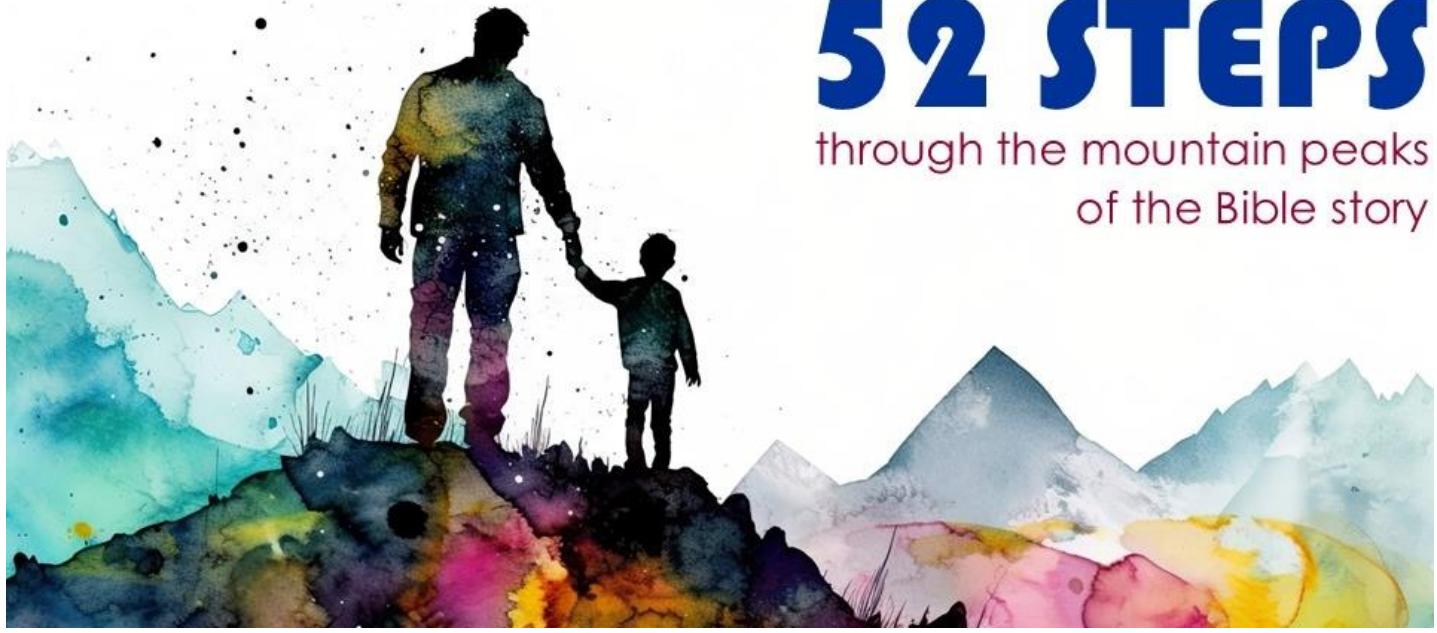


# 52 STEPS

through the mountain peaks  
of the Bible story



## Part 50 ► Coming with the Clouds of Heaven

### The signs of Jesus's coming

Forty days after His resurrection, the eleven disciples watch as Jesus "was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). As they gaze upwards, two angels tell them, "This Jesus, . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). At the end of this age, Jesus will return to Earth. The "appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" is our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). Three times at the end of the Bible Jesus declares, "I am coming soon" (Revelation 22:7,12,20). The apostle John responds, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20). That's the cry of *all* God's faithful people through the ages. Come, Lord Jesus!

**“ Three times at the end of the Bible Jesus declares, “I am coming soon”. The apostle John responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”**

Two days before Jesus's crucifixion, one of His disciples points out to Him how magnificent the Temple is. But Jesus responds, "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Mark 13:1). Later, His disciples come to him privately, and ask, "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). That's the question we'd all like to ask!

The Bible makes it clear that certain things must happen before Jesus comes. He tells them, ". . . you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. . . but the end is not yet. . . nation will rise against nation, . . .

and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains." (Matthew 24:6-8). Wars and disasters have continued throughout human history. But it seems likely that they will increase to a climax shortly before Jesus returns—just as the pain of childbirth comes to a climax just before the baby is born. And in Part 49, we learned that Jesus's Second Coming won't happen before "the rebellion"—a great revolt against God led by "the man of lawlessness", the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

Jesus also speaks about the persecution that believers will face. He says, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me" (Matthew 24:9 NIV). He warns them of spiritual decline and deception in the Church: "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Matthew 24:10-13 NIV).

But Jesus continues: "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world . . . , and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). And God has promised the salvation of "all Israel"; Paul tells us that "a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, . . ." (Romans 11:25-26). This probably doesn't mean every individual Jew will be saved. But it does mean many Jews—in fact, most of the nation—will accept Jesus as their Messiah, as His Second Coming draws closer.<sup>[1]</sup>

## The day of His coming

How will Jesus return to Earth?

- He's coming *in person*, in His resurrection body. He ascended bodily into Heaven, and (as we saw earlier) He'll come back "*in the same way*" (Acts 1:11).
- He's coming *with power and glory*. Jesus came once as a helpless infant; He'll return "*with power and great glory*" (Matthew 24:30) with "*all the angels*" (Matthew 25:31), "*with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God*" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). His people will rejoice at His coming. But unbelievers will call "*to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'*" (Revelation 6:16-17).
- He's coming *openly*. Jesus's first coming was in obscurity—born in an ordinary town in a troubled corner of the Roman Empire. But when He comes again, "*every eye will see him*" (Revelation 1:7). Jesus tells us, "*... the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, ... then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.*" (Matthew 24:29-30 NIV). At His coming, it seems that Heaven and Earth will suddenly be transparent to each other. And so everyone—wherever they are—will see Him.
- He's coming *unexpectedly*. The day of the Lord "*will come like a thief in the night*" (1 Thessalonians 5:2); it will catch this world unawares. Jesus says, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, ... only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert!*" (Mark 13:32-33 NIV). We believers must be ready for Him (see Matthew 24:42-25:13). We're to live obedient, faithful lives, watchful for the day of His coming. Those who walk closely with Him may well become increasingly aware of the approach of that day.<sup>[2]</sup>

There's much debate about the sequence of events when Jesus returns. Some events—or even all of them—may happen at the same time. Here's an outline:

- ◆ Jesus will conquer all the powers of evil.
- ◆ Every believer, from every period of history, will receive a glorious resurrection body, and will meet Jesus.
- ◆ The great final judgment will take place.
- ◆ Satan and his evil angels, together with every human who has rejected God, will be thrown into Hell.
- ◆ Finally, a "*new heaven and a new earth*" will come into being. Believers will live there in God's presence for ever.

## Destruction and death to the devil's domain

At His coming, Jesus will conquer all the powers of evil that we met in Part 49: **Babylon** (17:1-6), which seems to be *godless civilisation*; **the sea beast** (13:1-10, 17:1-18), which seems to be *godless political and military regimes*; **the land beast** (13:11-18), also called "**the false prophet**" (16:13), which seems to be *false religion and godless ideology* and **the dragon** (12:3-4, 7-17), Satan himself.

► **Babylon will fall**—an event dramatically portrayed in 18:1-19:5. "*Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!*"; "*In one hour she has been brought to ruin!*" (Revelation 18:2,19 NIV). Evil always bears the seeds of its own destruction. The "*ten horns*" on the beast, and the beast itself, "*will hate the prostitute*" and "*make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire*" (17:16). It seems that godless regimes end up destroying the very civilisations that they've birthed and nurtured. Godless civilisation is ripe for God's judgment. But it's *Satan's* forces which execute God's justice upon it. Evil is serving the purposes of God.

► **Jesus will destroy the Antichrist**. Paul writes, "... then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8 NIV).

**“ The great final battle is fought and won, not with weapons of steel, but with the truth.**

► **Jesus will defeat the two beasts**. In Revelation 19:11-21 John sees Christ—"King of kings and Lord of lords", crowned with many crowns—riding a white warhorse. He's "*The Word of God*"; from His mouth comes "*a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations*". Following Him on white horses are "*the armies of heaven*", clad "*in fine linen, white and pure*"—these seem certain to be God's people. This is the last battle, fought at Armageddon "*on the great day of God the Almighty*" (16:14), the day when Jesus returns. This battle is fought and won, not with weapons of steel, but with the *truth*. The beast and the false prophet are *deceivers*. So it's *truth* that defeats them—proclaimed by the One who is "*The Word of God*", and "*the truth*" (John 14:6). The beast and false prophet are captured and "*thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur*". And so Jesus destroys the worldly regimes, and the belief systems that supported them. And with His sword—His word of judgment—Christ slays "*the*

kings of the earth with their armies", people who were captivated by the false prophet's lies, and worshipped the beast (13:12-15).

This is the final battle in the war that began in the Garden of Eden. At its heart, this war has *always* been about truth. As we saw in Part 5, Satan deceived Adam and Eve into thinking wrongly and believing his lies (Genesis 3:1-7). He's "**the father of lies**" (John 8:44). Here in Revelation 19:11-21, the word of the One who *is* the "**the truth**" executes judgment on the beast and the false prophet, the great deceiver's deceiving henchmen.

► **Satan will be thrown into Hell.** In Revelation 20:1-6 we see an angel chaining and imprisoning Satan for "**a thousand years**", a period called 'the Millennium'. During that time, God's people reign with Christ. Then after the "**thousand years**" Satan is released; he deceives the nations and gathers them to attack God's people. But "**fire came down from heaven and devoured them**"; Satan is "**thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, . . .**", where, together with the beast and the false prophet, he'll be "**tormented day and night for ever and ever**" (Revelation 20:9-10 NIV).

## The Millennium

Christians have interpreted Revelation 20:1-10 in different ways. We haven't space to cover them all here. One clue is this: Jesus has chained Satan, "**the strong man**" (Matthew 12:29).<sup>[3]</sup> And shortly before His death, Jesus said, "**now will the ruler of this world be cast out**" (John 12:31). He has defeated Satan by the Cross. Now Jesus is seated at His Father's right hand, treading down all His enemies (Psalm 110:1). He has complete authority over all the evil powers (Ephesians 1:20-21).<sup>[4][5]</sup>

Satan can't "**deceive the nations**" (Revelation 20:3) any more. In the past, God "**allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways**" (Acts 14:16), but "**now he commands all people everywhere to repent**" (Act 17:30). Daily, God is delivering people "**from the domain of darkness**" and transferring them "**to the kingdom of his beloved Son**" (Colossians 1:13). Threaten though he may, Satan can't stop people coming to Christ (John 12:32).

So it's not unreasonable to understand the "**thousand years**" to be *the whole period from Christ's resurrection to His Second Coming*.<sup>[6][7]</sup> We can then interpret the rest of Revelation 20:1-10 in this light—and see the battle of 20:8-10 as another 'camera angle' on the end-time battle of Armageddon.

## Our resurrection

Paul explains: "... the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first"; then believers still alive when Jesus returns "**will be caught up together with them . . . to meet the Lord in the air**" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NIV). This act of being "**caught up**" is often called 'the rapture'.



When Christ returns, "**the dead in Christ will rise first**"  
(1 Thessalonians 4:16).

All believers who've died will be raised with new resurrection bodies. The bodies of believers still alive at Jesus's coming will be transformed without going through death. Jesus "**will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body**" (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV). Unbelievers will also receive resurrection bodies, though we don't know what they'll be like.

## The last judgment

Then everyone will be judged. John writes: "... I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. . . . And I saw the dead, . . . standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done." (Revelation 20:11-12). John doesn't say whether the Father or the Son is seated on this throne. But we know that the Father has handed over all judgment to the Son (John 5:22,27, Acts 17:31). Jesus Himself said He'll "**come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done**" (Matthew 16:27 NIV). So it seems clear that Jesus will be our Judge. One reason is surely this: Jesus is not only God, but also *a human being like us*, and was tempted just as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). And for us believers, that is a great comfort. *The very same person* who suffered and died to forgive our sins, and rose again to give us new resurrection life, is the One who will be our Judge.<sup>[8]</sup>

Believers will be judged, as well as unbelievers. God has justified believers; our names are written in "the book of life". Nonetheless "we will all stand before God's judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (Romans 14:10,12 NIV). God will assess every person's life—even their most secret thoughts. In the end, nobody can blame their heredity or upbringing or circumstances for the kind of person they've become. It's our *responses to life's circumstances* that makes us what we are at the moment of death.

Our lives on Earth now are our 'formative years'—a foundational period of training and maturing that's preparing us for life in the world to come. So how are we living? Are we yielding ourselves fully to God? Are we being moulded by the Spirit into the image of His Son (see 2 Corinthians 3:18)? Are we presenting our bodies "as a living sacrifice" and allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us by renewing how we think (Romans 12:1-2)?<sup>[10]</sup> Are we walking in the Spirit, rather than in our own strength? Are we trusting and obeying God, come what may?

**“ Our lives on Earth are our 'formative years'—a foundational period of training and maturing that's preparing us for life in the world to come.**

## Hell

At the last judgment, God will assign each person their eternal destiny—either to live with Him in His new creation, or to live without Him in Hell. We'll explore the new creation in the final two parts of our series. For now, we must consider the other destination—Hell. Paul tells us that "the Lord Jesus" will be "revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from"—or "that comes from" (ESV footnote)—"the presence of the Lord . . ." (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

The Greek word most often used for "hell" in the New Testament is *gehenna*. This name is derived from the name of a valley outside Jerusalem called "the Valley of the Son of Hinnom" (Jeremiah 32:35). This was once a place where children were sacrificed by fire to a pagan god, which called down God's judgment. The combination of fire, God's judgment, and slaughter, made the Valley of Hinnom a vivid image of Hell. The most graphic descriptions of Hell come from Jesus Himself. He tells us it's "where 'the worms that eat

them do not die, and the fire is not quenched'" (Mark 9:48 NIV); it's "the outer darkness", where there'll be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). In Revelation 21:8, it's "the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death". This is picture language, but it reflects a terrible reality—the agonising sense of God's anger, and of guilt and shame, loneliness, self-loathing and regret, and the emptiness of an existence without purpose and meaning.<sup>[10]</sup>

The underlying torment of hell is *relational*. We humans were made to love. But in Hell there is no love, no meaningful relationships of any kind. First and foremost, those in Hell are estranged from God, and experience His righteous anger. God made us for Himself.<sup>[11]</sup> To be estranged from Him is to lose *everything* that makes life worth living.

God loves each one of us with an unimaginably vast and steadfast love—a love supremely demonstrated on the Cross. He doesn't want anyone to "perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God makes it as difficult as He can for people to reject Him. But He does not make it impossible. Some people choose to reject God, and to live without Him. And that choice becomes their destiny.

## Next time . . .

In Revelation 21:1-22:5, our vision is filled with the glorious sight of God's city, New Jerusalem, who is none other than the beautiful Bride of Christ!

## Bible Reading and Question

You may like to read Revelation 1:1-3, 1:9, 3:14, 6:9, 19:11-21, 20:4. Here's a question to think about: ► In the Book of Revelation, the words and phrases "word of God"/"Word of God", "witness", and "testimony" occur a number of times. Given that one of Revelation's key themes is spiritual warfare, why do you think this is? See also Ephesians 6:17.

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