

Christ is Coming Back!

DAVE BAST

Christ's second coming in glory; the Bible teaches it; most Christians believe in it; but does that thought comfort you or puzzle you or perhaps terrify you? In this new series of *Groundwork* programs, we will examine the four last things: Christ's return, the resurrection, judgment, and the new creation. Stay tuned. From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today as guest host is Meg Jenista. Meg is a graduate of Cedarville University in Ohio, of Calvin Theological Seminary, and she currently serves as a pastor at the Third Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Meg, it is wonderful to have you on *Groundwork*.

MEG JENISTA

I am honored to be here, and looking forward to it very much.

DAVE BAST

Me too. I am eager to dig into scripture. That is our tagline, you know. That is what we do here; and today we are starting a series of four programs on – appropriately – the four last things. We wanted to focus on what is our future as Christians? What does the Bible teach us? So, these are the big four, right?

MEG JENISTA

Right; Christ's second coming, judgment, the kingdom, resurrection.

DAVE BAST

Yes, so today we are going to talk about the second coming, and that is probably the most in the news these days – this year, in particular.

MEG JENISTA

Yes; we have gotten perhaps more press time than we would like.

DAVE BAST

Right; in a negative way. But, you and I grew up, actually, both in Christian homes and families and in the church, but a little bit different tradition. In your tradition, the rapture was big.

MEG JENISTA

Oh, it was huge. I have childhood memories of coming home to an empty home and wracking my brain to think, "Oh, my goodness; I think it was the rapture."

DAVE BAST

Did it happen?

MEG JENISTA

It happened! I missed it! There was a loophole or something and I missed out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, somehow – I believed but I got left behind.

MEG JENISTA

I was terrified of being left behind; and when I talked to my friends who grew up similarly, they have their own stories. We remember the videos that we watched in youth group; there was one where a man was shaving with his electric razor and it turns out that he had been raptured, but his electric razor was still going in the sink. This is the stuff of nightmares; and yet, in church when we talked about Christ's second coming, it was meant to be glorious and redemptive and celebratory. That was our victory.

DAVE BAST

We did not have so much of an emphasis on the rapture in our tradition; but certainly, the reality of Christ's second coming; and again, you are supposed to look forward to that. But, I can remember as a child, as a young person – okay, I hope it happens, but maybe not – maybe not right away because I would kind of like to finish high school and maybe go to college.

MEG JENISTA

Yes, the prom is coming up... I would like to get into college.

DAVE BAST

And that is understandable.

MEG JENISTA

Sure.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, that is true for all of us all of our lives as Christians. We know we are supposed to look forward to heaven and to the Lord's return, but life can be pretty good most of the time for most of us here, right?

MEG JENISTA

Right; and I think that speaks to a real disconnect when we think about Christ's second coming; and that is that when Christ comes again, this world is going to disappear. It is going to dissolve and be no more and everything that we love about this world – our pets, our friends, our families, our neighborhoods – that is all going to dissolve as well, and then we are going to be left with this...

DAVE BAST

Very vague, yes...

MEG JENISTA

Mysterious... transcendental moment.

DAVE BAST

An eternal church service.

MEG JENISTA

Right. Please, Jesus... no.

DAVE BAST

I like good church, but... that's a little much.

MEG JENISTA

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, yes, this is what we are going to explore, I think, in these programs. That is why I am really looking forward to digging into this; but recently, the whole idea of the return of Christ and the rapture has become more problematic for us as Christians.

MEG JENISTA

We have gotten some bad press, I am afraid. Harold Camping has not necessarily been a favorite among a lot of Christians.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, he made a specific prediction that Christ was going to return and the rapture would happen on May 21, 2011. You know, it made the news all over the world – the secular news. If we make the secular news, it is usually bad for us as evangelical Christians.

MEG JENISTA

Why is that?

DAVE BAST

Well, they do not want to pay attention to us most of the time. It is only when something whacky happens.

MEG JENISTA

Right; well, it is a good news story because people have invested their lives in this prophecy. Their homes are being foreclosed on; they have spent all of the money in their bank accounts; I have heard stories of men or women leaving their families...

DAVE BAST

To get the word out.

MEG JENISTA

To follow this prophecy; right.

DAVE BAST

Tell the whole world Christ is coming. And then, of course, it did not happen and everybody laughs. People were having rapture parties; scoffing at this.

MEG JENISTA

Although I remember the Sunday following that prediction; and the sense that we needed to pray for the people who had invested their lives in this prophecy. They believed in God in as much as God was coming back on May 21st, and so what does that do to their faith in God and Jesus Christ?

DAVE BAST

And what does it do to our belief in the return of Christ? Let's look at what scripture says and try to make some clarity and common ground for all Christians who at least accept the Bible after we take a short break.
Segment 2

MEG JENISTA

You are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

At this point, we want to dive into scripture. That is where we want to end up; and the question is: Where does the teaching about the rapture happen within the Bible? The classic text on that is 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4; so, we want to land there, but before we can get there, we need to back the train up a minute and talk about the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation.

DAVE BAST

Which is where most people instinctively go.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and with good cause.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; when they want to figure out the details of Christ's return.

MEG JENISTA

Right; but before we can have that conversation well, we need to back the train up and ask: How are we intended to read these texts?

DAVE BAST

That is so important, it cannot be stressed enough, because one of the reasons why sincere Christians disagree about this teaching and these details – and let me make it clear – we are not trying to impose a particular view. I just am grateful for everyone who is looking forward to what the Apostle calls our blessed hope...

MEG JENISTA

Love it...

DAVE BAST

which is Christ's return. Yes, there is disagreement over these details, and it has to do with how you interpret, especially Revelation, and to some degree, Daniel as well. Do you take it literally? That is a knock sometimes on symbolically interpreting some of these details: Well, you are not taking it literally. We have to take the Bible literally. No, we cannot take the Bible literally all the time.

MEG JENISTA

There is a children's book, or a series of books called *Amelia Bedelia*, and it is about this woman who takes everything she hears literally; and the problem is that we speak in metaphor a lot of the time, and so, when someone tells her to go fly a kite, which basically means to get lost, she went and flew a kite.

DAVE BAST

And flies a kite, yes, right.

MEG JENISTA

And that may be taking the point literally, but it certainly is not taking it seriously.

DAVE BAST

It is missing the point, yes. There is the distinction. We take it seriously; we believe it; but we do not necessarily interpret these details that are meant to be symbols and images – we do not interpret them necessarily literally.

MEG JENISTA

And I think what helped me understand that was to begin to read poetry and to realize that you do not take poetry seriously by deconstructing it and putting it into an algebra equation to try to figure out what the author was intending. Instead, you read it as a whole and you pay attention to the emotions that it evokes and

the imagination and the wondering, because that is where the truth in poetry lies. I think it is significant that the authors of Daniel and Revelation use a poetic form because they are talking about what is going to happen at the end of the world, which is something we do not have a context in our language or in our understanding to wrap our hands around.

DAVE BAST

Eye has not seen nor has ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of humans to conceive what the Lord has prepared for – that is Paul again.

MEG JENISTA

Right.

DAVE BAST

This is mind-blowing – everything about it – everything about the end is mind-blowing, and what God wants to do is give us a picture – I like to think about left brain/right brain, you know, that distinction – one of those is your imagination. I can never remember which one.

MEG JENISTA

I think it is left brain.

DAVE BAST

But with one side of our brain we think imaginatively; with the other side we think logically and rationally. The New Testament addresses both of those. In Paul's letters, it is addressing our rational side. In John's Revelation, it is addressing that imaginative side with picture language; so we look at the pictures and we sense what he is saying without getting bogged down in trying to figure out what does this mean? What does that mean?

MEG JENISTA

And you know, evangelical...

DAVE BAST

Is this the Russian Army? Is this the, you know, all that stuff.

MEG JENISTA

Evangelical Christians are better at this than we give ourselves credit for because we love *The Chronicles of Narnia*; we love the works of J. R. R. Tolkien; and we know how to apply our imagination and our wondering in those contexts; and so, it is appropriate, I think, to apply that same method of reading to this text of scripture. That is how the original recipients of these texts would have heard them. The Jews in exile in Babylon for the book of Daniel, and the Church under heavy persecution in the book of Revelation. They knew the facts; they knew the details of their lives, and it did not look good. It did not look like God was on their side and that God was going to win the day; and so, what they needed was this veil to be pulled aside for a minute so that they could begin to imagine and wonder about the fact that God is still integrally involved; that God is still fighting on their behalf.

DAVE BAST

One great scholar of the book of Revelation, a British theologian named Richard Bauckham says that the pictures and images of Revelation were intended to counteract the power of Roman propaganda because these first Christians were living in the Roman Empire and it was dominated by this incredible power. Everywhere they looked, they saw Roman temples and Roman statues, and Roman emperors, and it was just overwhelming; and they were being persecuted by this terrible power of Rome; and so God gave them an even greater set of images and symbols to counteract that.

You think about our own day and age – we are overwhelmed by the images we see on television, on the Internet – and so much of it is anti-Godly; and here we have this picture book that God gives us to counteract

that in our imagination – the lion of the tribe of Judah who turns out to be a lamb that has been sacrificed for us. That is an incredibly powerful image.

MEG JENISTA

There is something significant in the fact that that is how the original recipients of the letter would have received it; and if we are going to take the Bible seriously, then we need to read it with a comprehension of its first and original audience. They were not looking for the locusts to represent helicopters or for this to be that, and to come up with this long chart. They were looking to be comforted in the midst of their affliction, and the poetry was what was going to provide them that strength.

DAVE BAST

Here is a basic, for me, bedrock principle for reading these books. If they do not say something to their original audience, then we are on the wrong track. If the message we take out of it is only something for the 21st Century and not for the First Century, or for Daniel's century before Christ, then we are going down the wrong track. It has to speak, first of all, to them.

MEG JENISTA

I love that. I think that is absolutely right; and I think we may miss that when we overlay scripture with our charts and our timelines and trying to make it all fit in the 21st Century. We miss the intention of scripture.

DAVE BAST

Because do not forget: Revelation is also a letter. It is a prophecy, yes; it is talking about the future. It is talking about the end of the world symbolically, but it is also a letter sent to First Century churches, so just like Thessalonians, which we are going to look at in a moment, or Corinthians, or Romans, it has to speak first of all to those to whom it was sent; and only by listening to that message will we get out of it what God is telling us.

MEG JENISTA

I think another principle that we want to draw in here is the very evangelical understanding of the clarity of scripture; the theological word is *perspicuity* of scripture.

DAVE BAST

I am impressed.

MEG JENISTA

Thank you; thank you. The idea that anyone who can pick up the Bible and read it in their language will come to an understanding of the heart and the centrality of the Gospel message.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it does not mean that every detail is clear or that every passage is clear; but it does mean that I get it. I get the point; and that is true of apocalyptic as well.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and so, we miss that when we think that I am going to need to reference these charts in order to understand the intention of this passage. We actually take the Bible out of the hands of lay people, which is not what we are about as evangelical Christians.

DAVE BAST

And maybe the clearest passage about Christ's return and what is going to happen is not found in either Daniel or Revelation, but it is found in 1 Thessalonians 4, as we have mentioned; and after this break, we will dig right into that passage.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Before the break we were ready to dive into 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4; so let's begin in verse 13:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

DAVE BAST

And what an encouragement they are. It is actually the only reference in the entire Bible specifically to the rapture. The term does not occur, but it is a Latin translation of the phrase where Paul says: We will be caught up together with the Lord. But, before we look at that more specifically and what that means, this is really a passage with a practical application.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely; and actually, the first three verses that I read deal with that practical application.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is not speculation about what is going to happen when he comes back and when is it going to be and will it be...

MEG JENISTA

Not at all. Paul is responding to the church in Thessalonica. It is an early church, first generation, and all of a sudden, their saints, their leaders, are dying, and Christ has not come back again; and they are thinking to themselves, "I do not want grandpa or elder so-and-so to get left behind, or I do not even want to go..."

DAVE BAST

Or to miss out.

MEG JENISTA

I do not even want to go up to heaven before them because they are so influential and significant to me, I want them to receive the honor of being received by God.

DAVE BAST

Yet, just by way of background, this is probably the very first book of the New Testament to be written; so this is literally the earliest Christian document, and it was still in a time of such excitement and fervor, that many of them were convinced they were all going to live until Jesus came back; so what happens when somebody dies? Does that mean they were not a true believer? Does that mean Jesus is not coming back? Those are the two extremes, and Paul wants to correct them on this.

MEG JENISTA

And to say your loved ones are loved and valued by God, and that when Christ comes again they will receive honor and glory and they will be with Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the short version of this passage is: Do not worry; if you die before he comes, it does not mean you miss out; and those who die whom you love, it does not mean they are gone, they are lost. Here is what is going to happen; and what is going to happen is, resurrection. Christ is coming. Let's be clear on that. What is the bedrock evangelical conviction that we all agree on? Christ is coming again.

MEG JENISTA

It leaves us, though, with that second portion, which is where we get our rapture theology.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, what is up with that?

MEG JENISTA

Actually, interesting; and as we were talking earlier about apocalyptic literature and the idea of evoking metaphor and understanding; that is what Paul is trying to do in this moment. He is referencing a tradition from the culture – particularly in the Old Testament – so that when David and his conquering army was returning to the city, everyone in the city would say to each other, “David is coming; David is coming. They are coming back. They have won. They are in triumph,” and the whole city would rush out of the gates and rush down the road and come alongside them in order to be the tickertape parade.

DAVE BAST

It is not like they could sit there and watch it on TV. I think of that story where David is bringing the Ark into Jerusalem, and he is dancing – before the Lord, it says – it is that kind of image. The king is coming. In this case, the king is Jesus; so, what is going to happen? Well, remember folks, your loved ones who have died, they are not going to miss out. The first thing that is going to happen is everyone is going to rise again, and then we are all going to go to meet him; and in fact, we are not going to sit back and watch it on TV; we are going to be caught up; we are going to be raptured – we believe in the rapture...

MEG JENISTA

Sure.

DAVE BAST

To meet him in the air, and then come with him back to earth. That is the imagery. It is not fly away and stay up there somewhere. It is coming back.

Meg Jenista:

This is great news to my 5-year-old self, who was petrified of this event because it means two things: It means a parade, and 5-year-olds are generally not petrified of parades; that sounds awesome. We will get to be part of a party and a celebration. They will be throwing candy or something, metaphorically, anyway; and the second piece is that we will be returning to earth. We will be returning to this creation – we are going to get into this more later – but the idea is all of that we love and value, all that reflects God's good creation and God's influence in this world, will be here and it will be restored and redeemed and I will not feel homesick for this earth.

DAVE BAST

No, and we will have our bodies given back to us, only made better, far more than we can do with our feeble attempts to exercise and diet and go through surgery, and all that. It is all there; and what a joy to be able to share this with a world that is dying; a world that has no hope; a world in desperation.

Let's, before we close, talk about the time of this. The when; is it going to happen soon? Are the signs out there? Again, this is a whole program's worth and more.

MEG JENISTA

Sure.

DAVE BAST

What would it make – let me ask – would it make any difference to you if you knew it was going to happen tomorrow?

MEG JENISTA

If it would make a difference in the way I was living my life, then there is something wrong with the way I have been living my life. If Christ is coming back tomorrow, then hopefully I would be busy about the work of redemption and Gospel proclamation and mercy and justice that I would hope characterizes my life already. If your life is going to change drastically because you think Jesus is coming back tomorrow, why are you waiting until the day before Jesus comes back to make that change?

DAVE BAST

Yes, I love that. That is so true. If this would transform your life, you need to transform it now; even if it is a thousand years until he comes.

MEG JENISTA

The signs have always been there; so, it is very likely that he could, and it is very likely that he could tarry because he is patient; not wanting any to perish.

DAVE BAST

So, let's end the way the early Church did, with *maranatha*.

MEG JENISTA

Come, Lord Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Amen.

MEG JENISTA

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. Suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/christ-is-coming-back>

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