

Lesson 15

WHY SOME CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN AN ANY MOMENT RETURN OF CHRIST

One of the major differences between a pretribulational rapturist (dispensational premillennialist) and a posttribulational rapturist (Historic premillennialist) is over the issue of imminency. Does the Bible teach an any moment coming of Christ or a soon or near coming of Christ?

The doctrine of imminency as taught by pretribs is that there are no intervening events between the present moment and the coming of Christ for His church and, therefore, the rapture of the church may occur at any moment. They claim that the church is not looking for signs but for the Son who can return at any time. Pretribs insist that an intervening tribulational period would destroy the doctrine of imminency.

A posttrib, however, says that the return of the Lord is not imminent and certain prophesied events must occur first before Christ returns in His second advent for the church. A posttrib insists that certain Biblical signs must precede the coming of Christ.

The issue is not whether Jesus Christ can return at any moment (all would agree He can), but the question is will He return at any moment in light of the Biblical teaching on the subject.

The real problem is how a single event, the second coming of Christ, can be described as sudden and unexpected, on the one hand, and yet heralded by signs on the other hand (Mark 13:5-30). Pretribs have tried to solve this problem by stating that Christ's coming must be in two phases: a sudden, unexpected return for the church before the tribulation period and an expected return for Israel (preceded by signs) at the second advent. Posttribs have answered this question by stating that the second advent of Christ only comes unexpected to the unsaved world but the true church will be looking for signs, realizing the Son's (Jesus Christ) return is near.

Pretribulational Proofs for an "Any Moment" Coming of Christ

Christ's Coming is a Comfort

There are verses in the Bible that speak of Christ's coming as a great comfort to Christians and to go through the events of the tribulation period would not be a hope of comfort but a hope of misery. Therefore, the church must be raptured out of the world before the tribulation period.

John 14:1-3. Pretribs argue that this verse teaches Christ will return and take Christians home to heaven and it says nothing about going through a time of tribulation.

Refutation:

1. This verse says nothing about an imminent return; it merely says Christ will take the disciples to heaven but it does not say when.
2. In Matthew 24, Christ taught these same disciples just two days before about His glorious return and the signs, which would precede it. Are we to conclude that Christ two days later was teaching a different return and a different hope for His disciples?

1 Thess. 4:13-18. The dead in Christ are the church who alone can be in Christ, so this is a special coming for the church before the tribulation and this alone would be a comforting hope.

Refutation:

1. This section does not say the coming of Christ is imminent, or there is no time factor given.
2. This section will occur when the trumpet is blown and that seems to be at the second advent (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:51-52).

1 Thess. 1:10: Christians are to be constantly waiting for the Son, not signs, from heaven.

Refutation:

1. This verse does not say Christ will return at any moment.
2. This verse says Christians are to be waiting patiently indicating that there may be a long delay in Christ's coming.

Conclusion: There are several passages in the New Testament which refer to the second advent (and pretribs admit this) which are set forth as a ground of comfort to Christians in the church.

2 Thess. 1:7: Believers who are suffering persecution are promised rest at Christ's coming (revelation - *apokolupsis*) which is an obvious reference to the second coming and not a pretribulational rapture

Matthew 24:44-47: These verses promise the watchful believer great reward when Christ comes (second advent) even though the tribulation comes first.

Acts 1:11: This verse gives the comforting words from the angel that the departing Christ would come again even as they had just seen Him go.

From these passages it is not the teaching of the New Testament that only an any moment hope of Christ's coming can be of comfort to believers.

Exhortation to Holy Living In Light of the Coming of Christ

Christians are exhorted to walk holy lives in light of the coming of Christ and these exhortations would not have much meaning if Christ were not going to return at any moment.

1 Thess. 5:6: Christians are told to be "alert" (watch) and "sober" in light of Christ's coming, and this would hardly be a realistic command if His return was not imminent.

Refutation:

1. This context says specifically that the Day of the Lord will not overtake true believers in Christ, for they will be watching for His coming (second advent) (2 Thess. 5:4).
2. This passage does not specifically state an any moment return of Christ.

1 Cor. 1:1, 8: Christians are to live godly lives in light of an any moment return of Christ for His church.

Refutation:

1. This verse does not say Christ will return at any moment.
2. "The revelation" seems to be the second advent not a pretrib rapture.
3. Christians are told to be "eagerly awaiting" which seems to imply a delay in His coming; therefore, we must wait patiently.

Titus 2:13: Christians are to be constantly looking for the Blessed Hope which must be an imminent return of Christ before the tribulation or it would not be a blessed hope to go through the tribulation.

Refutation:

Christians are told to be looking for the Blessed Hope but this verse does not say it will happen at any moment.

The "blessed hope" is the same event at the "appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, which is an obvious reference to the second advent, and the second advent will be preceded by signs before the Son comes.

1 John 3:1-3; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:4; 1 Tim. 6:14; James 5:8.

Refutation:

None of these verses state explicitly that Christ may come at any moment.

These verses urge the believer to give attention to some aspect or another of his Christian life in the light of, and while looking for, the coming of Christ.

Conclusion. The New Testament teaches that Christians are to have godly lives in light of the second advent which is not imminent and which is preceded by signs.

Matthew 24:42—25:30: Christ concludes the Olivet discourse with exhortations to live holy lives in light of His second coming, which is not imminent.

2 Peter 3:1-14: All pretribs see 2 Peter 3:10 (world destroyed by fire) as occurring at the end of the millennium, and yet Christians are exhorted to live holy lives in light of this event (2 Peter 3:11). Here Peter exhorts Christians to holy living in light of an event, which must be at least 1,007 years away according to the pretrib timetable. This event is not imminent but Christians are to live godly lives in light of it. The coming of Christ, according to posttribs is not imminent but we are exhorted to live godly lives in light of it.

The Predicted Suddenness of the Coming of Christ

The Bible teaches the coming of Christ will be “as a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2, 4) and occur “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:51). This implies that it may occur at any moment and this supports a pretrib rapture.

Refutation:

The Lord’s coming “as a thief in the night” is used six times in the New Testament (Matt. 14:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 3:3; Rev. 16:15). Four of these passages are obvious references to the second advent (Matt. 14:43, Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 16:15) and two are open to debate (1 Thess. 5:2, 4; Rev. 3:3). It seems as though all these verses are referring to the same event.

2 Thess. 5:1-4 states clearly that the Day of the Lord will not take true believers by surprise, for they will be looking for it, but it will come unexpectedly upon unbelievers.

Rev. 3:3 just says that the church of Sardis will not be watching for the coming of Christ, if they do not wake up out of their spiritual indifferences.

1 Cor. 15:51 says the Christian will receive his resurrected body “in a moment” occurring at the second advent. There is a distinct difference between “in a moment” (a split second) and “at any moment.” Whenever Christians get their new bodies, it will take place “in a moment.”

The Early Church Held the Doctrine of Imminency

Some of the church fathers imply that they believed in an imminent return of Christ, which supports a pretrib rapture theory.

Refutation:

Some of the early fathers did believe in imminency and some did not. The deciding factor seems to have been their viewpoint as to whether or not they were in the tribulation period. When they felt they were, they believed in imminency; when they felt they were not, they did not believe in imminency. However, the early fathers knew nothing of a pretrib rapture.