

Be Patient, the Lord Is Coming - Part 1

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg explains how a biblical view of history, centered on the second coming of Jesus, provides a realistic and hopeful perspective on the world's brokenness and our own personal struggles.

Duration: 39:35

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, James 5:7-11

Topics: "Lord's Coming"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by acknowledging that there are three temptations to be avoided and three examples to be followed in the text. However, before delving into these points, he wants to include the audience in his thought process. He emphasizes the importance of understanding that our personal histories are often filled with disappointment and brokenness, but the good news is that God has done something, is doing something, and will do something to redeem and restore us. The speaker also highlights the concept of the Lord's coming and how it is often seen as bizarre in today's culture, but it is a fundamental belief for those who read and believe the Bible.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information visit us online at truthforlife.org. I invite you to turn with me to James chapter 5 verse 7. And we read together the portion of scripture that will be the focus of our study both this morning and then again this evening. James chapter 5 and verse 7. Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield his valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged.

The judge is standing at the door. Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.

You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. Amen.

We thank you that we're able to read the Bible here and realize that you are the Lord, full of compassion and mercy. And for ourselves, we pray that you will make us students of the Bible, that we might be diligent in our investigation, that we might be clear in our exposition, that we might be humble in our response, and that in everything we might be conformed to the image of your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, we're turning to the seventh verse of James chapter 5. I found in reading the passage this week that I was wondering whether the recipients of this letter--that's the initial readers of the letter--in light of the oppression and injustice that they were enduring, and to which James has referred in the first six verses, whether they may have been tempted to ask the question, why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God do something? It certainly would be no surprise if they did, because it is a not unfamiliar refrain, and one that we hear on the lips of people almost routinely, often in response to some event, either in their private world or in the world at large. Disappointment or bereavement or tragedy of some kind often calls for this kind of reaction, and we need to be able to look into the Bible and give the answer which the Bible quite clearly and simply provides, namely, that God has done something, that God will do something, and that God is doing something. And it is, of course, as you will note looking at the text, in pointing forward that James seeks to address the present predicament of his initial readers.

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. And again, he mentions it in the eighth verse, the Lord's coming is near. In the ninth verse, the judge is standing at the door.

And as I read this this week in anticipation of these studies, I found myself stopping for just a moment and acknowledging the fact that while I, as someone who believes the Bible, who has come to trust in Jesus by his grace and goodness, while I can come to a phrase like the Lord's coming and immediately absorb it and put it, as it were, within the framework of my understanding of things, I recognize that to affirm in our contemporary culture what the Bible makes clear, namely, that history is moving towards a final event, is actually regarded as bizarre. To affirm, as C.S. Lewis does in one of his essays, that when the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. To make clear that history is not cyclical, but it is going somewhere, and the somewhere it is going can only ultimately be understood by those who read and believe the Bible.

When we affirm these things, we find ourselves immediately at odds with our culture. C.S. Lewis, writing concerning this in one of his essays, *The World's Last Night and Other Longings*, he makes the point very clearly, the doctrine of the second coming is deeply uncongenial to the whole evolutionary or developmental character of modern thought. We've been taught to think of the world as something that grows slowly towards perfection, something that progresses or evolves.

The Bible offers no such hope. It does not even foretell a gradual decay. It foretells a sudden, violent end imposed from without.

An extinguisher popped onto the candle, a brick flung at the gramophone. He's writing a long time ago. A certain curtain rung down on the play and the voice calling out from the wings, halt.

Now, I do have an outline for the exposition of these verses. I should just tell you this in case you disbelieve me. We're going to notice eventually that there are here three temptations to be avoided, that there are three examples to be followed, and there are two overarching truths that need to be taken to heart.

But long before we get there, I want to include you in my own process of thought. I do so purposefully, humbly, and I hope helpfully, because as it occurred to me that when I affirm these things amongst the people with whom I spend time and find their reaction, I am not unusual in that respect. Therefore, I need to be better prepared and perhaps you along with me the same.

In other words, we need to realize just how countercultural it is for us to affirm that creation is a divine act and not a continuing process. That's what the Bible says to affirm that the universe, time, and history are the work of a sovereign triune God, and to affirm that the meaning of history is established in terms of that sovereign creator God. Those three facts alone are so radically in opposition and opposition to much of contemporary thinking that it is imperative for us to think them out.

And what I want to do is to pause for a moment and put, if you like, the reality of the second coming of Jesus within the overarching framework of a biblical view of history itself. This runs the risk of being unduly simplistic. I don't mean it to be dismissive in any way, but secular philosophies of history are by and large marked by either, number one, peasantism.

Peasantism, a completely gloomy approach to life that holds out the only possibility in a cyclical approach, whereby in terms of classical paganism or eastern thought, we may get another go at it, but if we don't, it's a dreadful predicament that we face. And so people's lives, as they review history, as they look at their circumstances, and then as they look to the future, are at their core increasingly pessimistic. They find themselves, in the words of the old country western song, rearranging chairs on a ship that's going down.

They look at things and they're just pessimistic. Or secular philosophy is bizarrely optimistic. The optimism of Marx, who determined that if he could only put the social constructs in place and deal with the dialectic, if he could only put together the issues of economics in such a way as to redistribute wealth, then there was a tremendous future awaiting everybody.

And buoyed by the optimism of that view of history, he launched his crusade. Well, of course, he's dead and buried, and Marxism is pretty well dead and buried along with him. In the same kind of optimism, Harold Macmillan, the prime minister in the 1960s, stood on the stage of the British framework and declared the fact, we have never had it so good.

And his optimistic perspective ran up the stock market, encouraged everybody. But of course, if he could have seen life in the 90s, or the closing embers of the 20th century, if he had lived into the mayhem of the 21st century, then his optimism would have had to be somehow or another reconfigured. The third category that secular philosophy finds itself under is that of simply cynicism.

Because there is, in the highest realms of historical analysis in our colleges and universities, an increasing skepticism about the possibility of finding any meaning of history at all. Neither optimistic nor pessimistic, just completely cynical. History teaches us that history teaches us nothing.

There's no point to it in looking back. There is nothing to look forward to. And frankly, in the present, all that we can hope to do is muddle along.

Now, you can test these things as you just listen to people talk. You will find that they will drift in one direction or another. And unless you and I find ourselves under the tutelage of the Bible, and under the gaze of a sovereign God about whom we've been singing, then we will vacillate between these three poles--optimism, pessimism, or cynicism.

That is why, you see, it is vital for those who believe to be constantly going to the Bible in every realm of our lives, so that when we turn to the Bible, we can look for a realistic Christian understanding of history, or a biblical understanding of history. One of my friends who's in politics in Washington, D.C., often asks me when we're together, as a Christian, should I be optimistic or pessimistic? And I always answer him, I think you ought to be realistic. Because when you read the Bible, you discover that it introduces us to the good, the bad, and the ugly.

It doesn't seek to sweep the ugly and the bad aside in some false optimistic pie-in-the-sky dream, nor does it bury itself in the despair that accompanies the pessimism of a world without God, nor is it cynical because it recognizes that the God who made the world is the God who will fulfill his purposes in the world. And therefore, it introduces us realistically to things. The Bible takes into account the fact that God has made the world, that he is the one who has established history, that it is, in every realistic sense, his story.

And it also takes into account the brokenness of human history, that when we read history, we realize that, yes, there are tremendous signs of encouragement, there is much for which we can be thankful, but there is so much that is shameful, so much that is absolutely dreadful. And in our contemporary experiences, in the picking up of newspapers and magazines, in the reading of books, in the viewing of contemporary films and seeing plays, we realize that so much of that which is representative of our present history is equally vile and bad and reprehensible. And it will not do for people simply to tell us, well, you know, it's all going to get better if we only have a little more of this or a little more of that.

I'm sure we were willing to shake this off and move on. That's why the Bible is so tremendously encouraging, because it not only tells us that our history is broken, but it also tells us what God has done in time to deal with that brokenness. That the God who made time, who established the universe, comes in the good news, in the gospel, in the past historic event of the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus, to sound as it were a megaphone down through the centuries concerning the good news of his intervention so that what is broken may be by his goodness repaired, fixed, transformed.

And the good news of the gospel is the good news of an event that took place in time in the historic person of Jesus, whereby he did for us what none of us could ever do for ourselves. The good news of the gospel is an historic story of the activity of someone other than ourselves who comes into the brokenness of history, lives the perfection of his own life, pays the penalty for our broken lives, and thereby opens up the way of access for those of us who cannot find the missing pieces in the box of the jigsaw puzzle of our lives so that we might understand with Augustine that our hearts are restless, and they remain restless, until we find our rest in God. Jesus, says the Bible, has lived for us the kind of life we should live but can't.

He's lived for us the kind of life we should live but can't. And he has paid fully the penalty we deserve for the life we do live but shouldn't. Now, if you get that, you get what we've been singing in at least two of our hymns.

Jesus is the perfect servant, obeying the Father, keeping the law, living in perfection, and he is the perfect substitute doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. In other words, the good news is the good news of that which has been accomplished, and it has been accomplished. And the prospect of what is yet is built upon what has passed.

And until we understand the foundation upon which the future hope is built, the future hope will seem bizarre and perhaps forlorn to us. Therefore, it is for the Christian in relationship to history to understand

and affirm that in the cross we have the pivotal event of human history. We have the place in time that makes sense, if you like, of all of the fracturedness and all of the mess and all of the disappointment, and makes possible all of the restoration and the repair and the transformation and the new.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this, he put it in a verse that I found to be very difficult, and I read it every so often. In fact, I read it a great deal, and I hope one day to fully get an understanding of it. This is how it goes.

God made him--that is Jesus--who had no sin. The only person who never sinned, Jesus. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

Wouldn't make any sense for him to make him sin full stop. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Luther referred to this as the great exchange.

The prophets had already made it clear that all of our best attempts at making ourselves acceptable to God are just like filthy rags. It's not a very nice thing to hear, is it? Especially when we're trying to be a good person, trying to run the show properly, obey things correctly, take care of business, and so on. Beginning to preen ourselves and think how well we're doing, and then we turn to the Bible, and the Bible says, on your best day and with your best deeds, they all look like rags.

Well, the person says in that case, if when I've done my very best, I'm in rags, there is no hope for me at all, is there? Well, no, actually, not unless someone has provided for you the clothing necessary to make entry into the presence of God. And that's the story of the good news, that to be covered over with the righteous, the robe of Jesus' righteousness, is to be redefined not by our own failed histories, but by his perfect history. You see, think about it in intensely personal terms.

We review our lives, and as in the review of history, so in our personal histories, there is that which disappoints, brings us to potential despair, leaves us feeling bereft of hope, sad, in many cases crying out with share, again, 20 years ago, if I could turn back time, if I could just turn back time, and yet we know we cannot turn back time, therefore we cannot go back to that place, we cannot go back and make that repair, our histories are fractured and broken, therefore what are we to do? To despair, or simply to turn the radio up, plug the earphones in, and blow it off in optimism? Or shall we become skeptics and cynics, and deny that there's meaning in anything? Or shall we go to the place that holds the answers to our deepest longings, and provides the answers to our most profound questions, and confronts us with the fact that our felt needs, whatever they may be, are only representative of our great need, namely, that we would have someone take all of our filthy best endeavors, and provide for us clothes that we could never purchase for ourselves. You see, that's what Paul means when he says, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. What the Bible means by that is, that when we are united to Christ, by grace through faith, when we hear the word of the gospel in all of its truth, when it comes home to our hearts and minds in a way that arrests us, and confronts us, and convicts, and convinces, and changes us, when by God's mercy we open, as it were, chapter two of our lives, or volume two of our history, turning our backs on the brokenness of our history, and opening up the volume which is there as a result of what Christ has finished on the cross, then in Christ, all that is Christ's is ours.

We are ontologically related to Jesus. That is the meaning of the song. What did you mean when you sang, one with himself I cannot die? You say to yourself, what am I singing about? One with himself I cannot die.

I will die. No, you will go through the valley of the shadow of death, but if you're in Christ, you will not die. You will experience the journey of the separation of soul and body, but the you of you will never be separated from Christ.

It is impossible, because you are ontologically included in Christ, and therefore all that is Christ's is yours. All that is Christ's is imputed to you, or is accredited to you. That is not a fiction.

That is a reality. So, when someone asks in the course of conversation, as you affirm your biblical view of history, if anyone's left in the coffee shop for you to talk to by this point, and someone asks you the \$64,000 question, well then, how do you know that God will accept you? I mean, if you're telling me, says the person, that there is a God who is the judge of all the earth, that this judge is returning, that his feet are at the door, that when he returns the opportunities for response are over, that when he returns all will cry, some in joy and some in anguish. I need to know, says the person, how do you know that God will accept you? And what is the answer? Let me tell you what the answer is not.

The answer does not start with a personal pronoun, I. It doesn't start with, I did this, or I did that, or I asked this, or I believe that. I know you did all that, but that's not the right answer. It starts with a personal pronoun, he.

He died upon the cross for me, says your friend. Isn't that a little presumptuous? How do you know that he died upon the cross for you? Answer, because he died upon the cross for sinners, and I am a sinner. That's actually Rabbi Duncan from an earlier era in Scotland.

The people asked Rabbi Duncan, how do you know that you belong to Christ? And he said, because Christ died for sinners. Rabbi Duncan is a sinner. Therefore, Christ died for Rabbi Duncan.

Is this your assurance? See, this is the assurance of Christian faith. It's not the assurance of presumption. It's not an assurance that is tied to activity, at least to our activity.

It is an assurance that is tied to the finished work of Christ. And that's the only solid basis for assurance. If you look for assurance in the ongoing work of Jesus in your life, all the ebb and flow and the ups and downs, you will vacillate all the time.

The only way to be assured, the only way to be able to look forward to his return with confidence is in being able to look back to his death in faith. We used to sing a song in Scotland at a Bible class that I went to on Sunday afternoons. It was all boys.

And when you were the youngest, you sat on the front row, and the way you knew you were growing older was you got closer to the back as time went on. And I remember my crusader leader there, Norman Walker. He wasn't a good singer, but he was always very, very into it.

And he would move his fist like this. It bore no resemblance to any time or anything at all, but his fist just went back and forth. I can see him in my mind's eye even now.

And one of his favorite songs that he taught us began, Dear Savior, thou art mine. How sweet the thought to me. I cannot doubt your word, but yield my heart to thee.

Mine, mine, mine. I know thou art mine. Savior, dear Savior, I know thou art mine.

And sometimes on a Sunday afternoon when I would sing that first verse at the age of 11 or 12 or 13 or whatever I was, in my mind would be things that I'd said, the jealousy of my heart, unfulfilled promises, disappointments that I'd been to those who loved me best, animosity towards those who loved me most. And Satan, in the first verse, would tempt me to despair and tell me of the guilt within. And I would have had to say, you know, you're right.

That's why I love the second verse, which starts like this. Thou art the sinner's friend. So I thy friendship claim.

Christ died for sinners. Until I acknowledge myself to be such, there will be no discovery of him as a great and glorious Savior. Well, if the believer is in Christ, why are things the way they are? Well, because the believer is also in Cleveland, not just in Cleveland.

It could be in another place. But we are. Our names are written in heaven.

We're raised to the heavenlies in Christ, as Paul says to the Colossians. But we also live in time. We live in the overlap of the ages.

We live in the tension between the now and the not yet. That is why there is so much that still awaits us. That is why James is about to do what we're going to see here in James chapter five, and take all the injustices and all of the oppression and deal with them in light of the not yet.

Tell them, affirm them of what is there. Because these people would have been able to sing the hymn, The Church is One Foundation. They would have been able to affirm the second verse, mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war.

She waits the consummation of peace forevermore. She waits the consummation. She doesn't enjoy the consummation.

The now is not the not yet. We live in the gap, the overarching gap, the gap between what is and what will be. Till with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blessed, and the great church victorious becomes the church.

Now, the question with which we began and to which we return is simply this. Why doesn't God do something? And we have stood here firmly on the one spot and purposefully in order that we might get our bearings. In order that I don't do what it is very easy to do, namely take a passage of Scripture and isolate it from the big picture so as to teach true things, but to teach in a way that divorces it from the overarching purpose of God.

So, for example, if you look down at your Bible and you're using an NIV, you will notice that there is a chapter, there is a paragraph break, and there is a heading, and it is distinctly possible for the pastor to preach a sermon on the importance of patience. And indeed, I may well have done that in the past, I don't know. I hate to think that I did.

Well, would it be wrong to teach a sermon on the importance of patience? Clearly not. Patience is part of the fruit of the Spirit. But what James is affirming here is that they will only be able to live in this way when they live in light of the fact of God's eternal purpose.

That he is the one who overrules history in such a way so as to, without doubt, achieve the goal that he has established before the foundation of the world. Do you see why I say to you that you'll never understand history unless you read your Bible? And historians who do not believe just hate this kind of statement and regard it as absolutely ridiculous. But, of course, they regard the return of Jesus Christ as science fiction.

That somebody who died two thousand years ago is going to reappear, apparently from nowhere? Oh, come on. That's what it says. And that the reason that is going to happen is because of what has happened and because of what is happening.

That God in eternity has established a goal, and what is that goal? You could say that it's just twofold. One, to have a people, and two, to have those people like his son Jesus. That the overarching purpose of God is to have a people that are his very own.

Hence the anticipation in Revelation 7, which I quote almost ad nauseum now, of a company of people from every tribe, nation, language, people, and tongue that are all gathered to proclaim the name of Jesus. That is the goal of history. That is the goal of the sovereign creator.

So, when you find yourself in the middle of it, when you find yourself oppressed or depressed, when we realize that things are not the way we might like them, we may be discouraged in the midst of the journey, and so on, we need at least to put into the program an awareness of the fact that what God is actually doing is achieving a purpose from all of eternity. That it's not all about us. That it's not about our health.

It's not about our security. It's not about who is elected to the White House in 2008. It's about something far more significant than that.

It's about the fact that he has a people that are his very own. And as he redeems those people, his purpose for every one of them is the same in every case--to conform us to the image of his Son. Jesus, what are you doing with me? I am conforming you to my image.

Jesus, this is not the way I had hoped for. I understand. But trust me, I am doing what is best for you.

And when you think that out, you realize that it not only changes the view of history per se, but it changes the way in which we view our own personal histories. Now, we shouldn't feel bad if we find ourselves in need of a recalibration, because the disciples did also. At the end of Luke's gospel, you'll remember the two on the Emmaus Road believe that history has come to a crashing halt.

They say to the unidentified stranger, who's none other than the risen Jesus, we've been in Jerusalem, and we had hoped that this one was the one to redeem our people of Israel. We thought that we had a great future. It's all folded up.

It's over now. Jesus, at the mealtime, shows himself to them, and suddenly they realize it's not all over. So you think, well, they know it's not all over.

They must have understood history now. I know you get to Luke 2, Volume X, Chapter 1, and these disciples are now again with Jesus, and they say to him, Jesus, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel right now? Are you going to wrap this up right now? After all, you've done what you said you set out to do. We've followed with you.

You go up to Jerusalem and suffer and die, and make an atonement for the sins of many. You've done that. Are you going to put it all together now? Jesus says, guys, it's not for you, first of all, to know the times and the seasons that the Father has appointed.

So don't get yourselves all scurried up with that. Let me tell you what's going to happen. You go and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, I want you to go out onto the streets of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and tell the whole world about me.

And the reason you need to do this is because we have determined Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from eternity, to put together a people that are our very own. And one of the ways we're going to do that is as a result of you telling them what has changed. Not a lot.

I can guarantee you when tonight I deal with the second coming of Jesus, at least tangentially, I'll be flooded with people with all their questions about times and charts and diagrams and everything else. They're essentially backing out chapter one. Are you going to restore the kingdom at this time? Can we get it buttoned down right now? And you know what the answer is? God is putting together a people that are his very own.

People whose lives and histories are fractured and broken and crumbling. And he has purposed to use the lives of you and me to tell those same people this wonderful news about what has been accomplished for them, so that then they may discover something experienced in them, so that they and we together may look forward to the day when we are in his presence and with him. When the author walks back onto the stage, the play is over.

The judge is at the door. That's what he says. We'll come to that this evening.

In that moment, there will be no opportunity for response. When Jesus comes again, it won't be in ignominy. It won't be incognito.

It will be in such a way that every eye will see him. In other words, it is going to transcend anything known to contemporary society, anything known in all of the world. And in that moment, all will cry.

Some will cry, Oh, Jesus, I have waited for you. And others in anguish will cry, Oh, Jesus, I didn't believe in you. I didn't believe you were coming.

I didn't believe I needed you. And in that moment, anguish and joy will settle where we are. That's, you see, what makes it so serious.

I'm going to pray two prayers. One, a prayer that you may want to make your own, either because of the events of today or just the events all piling in on today. And then a prayer of benediction.

Lord Jesus Christ, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before believed. But through you, I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope. I thank you for paying my debt, bearing my punishment, offering me forgiveness.

I turn now from my sin and receive you as my savior. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with all who believe now and until Jesus comes or calls us to himself. And then forevermore.

Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg. You're welcome to pass this message on to others, but please do not charge for this message or alter it without written permission from Alistair Begg or Truth For Life.

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