do not exist. The example of Noah shows that the life of the people carried on in the usual way, so the judgment hit them while they were completely unprepared^[16] . Peter (2 Peter 3:10) and Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:2) also apply the picture of the thief in the night to encourage the faithful to walk carefully and eagerly in the commandments of the Lord and to remove all grounds for speculation. Only perseverance, selfless love and humble service in accordance with the words of Jesus will make this day a joyful day for us, no matter when he comes. Those who do not persevere in following Jesus and being anxious to please the Lord and to do good cannot take part in the feast in eternity, regardless of whether they expected him not to come very soon (see the parable of the unfaithful servant Matthew 24:45–51), or whether they expected him much earlier (like the ten virgins, Matthew 25:1–13), or whether in their laziness, they even wanted to secure a place for themselves methodically (like in the parable of the talents, Matthew 25:14–30).

⚓ **Appendix 2: Is There a Rapture of the Faithful Before the Last Judgement?**

Jesus and the New Testament speak only about a single return of Jesus on the last day. On this day the ungodly are judged and the faithful are raised up, as Jesus explains to his disciples, for example, in the parable of the weeds of the field:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (*Matthew 13:36–43*)

He also speaks of the resurrection of the faithful in the following passage:

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone

who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (*John 6:39-40*)

According to many free churches, however, before the beginning of an allegedly imminent Millennial Kingdom of Peace on earth, even before the Last Day, Christians living at that time and all those who have already died are raptured up to heaven. However, only Revelation 20 speaks of a millennial reign of Christ. Since the message of this book, in contrast to all other New Testament writings, is almost entirely encoded with images and symbols, and numbers are usually not to be understood literally, it is dangerous to derive concrete lessons about future events from it. Therefore, the representatives of this teaching endeavour to find references in other writings. Some see it in Matthew 24:40-41:

Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.

In the context of this verse, Jesus urges the believers to remain faithful and vigilant because of the unforeseeable time of judgment. This is also shown in the comparison with the Flood (vs. 38-39). It cannot therefore be a description of a rapture that supposedly takes place before the judgment. Some advocates of this teaching also admit that.

They also often refer John 14:2-3 to the Rapture:

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Jesus speaks here of his return to take the disciples back to be with him, but there is no reason to believe that this will not happen on Judgment Day, but beforehand. Rather, one can see from the entirety of Jesus' words concerning the Second Coming that everyone will then be rewarded according to his actions (e. g. Matthew 7:21-22, 16:27, 24:45-25:46, 26:64, John 5:28-29). The parable of the wheat and the weeds mentioned above and that of the dragnet (Matthew 13:24-43 and 13:47-50) also show that there is a day of judgment and retribution: the faithful followers of the Lord and all the righteous go to eternal life, while the evildoers, all the arrogant and unmerciful will never be able to participate in it. We must therefore note that there is no evidence whatsoever in the Gospels of a sudden departure of Christians from their daily lives.

Therefore, one of the main arguments is taken from first Thessalonians:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (*1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*)

Representatives of the rapture doctrine argue that according to these words Christians are caught up in the clouds with the Lord, which means that Christ does not come here to the earth. The believers meet the Lord

in the upper layers of the atmosphere. That is why, they say, we can only talk about the Rapture and not about the judgment on the last day. Although they believe that this is the best way to do justice to the wording of the text, we think it is very questionable to draw such a conclusion from this detail. As we shall see, both the text itself and the following chapter of the letter speak against this interpretation.

We can only guess what the exact reason for the sadness of some of the still very young Christians in this city was. It is important that Paul, in his declaration that both the living Christians and those who have already fallen asleep go to the Lord at the same time, cites a word of the Lord. As we saw before, the doctrine of the rapture cannot be derived from any word of Jesus, which is why its proponents refer to 1 Corinthians 15:51, where Paul obviously speaks of the same event, but calls it a mystery:

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

The fact that Paul speaks of a “mystery” assumes that Jesus did not talk about the Rapture during his ministry, but revealed it through the Apostle’s word. However, Paul does not speak here at all of a rapture in the course of history, but of the transformation of the dead and the living — namely at the last trumpet, that is to say, the Last Day. The fact that he only addresses the resurrection and transformation of believers is not an argument against it. Beginning with the example of Jesus, Paul teaches fundamental things about the ultimate destiny of life—the resurrection—because some of the Corinthians held an opinion that ran counter to the Christian doctrine. It is a sad reality that many people now come under eternal judgment because of their decisions against God. But Paul did not want to refer to the eternal existence of these people in spiritual death as immortality in a positive sense.

Paul thus does not reveal the mystery of the rapture here or in the Letter to the Thessalonians. The mystery, a reality that had not been so clearly expressed before, is rather that some Christians are transformed without experiencing death. If Paul was referring to a word of Jesus that had been given only to him, he would have quoted it. However, the content of what is said can be deduced from the familiar words of Jesus, even if we do not know a precise quotation. Paul wants to put an end to the ignorance of some Christians in Thessalonica with a clear reference to Jesus’ teaching. We find such a word about the resurrection in the Gospel of John:

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement. (John 5:26-29)

In that hour all the dead will be resurrected and will stand before the judgment seat of the Messiah, and since Jesus is the judge of all men, this also includes those living on earth at that time. As mentioned above, the subsequent thoughts of Paul in the Letter to the Thessalonians do not permit any other conclusion:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “There is peace and security”, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant

woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. (*1 Thessalonians 5:1-4*)

Here Paul writes plainly about the Last Day and there is no reason to believe that he might have meant another event in chapter 4. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that Christians are not surprised by this day because they are sons of the Light and of the Day. If Paul had believed in the rapture of Christians before the judgment, these words would have no meaning.

Now that we have established that there is no passage in the New Testament except in Revelation which talks of a rapture of Christians, a first resurrection before the judgment, the question of remains, what it was that John is talking about:

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. (*Revelation 20:4-6*)

As mentioned above, the interpretation of Revelation is difficult due to the abundant use of symbolic expressions. Nevertheless, it is still advisable to understand first of all what message this scripture contains for its initial recipients, that is, Christians in the second half of the first century. Thus we learn that the Apostle John received the contents during his captivity on the island of Patmos. The epistles to seven small Asian churches in chapters 2 and 3 give us insight into their spiritual situation. These messages alone, which are clearly anchored in the historical context of this time, have been the object of speculation for many centuries. It is claimed to be about the seven eras of church history, whereby people usually think that they themselves live in the second-last or last of these eras. The text does not support these thoughts. The question is also justified as to whether the "church history" we have access to is indeed the history of the Church [17].

Moreover, what goal could God have pursued with such a preview of history? What sense would it make if the reader found himself in any of these eras? Should he realize that it will be a long time before Jesus returns? No, that's not what God is concerned with. The warnings and encouragement contained therein to love, to assess the false teachers, to persevere in persecution, apply to the direct addressees. Like all the other letters of the NT, the epistles to the churches are of great value to all Christians, because they encourage self-examination, perseverance, faithfulness and the right doctrine.

If even these chapters are misinterpreted in this way, the danger is even greater for the rest of the book. We think that the content of the book is primarily intended to encourage and comfort the Christians persecuted in the first century, and that this is why it reflects also upon what has already happened. However, some commentators exclude references to situations before and during the period of writing. Of course, we too think that all believers who live later will be encouraged by it to endure persecution. However, this should never create room for spurious speculation.

This also holds true for Revelation 20: Those Christians who remained steadfast in persecution and many of whom were killed, will reign with Christ. Whoever takes the thousand years literally does not appreciate the symbolic use of numbers, especially in Revelation. There is no period of time in all biblical writings that

exceeds a thousand years. Only about God it is said that a thousand years are like a day. This should not lead us to think that two thousand years would be like two days. Rather, this number symbolizes an inconceivable greatness, befitting God, who also created time. It not only expresses his superiority over time, but also his great power. Thus, the great power of God and those who belong to him are faced with the powerless rebellion of Satan for a short time. There is also another reason why it is advisable not to view this chapter as a succession of events, but rather to see them as the power relations expressed in chronological form. For if God had already completely eliminated Satan, the question would arise as to why he should then let go of Satan again in order to allow the evil one to seduce people again. In this way, God would be more than just the one who allows the evil activity to take place, he would also be the one who gives the evil one space to act.

The idea of those who follow the doctrine of the Rapture, that suddenly many people disappear without a trace, may provide material for entertaining films; but such thoughts have nothing to do with the doctrine of the Bible. Nor would it be in keeping with the nature of God to exert pressure through such massive supernatural and unnatural events. He wants us to trust him because of the truth in Jesus, to repent of our old sinful life and to become followers of his Son out of love for him.

Appendix 3: Arbitrary Calculations of the So-called Last Days from the Book of Daniel

Although the book Daniel contains prophetic texts, it differs strongly from the prophetic books of the Bible in its overall form. This is not the place to start explaining why this is the case, but in our opinion the literary character of the depicted stories cannot be overlooked. Moreover, Daniel is not found among the prophets in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, but among the Writings^[18], which may be due to its late completion.

For us as Christians, it contains very important prophetic statements. Jesus makes reference to Daniel 12:2 in a speech about his ministry in connection with the resurrection, the clearest passage about this reality. His self-designation "Son of Man" is taken from the Messianic prophecy in chapter 7. And even the death of the Messiah and the renewed destruction of the Jerusalem Temple are predicted in 9:24–26.

No other Old Testament book deals so intensively with dreams and visions and their interpretations. This makes it especially interesting for people who want to predict the future. Religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Adventists owe their existence largely to speculative interpretations of some of the texts in this book. That is why we want to look at such texts in order to show the arbitrariness and irrationality of these interpretations.

⚓ Seven Times = 2520 Years?

In chapter 4, King Nebuchadnezzar experiences a dream that worries him. He sees a tree reaching to the sky, which is cut down and its stump put in chains for seven times. Only Daniel is capable of interpreting the dream. It is a warning from God to the king to break with his sins and to live in righteousness and mercy. However, since he does not change but remains proud, the evil predicted by Daniel happens one year later. Nebuchadnezzar is removed from throne and society and ekes out a miserable existence like a wild animal. But at the end of seven years his sanity returns to him, he looks to heaven, praises God and confesses:

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives for ever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from

generation to generation. (*Daniel 4:34*)

In doing so, he expresses the most important lesson, the decisive conclusion of this story.

If one remained true to the principle of “not going beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6), the danger of reinterpretation and over-interpretation would be averted. But since the book of Daniel talks about the time of the end in other places, it was seen as justified to gain a hidden, deeper “interpretation” of this story.

“Seven times” in chapter 4 means seven years. This short period of time is not suited at all for predictions that supposedly reach into our modern epoch. Several passages in the OT express that one day symbolically stands for one year.

The prophet Ezekiel is told to lie 390 days on his one side and 40 days on his other side, in order to bear the guilt of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) (Ezekiel 4:4-7).

In Chapter 9 of the book of Daniel an angel reinterprets the 70-year prophecy of Jeremiah. He is talking about 70 “sevens”. If this meant 70 weeks, it would only result in a period of less than 2 years. However, it can be concluded from the text that the time frame has to be extended. Therefore, one must understand the “sevens” here as year-weeks, resulting in a period of 70×7 years = 490 years.

Encouraged by such examples, the “Bible Students” supposed that they could also apply the rule “one day for one year” to Daniel 4. 7×360 days result in 2520 days, which should now be the equivalent of 2520 years. In order to be able to use it for a statement of the Last Days, however, it was also necessary to reinterpret the content of the chapter. It was decided to understand the disempowerment of Nebuchadnezzar as the end of Jerusalem and the kingship of David. This is a very strange interpretation, especially considering that it was Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the city. From one word of Jesus it was concluded that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians represented the beginning of the times of the Gentiles [19].

Historians unanimously agree that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587/586 BC. The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to this day, that this happened in 607 BC. This date, however, does not stem from historical research, but from a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible coupled with wilful interpretations.

607 B. C. + 2520 results in 1914. According to the prediction C. T. Russell made in the 19th century, this would be the year of the beginning of Christ’s Kingdom of Peace on earth. He had formerly predicted the invisible return of Jesus for the year 1874. Russell’s successor, J. F. Rutherford, declared 1914 as the year of the invisible return. In his book of 1920 “Millions now living will never die,” he predicted the resurrection of the biblical patriarchs in 1925. Due to the misinterpretation of Matthew 24:35, it was claimed that the generation of 1914 would not pass away until the end of the system of things. For a long time it was predicted with great certainty that 1975 would be the year of the end.

Without going into more detail, we hope that with these few thoughts we have shown the utter untenability of the whole approach.

⚔ **2300 Evenings and Mornings = 2300 Years?**

The Seventh-day Adventist Community also takes an important date from the book of Daniel. Daniel chapter 8 says that Daniel sees a vision of a ram and a goat. The empire of the Medes and Persians (ram) is conquered by a great king from Greece (goat = Alexander the Great). But its realm is falling apart. In one of the partial kingdoms a wicked man will take over the reign, who will then forbid the Jews even to practise their religion. He takes the regular sacrifice away from them and desecrates the temple in the worst possible way. Still within the framework of the vision, a saint asks how long this situation will last and he

gets an answer:

Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one who spoke, “For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?” And he said to me, “For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.” (*Daniel 8:13-14*)

In these words, there is nothing to indicate that the historical framework of the vision is being abandoned. The only question is whether it is 2,300 days or just 1,150 days. The regular sacrifice that the enquirer is concerned with was offered every evening and every morning. Therefore, it is obvious that the duration of the desecration of the temple is 1,150 days, which quite accurately corresponds to the actual event under the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes [20].

In the subsequent interpretation of the vision, the time of the end is spoken of twice (vs. 17+19). However, this end does not have to be the end of the world, but can refer to the time of fulfilment of the events that have just been observed. However, 19th-century American Baptist preacher William Miller wanted to interpret the vision as referring to the alleged imminent end of the world. First, he overlooked the fact that it was only 1,150 days. Then he interpreted the now 2,300 days as just as many years. In his opinion, the command of the Persian king Artaxerxes I to rebuild Jerusalem was a suitable starting point for the 2,300 years. Allegedly Ezra had written this down in the 7th year of the king, which according to our calendar is then the year 457 BC. On this basis he proclaimed 1843 as the year of Christ’s return. When this failed to materialize, he postponed the date several times by a few months, and finally even set the exact date—October 22nd, 1844.

The movement he initiated soon disintegrated, but some held on to the calculated date, giving it a new content. It is supposed that Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary in 1844 and began the service in the heavenly sanctuary. This doctrine is mainly upheld by the Seventh-day Adventists and continues to form the basis for their expectation of the imminent return, without daring anymore to set a date for it.

It would be too much to describe and evaluate all of Miller’s arguments and those of the Adventists for 1844. By randomly combining different texts and reinterpreting them you can easily read many things into the Holy Scriptures. Those who employ such futile methods and thus seduce other, gullible people will have to answer for it on the last day.

On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (*Matt 7:22-23*)

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Footnotes

1. probably in the last year of his ministry
2. This view is widespread among liberal theologians. However, it contradicts another well-established assumption in modern theology, namely that a great part of Jesus' words in the Gospels are in fact the words of men from the churches of the late first century. They claim that the Christians at that time believed that Jesus would come back in their lifetime. Since this did not happen, Jesus' words were reinterpreted or changed to explain the delay. Why none of these bold and creative men has removed such a drastic error as in Matthew 10:23, however, remains a mystery.
3. The Hebrew word Messiah translated into Greek as "Cristos", into Latin as "Christus", and into English as "the Anointed" was, according to Jewish ideas, someone who was anointed as king. At that time there were high expectations of a strong political leader, a new David.
4. see Luke 3:7-9
5. written around the year AD 65
6. If you imagine time as a series of evenly distributed years on a timeline, you might think that John thought that the end of all time was imminent. In Jewish thought, however, the content of time is more important than its mere duration. It is of no significance how long it will be before Jesus returns. In such contexts, we must not take temporal concepts literally as if the last hour were the final period of the last days, just as little as the last days represent the final stage of the last time.
7. Jews who regarded Jesus as the Messiah, but deemed the observance of the Mosaic Law necessary for salvation, even for Gentile Christians
8. A collective term for doctrines of Greek origin in which material existence was regarded as the reason for evil. Gnostics were interested in Christianity and used Christian vocabulary, but filled it with their own content, contrary to the apostolic doctrine.
9. Luke 12:39-40; see also section 2
10. This does not mean that in the distant future people will appear pretending to be Jesus. Such people would be completely unbelievable because Jesus' second coming will bring the history of mankind to an end.
11. We are aware that some statements in the text seem to fit the return of Jesus at first glance much better.
12. see Luke 2:1-3. The authors of antiquity, when writing about the „world“, did not imagine the whole globe as it is known to us today, but the inhabited world known at that time or even only the Roman Empire.
13. This is confirmed by Luke's report in Acts 2:5-11
14. see also the Parable of the Tenants, Matthew 21:33-46
15. Jesus' speech, which underpins the immense significance of the destruction of the temple with symbolic language, must not be interpreted as referring to a cosmic and terrestrial catastrophe by taking these symbols literally. We also find similar language in the Prophets when major political or spiritual changes are predicted. Compare the end of Babylon in Isaiah 13:9-22, the end of Egypt in Ezekiel 32:1-15 or the outpouring of the Spirit in Joel 3:1-5/Acts 2:14-21
16. We are aware that the same picture fulfils a slightly different function in Luke 17:26-27, where it is in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem. On the one hand, we know from the Gospels that Jesus sometimes used identical or similar images or parables for different purposes. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that the authors of the Gospels report Jesus' statements in different contexts.
17. see our article "[The Church in the New Testament](#)".
18. The Hebrew Bible (known to Christians as the Old Testament) is divided into three groups: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Book of Daniel is counted among the Writings (such as the Psalms, Chronicles, and Ruth) and not among the Prophets (such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets).
19. see Luke 21:24—in fact, here Jesus speaks about the destruction of the city by the Romans, which took place in the year AD 70
20. He desecrated the temple by having a statue of Zeus erected on the altar of burnt offerings in December 167

BC. A little more than three years later, in December 164 BC, a new altar was consecrated for Yahweh.

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