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Will Christ's Second Coming Be Unexpected?

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Questions about how to reconcile the unexpectedness of Christ's second coming with passages that advise believers to pay attention to the signs of the times, why Christ hasn't yet returned after 2,000 years, and whether a person who has died experiences time as a disembodied spirit.

- * How can we reconcile the unexpectedness of Christ's second coming spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 with other passages that advise believers to pay attention to the signs of the times?
- * Though many early Christians thought Christ would return in their lifetimes, it's been 2,000 years, so where is he?
- * When a person dies, is that person experiencing time as a disembodied spirit?

Transcript

#STRask.com You're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. Welcome, Greg. Hi, Amy.

Alright, let's start with a question from J.T. How can we reconcile the second coming of Christ as unexpected, according to first the second coming of Christ? According to 1 Thessalonians 5.2, with other passages that advise believers to pay attention to the signs of the times as in Matthew 24. Well, it's interesting. At first Thessalonians 5, it says that it's going to be the people it's going to catch by surprise are the non-watching world.

Let me just move go there quickly because I was in a project my first summer as a Christian in Hawaii and we had a memorized Chapter 5. So, first Thessalonians. So, I'm not exactly sure why, but it was a good exercise and I still remember a lot of it. Let's find it here.

Do you want me to read it? I can just read it for you guys. You're looking. No, there's

something I want to.

That's right. I can do it as I find it. Okay, first Thessalonians 5. Alright, here's the thing.

It says, "As to the times in epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you." By the way, times in epochs, those are larger periods of time. Okay, for you, yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief of the night. While they are saying peace and safety, that destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child and they will not escape.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness that the day would overtake you like a thief for you are sons of light and sons of day, not of night or darkness. So, let's not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. Okay, so here you have two things going on here.

You have, there's an indeterminate time in the future when Jesus is going to return. But we should be vigilant and ready. There's a number of exhortations to that effect.

Here's one of them, in 1 Thessalonians, but also Jesus made this point too in a number of parables. Alright, be alert, be ready. And if you're alert and you're ready, you will not be caught by surprise.

Okay, by the way, I think this actually argues against this kind of sense of imminence where Jesus could come at any second. And this is part of the support of the pre-trib rapture. It could happen at any second.

Imminence means any split second. He could just come. And I don't think that's what the New Testament conveys because there are lots of other things that had to take place.

I know some people have said, well, there's no prophecies that had to be fulfilled for Jesus to come. Well, in that view of imminence, no prophecies ever had to be fulfilled. Jesus could have come at any moment.

The ones that are caught by surprise are the ones that are just living their lives as if God is not a factor and Jesus is not going to return. Second Peter, we read about this. Where's the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers have fallen asleep, where everything is continued just as it has.

Okay? Well, just because He's never come doesn't mean He isn't going to. So there is a whole contingent of people that will be caught by surprise. But the Christian is meant to be alert and sober.

Now, I don't think what alert and sober means is trying to calculate the days that He comes. It means that you are ready for whenever He comes because you are not caught messing around when He returns. You are caught with your hand at the till doing the job that He's given us to do.

And we're not looking back. And that's really the point. You are not going to be caught by surprise.

Your son's of the day in of light and the day should not catch you by surprise. So I think this is a way to reconcile those two things. It is the non-believers they're going to be caught by surprise by the return of Christ.

It is not going to be the believers. Believers are waiting for that. They know what's going to happen.

So that it happens is not going to be a surprise when it happens, it's harder to figure out. But I don't think I'm not a pre-trib rapture person. So I don't think the scripture teaches anything like that.

And so I believe in the resurrection which happens at His return, which is what 1 Thessalonians 4 says, 1 Corinthians 5 says. And there's only 1 second coming. There's not a 1.5 coming.

There's not 3 coming. There's a 2 second coming which would make 3 coming. There's a 1st coming and a 2nd coming.

And the catching up in the air with Christ will be those who are His at His coming. So it says 1 Corinthians 15. So I just take that in a straightforward fashion.

But we are waiting anxiously waiting. Marinatha, Lord, come quickly for that coming. What's the world doing? Duh, me, me, me.

You do you. And then destruction will come upon them suddenly. So here's a second question that's related to that.

This one comes from Justin Weaver. It's been Justin Bieber? Justin Weaver. Oh, okay.

It's been roughly 2000 years since Christ ascended. And it seems many early Christians thought He would return in their lifetimes. An objector to Christianity might ask the question Christ said He would return.

It's been 2000 years. Where then is He? He's not here. All right.

There's a verse in 1 Peter that people misunderstand, I think, that is a citation from the Old Testament. And it says there that a day is as 1000 years. Second Peter.

Oh, second Peter. Thank you. Yeah.

Second Peter. Same passage I was just referring to. And people, right away, they try to make a hermeneutical principle out of that.

Well, let's see. Wherever it says day, we're going to calculate a thousand years or some

long period of time. It says, and a thousand years as a day continues.

And his point is to describe to some degree the phenomenology of time passage from God's perspective. In other words, the passage of time does not feel the same way to God as it feels to us. A day is a thousand years and a thousand years is a day.

It doesn't mean God is timeless. He's outside of time. That's a different issue.

It just means that the phenomenology of the passage of time is not the same for God. Now, I was just thinking about this on yesterday, a day before yesterday at church, because our pastor was teaching on, on the Gospel of Mark right at the beginning. And here is John the Baptist appearing on the scene as the voice of one crying in the wilderness prophesied by Malachi 400 years before.

Well, that just rolls off our tongue. Yeah, there are 400 years of of silence. 400 years of no profit.

400 years. Let's see. This is like 2,400 years ago with 1600s.

Okay, it was 100 years after 1492. Columbus landed on the, you know, the, the, where we landed. North America.

In other words, it was almost as long as Columbus landing to where we are now that there was a last profit. There are long, long stretches of time in Scripture where things, where things, things just take a lot of time. Okay.

And then the reference back to Abraham. All right. Well, Abraham was a thousand years.

Let me think if I get this right. 500. Abraham was 500 years.

No, it was a Abraham was a. I'm trying to get my markers right here. A thousand years before Christ was the, was the David, who was David 500 years before that was Moses and 500 years before that I think was Abraham. Right.

Okay. So Abraham was a thousand years before David. We think of it all scrunched together in our biblical history, but it's a long time.

So this is 2000 years. Okay. It doesn't seem long to God.

God is accomplishing his purposes. It takes, he works through history and through people. Screwed people, rebellious people to accomplish his purposes.

From his perspective, it's not a long time. He's got his own timing. So I think it's a fair question to raise, but I think we have to keep in mind that it's kind of always been like this.

You know, from Abraham is promised a seed and it isn't until 2000 years later that the

seed of Abraham being Christ, that characterization of the seed comes as a rescuer. Okay. So now it's 2000 years more.

I don't know. I don't think that has the length of time as any bearing on the promise of Jesus. When you look at the larger scope, things have always taken a lot of time from our perspective.

And then from God's perspective, if there isn't the phenomenology, the feel of the passage of time is certainly not the same for him as it is for us. And that's part of the point that was being made when I cited 2nd Peter in the last question, where is the promise of his coming? Well, that's where you see this phrase a thousand years, this is the day and the day a thousand years. So it's not slow from God's perspective.

He's just working on his plan. And I think the answer you gave for the first question, Greg answers why many early Christians thought he would return in their lifetimes as Justin asked, because as you pointed out, all those passages were about our needing to remain alert and remain faithful. Even if it seems like it's been a while, the idea as you pointed out was that they needed to remain awake and alert, because we don't know exactly when he's going to come.

And when he does come, people are going to be shocked. Yeah, yeah. Many are.

And I never think about the 2nd coming of Christ in terms of, I think it eschatologically, there's going to be a resolution of all these things, but I don't think in terms of timing. Because each of our lives relative to the whole are very, very small or very short. Our lives are like a vapor.

I'm counting my years. I figure, well, I get 10, maybe 15 more years. And then I'm going to shuffle off this mortal coil.

And so what I am concerned with is not whether Jesus is going to come back and rescue me in the next 15 years and everybody else, but whether I am going to be faithful with the years I have left. And one thing, one thing more to note from 2 Peter is that he gives the idea that we ought to regard the patience of God as salvation. In other words, God is working out people's salvation during this time.

The patience is for the purpose of him bringing people to himself. So there is a purpose. God is not slow, but he's long suffering as the way Peter puts it.

Not wishing that any should perish, but all should come to repentance. And I don't think that means a lot of times this is an aside and it might trouble people, but I want you to think if what you mean, if you think that what is meant by Peter there, as he wants to all to come to repentance, and this is why he's delayed. And you read the all as every human being, then Jesus is never going to come back because all are not going to come to repentance.

It's those that God has chosen for himself that he has in view there, not just any old person or else that Jesus will never return according to the... If he's waiting for everybody to come, and that's what he has in mind. I think he's waiting for the bride. He's waiting for the bride to come in.

Everyone who will come, the bride, with the Scripture calls the elect, however you want to cash that out. That's what he's waiting on. The fullness of God's people to come in.

Let's go on to a question from Bob. When a person dies, is that person experiencing time as a disembodied spirit? Yeah, I would say so. I took a course about time from Wayne-Milling Craig back in the 70s, believe it or not, graduate level course.

It was a really hard course. And I did really well in it, but I didn't get a good grade, which really bugged me. Anyway, and what it forces you to do is it forces you to think about what you mean by time.

Time is a way we characterize the passage of moments. Moments are events such that when one moment is passed, the event from that moment is passed. That is, when one moment is P-A-S-S-E-D, then that event is P-A-S-T.

And something now is true about the past for that individual who's experiencing time. And whenever things happen, if anything happens, there is going to be a past, not just a present or the future when other things are going to happen, but things that have already happened. And so if there are facts that are tensed, like I drove to the office this morning, that means I already did something that's a fact, and it's in the past, well, time has passed.

If you have tensed facts, you know that time has passed. The only way time doesn't pass is if nothing happens. Time is what keeps everything from happening at once is another way of putting it.

So if you are a disembodied spirit, is anything happening? Are you doing anything? Are you praising the Lord? Because if all you're doing is praising the Lord, then at the moment, while I'm praising, there was a past moment when I was praising. That means there's a passage of time. I think Christians are so confused about this partly because of the language.

We move from time into eternity, we say. We move into a time when there is no time, but this is nonsense. If we are moving into a time when there is no time, then it's no time.

And nothing is happening. If there's activity, if we are reunited, we were talking about 1 Thessalonians 5. 5 in chapter 4 talks about comfort one another with these words. In other words, you are going to be reunited with your loved ones that have gone before you.

I've died before you died. A reunion is an event. Once that reunion happens, then the reunion becomes passed for those people.

There's lots of activity in our disembodied state. And being with the Lord, and then, of course, there's going to be different kinds of activity when we are resurrected. And that passage is talking about the resurrection.

But nevertheless, after death, there are events that we participate in. Therefore, there's a passage of time. It's hard to know if this question is about the time or not having a body or if they're going to be asleep in some way.

So, I think also, it's important to remember that the Bible does indicate that we will be aware too. It's not just we're in the ground and we don't know anything until we're resurrected. And I think of the passage in Revelation where he talks about the people who have been martyred are waiting for God to bring justice about for their martyrdoms.

So, there's that sense of waiting, that sense of being aware and being with Jesus. Right, exactly. And the great cloud of witnesses who are there witnessing.

So, they are disembodied spirits who are paying attention to what's going on. This is from Hebrews 11. So, there are lots of indications, or maybe it's 12, but there's lots of indications in Scripture that those who have gone before us, who are disembodied, who are disembodied because their general resurrection hasn't happened yet, are still participating in activities, observing, interacting, being with the Lord, and anticipating the resolution of all things.

Well, we are almost at a time, so I'm going to use the last minute or so to explain to you how you can send in a question because we love getting questions from you. It makes our show great when we can choose from all these fantastic questions that you sent in. You make our show great, Amy.

You're the one who makes the show great. So, there are two ways you can do it. If you send it to us on Twitter, just include the #strask.

That's all one word, #strask. But the other way you can do it is if you go to our website and you go to, on the top, you'll see a chance to choose podcasts, just choose #strask. And you'll see a link right there.

Just click on the link. You can send us a question. Just make sure you keep it short.

Make sure it's under two sentences or so. Sometimes we get longer questions and we just don't use them. So, if you want us to consider your question, just make sure it's about the size of a tweet, which is 280 characters.

It's shorter than people think. So, go ahead and send us your questions. You have no

excuse now because if you don't have Twitter, you can still send us a question.

We always appreciate hearing from you. Well, thank you, Bob and JT and Justin for your questions today. And again, share our podcast with people, review it, give us 5 stars.

If you enjoy the podcast, that also helps us to get the word out. Alright, thanks for listening and we hope to hear from you soon. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockerel for Stand to Reason.

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