

What Do Presbyterians Believe about the Second Coming?



Session 1



Matthew 24:1-31

Session Objective

Participants will explore the different eschatological viewpoints held by contemporary believers and the apocalyptic genre found in Matthew in order to learn about the Reformed understanding of Jesus' second coming.

Faith Statement

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

—Nicene Creed

Session Overview

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Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

This session focuses on the question of whether we can determine when Christ will come again by looking for signs. While we cannot answer that question, we can look for Christ's presence among us now. Spend some time reflecting on your day, using the following questions:

- Where have you seen or felt God's presence?
- What has happened to be thankful for?
- What has happened that you need to let go of to be more attentive to God's presence?

Pray for God to remove the obstacles that keep you from feeling God's presence.



Understanding the Scripture

Eschatology is the term scholars use to talk about the end of time. The word comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, or "last." For Christians, it refers to the return of Christ and "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Presbyterians and others within the Reformed tradition strongly affirm this belief, but we don't claim that we can know much about *how* it will happen.

Matthew 24 falls into the section of Matthew's Gospel that can be referred to as *the little Apocalypse*. In it Matthew takes the apocalyptic genre found in Mark's Gospel and fleshes it out a little more for his readers. But we still find ourselves grappling with the question of what to do with this section. Matthew's focus was not on encouraging speculation about the signs or what they meant. Instead, he wanted the community of believers to be living into that time that Christ would return. The church was not to wait passively for the signs to appear and for the Son of Man to return. Instead, this was to be a time of the church's mission to all nations.

Matthew's repeated emphasis on the continuing presence of Christ may be taken to mean that the second coming has already happened. Matthew could be seen as telling his readers, "Don't look for signs and warnings about the second coming, because Jesus is already among us." His warnings of the false leaders who will attempt to decipher the signs and say, "He's over there!" or "No, he's here!" support that view. The fact is that Jesus is already here, and will come again.

When it comes to apocalyptic literature, perhaps we should admit what we know and what we don't know rather than spend time and energy trying to find hidden messages and clues. What don't we know? We don't know the time, the year, the month, the day, or the hour. What do we know? We know what we are supposed to be doing—performing acts of mercy, forgiveness, and peace that characterize this community of faith. For Matthew, the warnings and signs

were not clues that needed to be deciphered in order to calculate the actual time of Christ's second coming. Instead, they were to help the community prepare to meet the second coming whenever it was to happen by living as active citizens of the coming kingdom.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Nicene Creed is the oldest written theological statement of the church. Approved by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 381, the creed was developed as an answer to heresies concerning the personhood of Christ and the concept of the Trinity. In its final form, the creed states that Jesus is both human and divine. But in doing so, it leaves us with the mystery of this personhood. The sentence used for today's faith statement adds to that mystery. We believe that Christ will return, but we don't know when. We believe that when he returns he will be fully engaged in the actions of humanity, but we don't know how he will judge us. The best we can do is continue to live our lives faithfully in anticipation of the day we (whoever the church is whenever Christ comes) will actively participate in the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.



Teaching Today's Question

The apocalypse, the end times—these phrases have become popularized over the years by movies and TV shows. They make for good entertainment, but for people of faith what do they mean? Trying to figure out what to believe about the second coming of Christ can be confusing. Is this something we should be afraid of or something we should look forward to? The session will look at how the apocalyptic literature of the Gospels has been used and misused, and also discuss what the possibility of the second coming means for how we live out our faith.



Enter

Option A: Scavenger Hunt

- Two copies of "Clues" (Web Resource 1a), scissors, envelopes

Before the session, cut out two sets of clues from "Clues" (Web Resource 1a) and place the sets of clues into separate envelopes.

Divide the participants into two equal groups and give each group a prepared envelope. Explain that inside the envelope is a set of clues and that each team needs to find an item that could fit each clue. Possible items could include:

- Find something made with strings that is bigger than your foot. (shoe)
- Find something permanent that you can hold in one hand. (pen or permanent marker)
- Find something that is a real cutup. (scissors)
- Find something that is a portable library. (Bible)
- Find something that holds liquid even though it has a hole in it. (cup, glass, or bottle)
- Find something that spends its time just hanging around. (earring)

After each group has decided on an item for each clue, review the answers together. Explain that Scripture gives us some clues about Jesus' second coming, but Scripture lacks a comprehensive picture about how Jesus will return.

Option B: End of the World

- Computer with Internet access

Before the session, preview and download the video "Duck and Cover" available at [youtube.com/watch?v=-2kdpAGDu8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2kdpAGDu8s). Preview the video from the beginning through 5:11.

Explain to the participants that they are going to watch part of a public service film created in 1951 as part of the Federal Civil Defense Administration's campaign about what to do in case of a nuclear attack. While the preparations in this movie may seem pointless to us now, keep in mind that, for many, nuclear war meant the end of the world. Watch the video together before exploring the following questions:



- How do you think it would have felt to watch this film as an elementary school student?
- What are your thoughts about the end of the world? Is it something you have ever considered? Why or why not?
- How does Jesus' coming connect or not connect with the end of the world?
- What questions do you have about what the Bible says about the end of the world?



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, “What do Presbyterians believe about the second coming?” Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question or use the following questions to guide the discussion:



- Where have you heard or seen the phrase *second coming*?
- What films or television shows have portrayed or discussed the second coming of Christ?
- Do you think the second coming will happen in our lifetimes? Why or why not?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

O Lord, we pray “Your kingdom come,” but when will that happen? We long to know the answer, for we are people who like to be prepared. Help our faith in moments when it seems that day will be far away—if it will ever come—and help us to work and live each day as if your kingdom was already here. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Option B: Video Clip—*The Vicar of Dibley*



The Vicar of Dibley: Series 2 DVD (1996, NR) and movie-viewing equipment

Preview the following clip from “Engagement” on *The Vicar of Dibley: Series 2* DVD: 2:48–3:26. *Note:* The scene prior to this one includes questionable language and innuendo.

Explain that *The Vicar of Dibley* is a British comedy about a woman vicar (Anglican priest) in a village in England. The series focuses on the vicar and the residents of the village. In this scene, the vicar is talking with a rather naïve character named Alice about when Jesus will return. Watch the clip together before exploring the following questions:



- Is Alice’s understanding of the second coming (that we can know the day and time) the same as the understanding that is common in our culture?
- Do you think the vicar was right when she said it would be just lovely? Why or why not?
- What other understandings of the second coming exist in the world?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Eschatology 101

- Bibles, copies of “Eschatology” (Web Resource 1b), modeling clay

Distribute copies of “Eschatology” (Web Resource 1b) and read the information on the page together.

Divide the participants into four groups. Give each group some modeling clay and assign each group one of the following viewpoints: amillennialism, postmillennialism, premillennialism, or premillennial dispensationalism. Have each group create a scene out of modeling clay that brings their assigned viewpoint to life. After a few minutes, give each group an opportunity to show and explain their scene to the rest of the participants.

Make sure each participant has a Bible and together read Matthew 24:1–31. After reading each section of text (vv. 1–8, 9–14, 15–28, 29–31), explore the following:



- What one word describes your reaction to this passage?
- What does this section of text teach us about Jesus’ second coming?

Again read the paragraph about amillennialism and take another look at the amillennialist scene created earlier. Explore the following questions together:



- How can we interpret Matthew 24:1–31 in light of an amillennialist understanding of Jesus’ return?
- How might people with other viewpoints (premillennialists, postmillennialists, and premillennial dispensationalists) interpret this Scripture passage?



Express

Option A: Re-creation

- Modeling clay scenes from Explore

Ask: How does discussing Jesus’ return affect our lives as people of faith?

Have the participants work together to sculpt a response to this question using the modeling clay from the scenes created in Explore. If possible, display the sculpted response in a prominent location in your church building.



If you have fewer than eight participants in your group, work together to create a scene for each of the viewpoints out of modeling clay.

Option B: Read and Reflect

- Copies of “Looking Forward” (Web Resource 1c)

Distribute copies of “Looking Forward” (Web Resource 1c) and together read the quote on the page. Explore the following questions together:



- Which aspects of Jesus’ return are potentially scary? Are you scared by these things? Why or why not?
- According to this quotation, how are we called to respond to the news of Jesus’ return?
- How can you live your life joyfully anticipating the future?



Exit

Wrapping It Up

- Newsprint, marker

Write *What is the second coming?* at the top of a posted sheet of newsprint.

Give each participant an opportunity to respond to the posted question, recording the responses on the newsprint. Look at the responses and discuss what things have changed for the participants since the beginning of the session. Close with a prayer thanking God for time together to delve deeper into our faith questions.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after each session. Provide each family with a copy of this Web Resource.

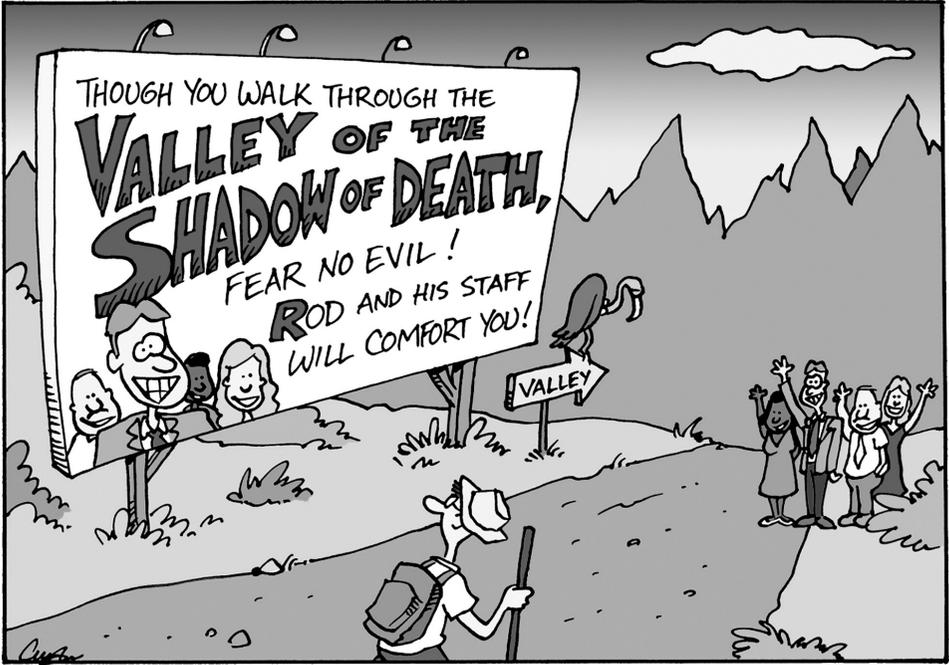
Mission Connections

Have your group sponsor an emergency-preparedness fair. They can schedule a specific time and invite various groups and agencies (the Red Cross, local government entities such as the fire department, and so on) to set up displays and to give presentations on how people can be prepared for emergencies.

Web Connections

As a group, read and discuss the following articles from *Presbyterians Today*:

- gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/today/end-world/
- gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/today/eschatology/



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