

“Debunking Religion: The 2nd Coming”

Acts 1:11

“Are we there yet?” I wish I had a dollar for every time Eric and I heard that on our family vacations.

- 10 minutes out of the driveway, “Are we there yet?”
- Every time we stopped for gas or a bathroom, “Are we there yet?”
- About every 5 minutes throughout a day-long drive, “Are we there yet?”

And then there is the inevitable follow-up question, “How much longer?”

Packed into their assigned seats (yes, the kitchen table and the family van both had to have assigned seating for our three children!), with toys, games, headphones and pillows, a call from the backseat arose, “Are we there yet?” - this is ALWAYS said in a whinny voice – “But how much longer?”

As long as there are children, these questions abound. But adults are really only a tiny bit more sophisticated in our questions. Where trouble lurks, humans have a tendency to look to the sky and demand an answer to the rhetorical question, “How much longer?”

The so-called 2nd coming of Jesus is the hope of believers that God is in control of things, and has a plan for the end of time as we know it. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the angels declared to the apostles, “‘People of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking at the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’” (Acts 1:11) www.gotquestions.org/second-coming

There are more apocalyptic scriptures which have been mis-interpreted to say a variety of rather bizarre things, like...

There will be a period of tribulation (some say we are enduring it right now) and then Jesus will come again in the sky to take believers into heaven. After that, there will be a millennium during which those who are left will have an opportunity to confess their sins. At the end of the millennium, there will be a final judgment.

Various adaptations of this 2nd coming theology are made... some say Jesus comes *after* the millennium instead of before. Others say Jesus will cause the dead to rise up out of their graves and then those who believe in him – living or dead – will disappear into the clouds with him while all the rest watch in disbelief. By the way, because the 2nd coming of Jesus is identified with the Mt. of Olives, most cemeteries in the United States are designed to have the head end of the casket on the west so that we can literally sit up facing the East on the day Jesus returns!

There is no doubt that the Biblical writers after Jesus' death believed he would come back as judge of the world. Jesus was, after all, a Jew. And as such in the first century, he would have expected God's intervention to establish a messianic kingdom on earth. Many believed it would happen in their lifetime. And then in 70 CE, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

"How much longer?" the people complained, "When will it ever end?"

Priests and early church leaders assured them that this present trial was only temporary. "Soon," they said, "Things will be set right. We won't be an enslaved people. We will be able to prosper. We will have enough to eat. We will worship our own God."

The new Jesus movement was in an even more precarious place. They were a fledgling organization of loosely connected house churches. Many of them were poor. Some were persecuted. Others were martyred. Their very lives were at stake. And if a parent died, death was almost certain for the rest of the family – spouse and children who couldn't be self-supportive. "How much longer?" the people cried, "We can't hold on."

And they were assured that Jesus would come back and things would be set right-side-up again. The faithful would have all they needed.

Obviously, the idea of a literal “very soon” espoused by John the Baptist, Paul, and even Jesus was wrong from the beginning. Jesus didn’t come back. Some 2,000 years have passed. “Are we there yet?” we wonder.

We live in a world where a young man can be slashed to death in the streets, where a man shoots his twin brother in the chest, where children are murdered in their own school. Human history grinds on, between the now and the not-yet. If there is a God, will he/she/it find a way to bring something beautiful and good out of a world that includes Bosnia and Rwanda and inner-city ghettos and jammed prisons?

What is interesting to me about 2nd Coming theology is how it ties into the normal human pattern when our lives unravel. Have we created the 2nd coming because we are like antsy children in the backseat needing reassurance?

A child is gravely ill. The parents sit in disbelief and cry out for God’s intervention. “How much longer, God?” “Is there no end to the days of pain, no relief from the poking and prodding?” “Set it right, God, children are not supposed to die before their parents.” The child dies. Aching parents are offered words supposed to be comforting, “You will be reunited. Your child is now an angel. Jesus needed another angel.”

An aging father is more and more depleted by mini-strokes - TIAs. With each episode, he loses more strength and ability. He is a reflection of his former self. It is a cruel demise. He finally sees death as a preferable outcome. “How much longer?” pray his wife and adult children. And they are consoled by “When it is your time, he’ll be waiting for you by the pearly gates.”

Injustice and poverty plague a young man. He watches with eyes too young to see as his brother is shot by gang members. His father disappears. His mother is

left to provide and works long hours even though he is home alone. He goes to live with his grandma. Life is difficult. The trouble keeps on coming. Will he ever get a break? And will it do any good? Is it too late to make a real difference in the cycle of poverty and bad decisions? “How much longer, God? Can’t you fix this... swoop in and make the world different.... Change the inequities ... kick some butt... put things right? Will we ever get there?”

All of a sudden, Jesus appearing in the clouds to make this tribulation go away seems more ideal. What a relief!

- All the things that are upside down in this world will be put right.
- People will get their just reward.
- Inequity and injustice will be cured.
- Bullies and mean people will be put to shame.
- There will be no grief – no pain – no suffering.
- Jesus will come in the clouds and fix everything.
- We will be reunited with all of our loved ones.
- We will have arrived at our final destination.

That’s one way to end the story. “And they lived happily ever after.”

Or, perhaps, Jesus comes again and again. To you. And me. He continues to come into our lives, comforting (or challenging) us. When we cry out, “Are we there yet?” he comes to show us the way. When we cry out, “How much longer?” he comes to comfort us. Perhaps that’s how he comes. Not in the clouds with a blast of the trumpet, but over and over again. To you. And me.