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For the long haul

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For those who grew up in the revivalistic tradition, we heard the same basic sermon every Sunday: "You are sinner. Repent or you're going to hell. And you better get to it, because Jesus could return at any second and catch you unprepared."

I can't tell you how many times I heard a preacher say something like, "The Lord Jesus could return at any moment! He could return before I finish preaching this morning!" And then the speaker would preach for so long, I thought that's exactly what he was trying to achieve: Preach till Jesus got there.

I didn't like this sort of exhortation. I was, after all, a teenager being told how big a sinner I was, but didn't feel like I had gotten to sin very much yet. I hadn't got to do much of anything! I hadn't traveled, hadn't earned my driver's license, hadn't had sex, hadn't turned twenty-one or really even lived. If Jesus was content waiting all these centuries before returning to earth, just to show up at this particular blip in history to interrupt my simple little plans, then I concluded it would be a raw deal.

My feelings about so much of the "Second Coming" preaching I hear still makes me cranky (but for a different reason than when I was a teenager). We are so absolutely convinced that we are living in the final chapter of human history – on the last page, if not within the last sentence – that we are in danger of giving away the future.

Growing up in a tradition where the impending, imminent return of Christ was a pillar of our faith, the question was always asked, "What if Jesus came back today?" That's a good question, no doubt. But here is a question that might be better: "What if he doesn't?"



What if Jesus does not come back today...or tomorrow...or next year...or next decade...or next century? What kind of world do we want to leave for our descendants? What kind of world will we have then? If we aren't prepared for the long haul, prepared to persevere into a distant future, then have we not given up on actually living the faith we profess?

We who are Christian could take a lesson from the not-for-profit organization, "The Long Now Foundation." It has been around since 1996, and it hopes to be around much, much longer. The Long Now Foundation has one essential goal: To reverse the trend in our culture of short-term thinking.

The founders believe that our "accelerating technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, and the distractions of personal multi-tasking" have given us "a pathologically short attention span." They want to provide some sort of corrective balance to our short-sightedness, and encourage "the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where 'long-term' is measured" in centuries, not months or years.

Illustrating this long-term thinking, Long Now is building a massive clock – a 21st century version of Stonehenge – that will tick for the next 10,000 years. Eventually the clock will be placed in a cave in Nevada's Great Basin National Park. The point of the clock is not to mark time; it is to rekindle our hope in the future.

The church, allegedly the most hopeful community in the world, could use some of that thinking, because Jesus will probably not return before you finish reading this article. He'll probably not return today, and likely not return in your lifetime (If he does, I will happily apologize to each and every one of you publicly, along with an exhaustive list of all I have been/am wrong about).

No, "God is not slow about keeping his promises," but we must know that God works on a timetable that is all his own. And yes, maybe Jesus will return tomorrow or next year. But it might be next millennium. Regardless, if it's sooner or later, we have to be more than prepared. We have to be prepared to faithfully persevere no matter how long the wait.

Ronnie McBrayer is a syndicated columnist, blogger, pastor, and author of multiple books. Visit his website at www.ronniemcbrayer.net.

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