

Lesson 16

WHY SOME CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN A “SOON” OR “NEAR” COMING OF CHRIST

Many Christians believe that Christ will return after the tribulation period and that the rapture of the church will occur just before the second advent of Christ. This is referred to as the posttribulation rapture theory. Signs will precede Christ's second advent and these signs must be fulfilled before the second advent takes place. For a posttrib there is no imminent return of Christ until the tribulation begins and the signs of Christ's coming appear on the scene of history.

The posttrib rapture has been the position of most Bible scholars throughout the history of the church. Until 1830, all premillennialists were posttrib rapturists. After 1830, pretrib rapturists have gained much prominence.

Posttribs search the Scriptures and do not find even one verse which states Christ will return at any moment. They see verses such as 1 Thess. 1:10, 1 Cor. 1:7 and Tit. 2:13 as stating that Christians are to be looking for Christ and waiting patiently for His return but they do not see any hints that He is coming at any moment. Posttribs do see that in Matthew 24, Christ taught His coming would be preceded by signs (Matt. 24:4-14; 15-24; 29-31). It is when these signs appear that Christians will know that Christ is near (Matt. 24:32-33). These signs will quicken the Christian's excitement for Christ's return, for they will know their redemption is drawing close (Luke. 21:26-28).

All Christians, even pretribs, are looking for signs and it is these signs, which cause him to look for the soon coming of Christ.

Support for a Posttribulation Rapture

Parables of Christ

In the various parables Christ set forth concerning His second advent, He seemed to teach that there would be a delay in His coming; therefore, it was not imminent and He never intended it to be imminent.

Luke 12:36-48 (cf. Matt. 24:42-51). There is a blessing for those slaves (Christians) who will be watching (on the alert) when the master (Christ) comes. He may not come in the second or even the third watch, indicating there will be a delay. Some steward-slaves (professing Christians who are not born again) will conclude that Christ “will be a long time coming” and they will get disheartened and beat the other slaves. Christ will come and judge these professing Christians with the unbelievers. The words “long time coming” indicate a delay.

Luke 19:11-28. This parable speaks of the nobleman as Christ and the slaves as Christians. The nobleman went into a “distant country” and left his slaves with certain responsibilities. Finally, he came back to reward them. The “far country” indicates that Christ would be away for quite some time and then He would return.

Matthew 25:1-10. The Bridegroom (Christ) delayed and the ten virgins became drowsy. This indicates a long delay, not imminency.

Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20)

When Christ gave His disciples the Great Commission, he indicated this would go on until “the end of the age” which is the second advent of Christ (Matt. 13:36-42). The disciples must have understood that it would take a great deal of time to evangelize the world. Therefore, they probably did not expect Christ to return at any moment. Their task was to preach the gospel until He did come, whenever that was. Furthermore, Christ said that the end would not come until the gospel is preached in the whole world (Matt. 24:14).

Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:4-14; 15-24; 29-31)

Christ taught His disciples that signs would precede His coming (tribulation, abomination of desolation, world-wide preaching of the gospel, supernatural phenomena in the sun and moon, etc.).

Apostasy and the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:1-3)

The Day of the Lord (Christ's second advent) Paul says cannot come until the apostasy (departure from true Christianity) and the Man of Lawlessness is revealed first. It is only logical that it would take time for the apostasy to develop and the stage of history set for the Man of Lawlessness.

Present Position of Christ (Acts 3:20-21)

Christ ascended to heaven and this verse states that Christ must stay in heaven until the time of restitution of all things (the establishment of the earthly kingdom as predicted by the Old Testament prophets). This will occur at the second advent.

Times of Gentiles (Luke 21:24 cf. 21:27).

The "times of the Gentiles" indicates the period of time Israel shall be dominated by Gentile powers but this will end at the second advent. This certainly implies a long period of time.

Paul Expecting Death Not Rapture (2 Tim. 4:6-8)

In his last imprisonment, Paul seems to be waiting for death not a rapture. He sensed he would die before Christ came.

Peter's Martyrdom (John 21:18-19)

Christ predicted Peter's martyrdom so Christ could not have come back until after Peter's death. This event had to occur first. Christ's coming in the second advent was not imminent to Peter.

Churches' Continuing Ministry

The Pastoral Epistles teach the continuing ministry of the church, which takes time.

Practical Questions for a Posttribulational Rapturist

Question: How can a posttrib rapture incite to holy living if Christ does not return at any moment? We will not be ready if we are not expecting Him at any time.

Answer: The purifying influence of the second coming does not lie in the fact that Christ might return any moment and Christians might "get caught up," but in the fact that Christians will have to give an account to Christ for what they did for Him at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). At the Judgment Seat the whole life of a Christian will pass in review before the Lord. Jesus may not come today, but what we do today He will examine when He does come and that is what motivates a Christian to holiness of life. Furthermore, we will all meet the Lord by death or at His coming and will give an account.

Question: Does looking for signs keep one from looking for the Son?

Answer: Signs merely incite the Christian to look harder for the Son. The disciples were to wait a complex of events, which might begin any moment, the second advent being a part of the complex, but not the first event.

Question: Are not Christians told to watch for Christ?

Answer: Yes, and the signs are indicators that Christ is not too far away. The thrust of Christ's admonition to "watch" in the Olive Discourse is not that Christ might return before the disciples expected, i.e. at any moment, but that He might delay longer than they expected and thus they might become negligent and lose sight of the hope of His coming entirely. Christians are to be ready for the Lord's coming because of the uncertainty of the time, not its imminence, and the "watching" is to be understood as faithful service, not eschatological frenzy.

The problem of the Thessalonians was that some in that church thought Christ was going to return at any moment and so they stopped working for a living (2 Thess. 3).

Question: If Christ cannot return until after the tribulation, then it would be possible to predict the exact day of Christ's return if the tribulation is to begin with the Antichrist making a covenant with the Jews. At least one would be able to count the last 3 ½ years of the tribulation from the time of the abomination of desolation

is set up. However, this would contradict Christ's own words who said that no one knows "the day or hour" of His return (Matt. 24:36).

Answer: Christ said that the days of the tribulation would be "cut short" or "shortened" for the sake of the elect (Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20). Apparently God will not allow the tribulation (2,520 days - 7 years) to run its full course. While it is true that no one will know the "day or hour" of Christ's coming, they will know approximately the time and in that sense Christ's coming will be near or soon.