



Title	⇒ Series: Talking About What We Don't Talk About Part 3 (The Second Coming): "V-Day"
Scripture	Isaiah 65: 17-19, 25. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11.
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
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Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you.
God's people: And also with you.



Imagine you are Rayford Steel, a pilot for Pan-Continental Airlines and you are making a flight from Chicago to London. You are informed by Hattie, your head flight attendant, that many of the passengers have disappeared mid-flight. Their clothes are the only evidence remaining of their former presence. You contact other airliners to find that they experienced the same phenomenon. Upon your forced return to Chicago you find total chaos, as aircraft and vehicles, suddenly without operators, have collided and crashed all over the city. After reaching your home with considerable difficulty, you find that your wife and son have also disappeared. Actually, this is what you had expected, since your wife was a Christian who had spoken regularly about the imminent secret rapture of the Church, and you find that this is the only reasonable explanation for what has happened.

But the majority of people seek to find some other reason, some other explanation for these mind-blowing and unexpected events, such as capture by aliens or an unexplained scientific phenomenon. You call the church where his wife was a member, and one of the pastors answers the phone! His name is Bruce. You meet because you want some answers. Bruce confesses that he was never a true Christian, and was not surprised to be left behind. But Bruce has become a Christian since the rapture, and is anxious to share his faith with others. You and many others are converted. Strange and crazy and scary things start to happen all over the world as people begin to live in a godless world. What happens next?

Well, to find out you will have to continue reading the series of books called *Left Behind* by best-selling authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.¹ They have capitalized on a new infatuation of ideas related to the Second Coming of Jesus—his physical return to earth—to claim the faithful.



This morning we continue our series of messages titled "Talking About What We Don't Talk About." You have shared with me topics that you would like to see addressed in light of what Scripture has to say about them. You have had wonderful ideas. You have had challenging ideas.

You have had ideas that have helped me to grow. Also, some of what we'll be discussing in these next two months is also based on what I feel many churches have stopped talking about for some reason or another. Today's topic, it seems, was of great interest not only to me, but to many of you. And yet, we don't hear about it very often.

As I said last week, as we proceed through each topic we will make three moves and ask three questions. First, we will take our topic and ask: What are we talking about? Second, we will ask: Why *don't* we talk about it? And third: Why *should* we talk about it? Here we go.



First: *What* are we talking about?

We are talking about something called the *Second Coming of Christ*. In my estimation it is something that has been a long and fixed and permanent and serious part of the hope of Christians for almost 2000 years. I say *almost* 2000 years because for some reason it has kind of dropped off the radar in much of what churches talk about in the past 100 years, and even more so in the past 50 years—with the exception of a few extreme branches and more fundamentalist circles.

And yet strangely, at about the same time that many Christians *stopped* talking about it, the wider popular culture around us seems to want to *start* talking about it. And with this interest I am including general speculation and curiosity about the end times: What will happen at the end of history and various doomsday scenarios made popular in movies such as *Armageddon* and *Independence Day*. You may have also read Hal Lindsay's classic book *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

This year there is rabid speculation that the world will end. They think it will happen in November 2012. This theory has to do with how some people have interpreted an old Mayan calendar system that comes to an end this year in 2012 after a 5000-some-odd-year stretch, and is perhaps connected to a planet called Nibiru crashing into earth. There are also various other reasons why people think the world will end. But it should be noted that as far as I can tell, none of them are convincing. Plus, scientists can't seem to find this strange planet called Nibiru.

But what, you might ask, does this have to do with the Second Coming of Christ? Because our faith has long held that when Jesus returns, the old order of things will pass away, a judgment will take place, and God will inaugurate a new heavens and a new earth—and an incredible creation of perfect praise and peace will follow. But it seems that Hollywood often leaves that part out.

But to get to it more seriously, and to state the obvious, the Second Coming is “second” because it comes after the *first* one. We talk about the first one a lot. That was when Jesus was born in a manger, grew in wisdom and stature, teaching about the kingdom of God and healing and saving; was crucified on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem; was vindicated and raised by holy God to create the first Easter morning and start his church; and ascended to heaven. That's the *first* coming. We know that one pretty well. We sing about it every Sunday. The reason we hold services on Sunday, and the reason why Sunday is the *first* day of the week and not the last, is because we are remembering and celebrating that *first* Easter at the *first* coming.

The *second* coming is talked about with much less frequency. But as you read Scripture what you find is that in the very early days of the church there was the expectation that Jesus would come back to them physically to complete and finish the work that God had started.

Now as if things aren't already confusing enough, here's where things start to get *really* confusing.

As you read through the New Testament what you find is that this expectation is pretty much assumed. Meaning that there is not one perfect place that describes with clarity what is going to happen. And so what you have to do is to look at a variety of passages to get a sense of the wider picture. This is where (I think) many strange branches of the Christian faith have gone wrong: They have looked at just one passage assuming they've got the whole picture. But that is kind of like that old story about the blindfolded men walking up to the elephant in an experiment to describe what the animal is like. One man walks up to the tusks, and feeling one and then two, assumes that he is touching a great beast completely covered in tusks. Another touches the trunk and figures it must be a huge land-walking octopus-like thing. Another touches a leg, another the belly, another the tail. All of them know a little bit about the elephant, but they don't see the whole picture. This is how we have to approach Scripture in finding out what the Second Coming is really all about. We don't want to think it's just about a tusk or a tail. What we want is a wide a picture as possible, especially on an important and slippery a slope as this.

Here's the first key passage. It's from the book of Acts, chapter 1. The context is this. It's after the resurrection and Jesus has appeared again to his followers, and he has just ascended into heaven: "While [Jesus] was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Now what does this mean? The thrust of this is that Jesus will come back; and he will be physical. They're referring to him being a person you can touch. He won't be just an idea or a thought or a sentiment. He won't be a social movement. We will gaze upon him with our eyes. The biblical word that is often used for his "coming" is sometimes also translated simply as *presence*.

Another key passage in figuring out this elephant is those parts of Scripture that talk about what else is happening when he returns. Often it says that there will be trumpets sounding, most notably in 1st Thessalonians 4 (that Paul read earlier) and also in the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians. Why is this little detail important? Well, the idea here is not to tell us what God's favourite musical instrument is. The idea is to tell us that *we will know about it when it happens!* It will not be a secret. That's one of the biggest inaccuracies of the *Left Behind* series that I told you about at the start of this message. When it happens *we will know*. It's not like it's going to happen in Africa or Russia or India and we just won't be in the right place at the right time. We will know.

I remember an old Saturday Night Live skit (that's a late night comedy show for those of you who don't stay up past 11 anymore, like me) with funny man Phil Hartman playing Jesus at his Second Coming.² He figures that the best way to tell everyone that he's come back is by going to the big network television stations for one of those important broadcasts that cut through all the regular programming, kind of like the American President announcing a big decision. Of course, the networks doubt it's really Jesus so he can't even get on the air. We miss it.

But in God’s plan—and we are not sure how—we will know.

Another important element about the Second Coming is this: Although we will know it is happening when it happens, we don’t know *when* it will happen. For some reason people always seem to forget this. People make predictions. Maybe they listen to people like the 16th century prophecy-maker Nostradamus. Maybe they read books that try to find hidden codes and clues in the Bible. Maybe they look in the stars. But none of them has the answer. On this point, Scripture is quite clear. No one knows when. It will come “like a thief in the night,” Scripture says in many places.³ Which means, by surprise—kind of like the old bumper sticker: “Jesus is coming, look busy!” We do not know when. Scripture says in 2nd Peter that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” Which, to me, means that in the past two millennia, the past two thousand years since the first coming, to God it’s only been a weekend.

The final—and perhaps most important thing—about his coming is something I will save to the end. So we move on to our second question: Why *don’t* we talk about it?



As far as I can tell, the first reason why we *don’t* talk about it very much is because we have grown tired of waiting. I once heard a funny line about a person who hired someone named Jesus to do some plumbing work in his house. He likened it to our topic today by saying that he waits and waits, but the man never returns to finish the work he started. And so he calls someone else.

In this big old world of ours, time has passed and passed and passed; we’ve travelled so long and so far as a civilization; we’ve invented sliced bread and the printing press and hospitals and schools and the internet and planes; world wars have come and gone; we’ve been to the moon. And yet, he has still not come. Many people start to doubt whether he’s coming at all.

But this is where faith comes in: We need to trust in God’s timing. Not our own. If we *knew* when he would be coming, we would really have to wonder whether our readiness was because we just wanted to be safe, or because we really loved him.

Another reason why we don’t talk about it much is because it is incredibly confusing and controversial. This was highlighted recently by a letter to the editor in an American Christian magazine for two of the main denominations to the south of us. Here’s the question: “Why are there so few sermons in our churches on the Second Coming? Is this part of our belief or not?” The wise “answer person” replied this way: Not all Christians think alike on matters of theology, but it would be hard for someone to feel at home in our tradition who did not understand God as the One who has come, who is present... in our lives today, and who is yet to come in whatever form the future ends up taking. To literalize the Second Coming is to ruin both its beauty and its significance. To ignore it is to avoid what may be the most important part of the Gospel we know about, since the past and present, relatively speaking, are brief, while tomorrow borders on forever.”

In a later issue of the magazine, another reader reacted to this answer: I compliment the Rev. _____ for his illusive non-answer to what I am sure was a serious question concerning the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. If I understood his answer, he said, in effect, “We don’t all agree. But if you want to be comfortable in [this denomination] you will need to agree that Jesus is coming again, but not

really—for if you actually believe in the Second Coming you will ruin both its beauty and its significance. Yet you can't ignore it because it is in the future.”⁴

When you think about it, this connects to a larger issue: The second coming is a very grand and miraculous type of thing. I personally feel that many Christians are embarrassed by it. We would so often rather talk about the things that are acceptable to mainstream society—things like love and forgiveness and compassion. And although those things are important, they do not and cannot take the place of a God who wants to be and is actively engaged in the renewal of our world. They can never take the place of a Person. Christmas is not just about family and giving; it's about a person: the birth of Jesus. Easter is not just about family and friendship and chocolate; it's about a person: it's about the resurrection of Jesus. Christian hope is not just about wishing something might come true; it's about a person: it's about knowing God is working all things together in his grace-filled purposes one day. Yes, it's extraordinary. Yes, there's the first resurrection, the walking on water, the raising Lazarus, the multiplying loaves, the healings! Yes, it's extraordinary. But that's our God.

But perhaps the most controversial part about the Second Coming is what Jesus will do: Yes he will save the faithful, but he will also judge evil. Nowadays we don't like to talk about that too much. We would rather focus on his kindness and goodness. But remember that old line from the Apostles' Creed that many of us have said since we were babies, “And he will come to judge the living and the dead”? That's it. And the reason he judges is not because he is angry or vindictive; it's *because* he loves. It's *because* he is full of justice. Think about it for a moment. What would you think of a society that let paedophiles and murderers walk the streets without justice? Would you think it was a just society? Personally, I wouldn't let my kids out. Judgement and justice—and friends, I know this in itself could be a whole other months of messages—judgment and justice is part of what gives his love its integrity. Justice gives loves its integrity.

With this we arrive at our final question: Why *should* we talk about it?



Earlier I said that a key element of the Second Coming of Christ would be saved for the end. Here it is. And it is also the main reason why we *should* talk about the Second Coming.

It has to do with what will happen in the big picture when he returns—what will happen to the heavens and the earth. Many people assume that heaven is the end of the story. And not only that, but that this world in which we live is totally irredeemable, and that the point of this life (and this faith) is simply to get out of here fairly intact and “into heaven.” But that's not the end.

When we look at the wider picture of Scripture, we find that God's incredible desire for our world is not for its destruction, but for its perfect renewal. Scripture calls it the *new creation*. In Isaiah and Revelation it's described as a “new heavens and a new earth.” Earth and heaven come together in this amazing thing that is new. To use the phrase of bishop Tom Wright, it is life *after* life after death. And when Jesus comes he will usher it in! It's him finishing the job. Easter—the *first* coming—was the start of this new age; and the Second Coming is the good news of when it all comes together; it's the good news of glory and resurrection for *all* the faithful! It will be so amazing and dazzling that we can barely muster words to describe it. It will be the kind of joy that has trees literally clapping with happiness, mountains giddily dancing; the kind of joy at the end of a world war when total strangers jump from their houses out in the streets kissing and hugging total strangers!

And it is a real, tangible existence: We will have some kind of body that we move around in—although they will be somehow different from this corruptible stuff we live in now. Isaiah says that there will be no more people dying too young. I say there will be no more cancer or disappointment or broken relationships. Revelation says that crying and death and pain and tears will be no more because Lord Almighty is making all things new!

Yes, this is great, Matthew. Sure. The Second Coming brings in this new and final stage of creation. That's great hope for the future, but what about now?

Each one of us is even now contributing to this new creation in every act of praise, of prayer, of love, of grace, of service, of humility, of justice. We don't do these things in a world that will eventually fry. We do these things contributing to the great new creation. *Our work now has eternal significance and will be honoured and amplified in this new creation.*

Bishop Wright uses a great metaphor to bring this to the surface. We are each stonemasons working on a part of a big cathedral. The architect already drew up the plans and passed on instructions to the teams of masons as to which stones need carving in what way. The foreman distributes these tasks among the team. One shapes stones for a particular tower or turret; another carves a delicate pattern; another works on gargoyles or coats of arms; another is making statues. They are vaguely aware that the others are getting on with their tasks. When they're finished with their stones and their statues, they hand them over without necessarily knowing very much about where in the eventual building their work will find its home. They may not have seen the complete architect's drawings. They may not live, either, to see the completed building with their work at last where it belongs. But they trust the architect that the work they have done in following instructions will not be wasted. They are not, themselves, building the cathedral, but they are building *for* the cathedral, and when the cathedral is complete their work will be enhanced, ennobled, will mean much more than it could have meant as they were chiselling it and shaping it down here in the stonemason's yard."⁵

Because at the second coming it all comes together. It fuels our mission in the here and now. Out of the ashes of the old world (this world), the new world will arise. Heaven and earth will get married.

I don't make comparisons to World War Two lightly. But it's kind of like World War Two, but on a much bigger scale.⁶ D-Day, that horrific battle on June 6th, 1944, is often referred to as the turning point of that epic war. Perhaps many of you knew people who were there; perhaps a few of you were there; perhaps you remember being in school and classes stopping to hear the reports coming from Normandy because everyone knew it was the decisive move by the allies; perhaps you read about it in books, or saw it on a documentary. And even though there were many terrible battles afterward, people knew that after that point—after D-Day—the tables had turned. Certain fights had to play out, but the victory was in hand.

Did you know that more people actually died and there was greater destruction *after* D-Day, between D-Day and Victory Day (what we call V-Day) than there was *before* D-Day? But after D-Day the outcome was sure. Yes, there was suffering and tonnes of bad things and horror. But the outcome was never in doubt. On V-Day people jumped from their houses, flowing into the streets hugging and kissing total strangers in celebration and victory!

The first coming, Easter, was D-Day. It was the decisive move in history that assured the faithful that the battle was won. The powers of hell and death were conquered. It tipped the scales. And yes, just like after D-Day, there was and is much horror and battle and struggle that still has to play out. But the Second Coming is V-Day. The great victory. The reign of peace. The start of the new creation. We know the battle is won. V-Day is when it all comes together.



As this intense time of reflection comes to a close, I have to apologize to you. I was talking with a friend last week and shared with her the list of what we would be discussing in this series, she said, “You’re crazy! You shouldn’t be spending 1 week on each of those topics, you should be spending 10!” Well I fear she is right. And yet we move forward. Perhaps today’s message has raised more questions for you than it has answered, so we should talk about it. And we will.

It is a tricky topic, as is any topic speaking about the future. And I don’t claim to have all the answers. But we are on a road looking forward on a very foggy day. Scripture is the signs at the side pointing us our direction; and we don’t doubt that the road ahead will in fact be like those signs tell us. But we won’t see it and fully understand until we have gone through the fog.

But I will say this: This real hope that lies somewhere on the horizon will not disappear from my lips or my faith, because I believe that in a world that so often seems grey-stained bleak and ordinary, mundane and regular, it gives our hope substance; it gives our present work and mission meaning; and it reassures ourselves and the world that our God is a God who keeps his promises. One day—as Scripture calls it “the Day of the Lord”—Jesus will return and put things right; and God’s new creation be fulfilled “on earth as it is in heaven.” The two will get married.

One of the earliest creeds of the followers of Christ—centuries and centuries ago—was simply three words long; you can find it in the second last verse of the Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus!” Friends and beloved children of God, I invite you today to restore to your faith the hope of a God who makes all things new.

V-Day is coming.



¹ This is a modified summary of that found in W. Fred Rice in his article “The Not So Secret Rapture” as found on www.reformed.org/eschaton and accessed on January 19, 2012.

² I tried to find the reference for this and also the video on the internet but couldn’t. So this recollection is from memory.

³ See especially Mark 13:32 and forward. For the “thief” references see 1 Thessalonians 5: 2, Revelation 3: 3 and 2 Peter 3:10 (and elsewhere).

⁴ As retold in Tom Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 113.

⁵ As adapted from: N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 209-10.

⁶ I remember reading a comparison between D-Day and V-Day to Easter and the Second Coming. I forget where, but think it may have been in one of Oscar Cullman’s books.