

The Second Coming of Christ

I offer the following with some hesitancy! Some people asked for some further information concerning the pre-tribulation rapture (a term I will define soon!). I said I would and so here it is.

However, it must again be said these issues are secondary and this paper is offered as an encouragement to further thought rather than as a basis for division. A person's view on the return of Christ (whether pre or post tribulation) has no bearing on the truth of the gospel and our means of salvation in Christ. The position this paper presents and the one it critiques both hold to an historic coming of Christ as the basis of the Christian hope. It is important we keep this in perspective as we wrestle together with what the Scripture's say.

The ultimate issue is of course – what do the Scriptures say. We can never go wrong if we bring our thinking to the bar of Scripture and seek to see what view IT holds of the end. You may not agree with the views presented here, but if this paper causes us to dig further and reflect harder on the word, my goal is achieved!

A definition of terms

In the thought of many (part of what is called a 'dispensational' position) the second coming of Christ will not be one event but two, separated in time by what is called the great tribulation (said to be that event referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24:21).

The timing is as follows. Christ will return at some time in our future, *secretly*.¹ At that time he will 'rapture' all true believers up to be with him in heaven. After this the great tribulation (a time of intense suffering) will occur which the dispensationalist says will last seven years. At the end of the seven years, Christ will return again, but this time publicly. Those who hold this view therefore believe there will be *two* returns of Christ still to come.² The belief in an earlier return of Christ is the called the *Pre-tribulation rapture* view. It is a helpful title because it indicates that both sides acknowledge there will be a rapture (the capturing up of believers into the air to be with the Lord), it is just that some hold that this rapture will happen *prior* to the great tribulation and others insist it will happen *after* the tribulation, at the very end and as of a piece with the one and only return of Christ to wrap up history (the *post-tribulation* view).

This understanding of a pre-tribulation rapture (and so two returns of Christ) is driven by at least four pieces of evidence.

The **first** is the way Christ's coming is talked about in John, Jude and 1 Thessalonians. In John 14:3 and Jude 14 (and perhaps 1 Thess 4:15-17) Jesus is said to come *for* his people. But in 1 Thess 3:13 he is said to

¹ The use of 'secret' relates to the visibility of Christ to the world in this so-called first coming. He will not reveal himself to all but only the born again believer. So although the sudden absence of many Christians will make this event 'not so secret', this coming is distinguished from the final coming because Christ will be unseen by the world.

² In addition to this thinking the classic dispensationalist also believes that at this second appearing, Christ will not only judge evil but he will also bind Satan and set up the millennial kingdom with Israel back in the land of Palestine.

come *with* his people. Dispensationalists say that it is not possible for Jesus to come *with* his people unless he has first come *for* them.³ Therefore, the inference is that there must be two comings.

Secondly and of a piece with this is some important terminology attached to each instalment of Christ's coming. Dispensationalists often draw a sharp distinction between the biblical language of 'parousia' (Greek for 'coming') and 'apocalypse' (Greek for 'revelation'). 'Parousia' is said to be the Bible's way of referring to Christ's secret coming prior to the tribulation when he raptures the church out of the world (The 'parousia' is said by many to *only* refer to this secret coming). 'Apocalypse' is said to be the Bible's way of speaking of Jesus' public appearing at the end of the tribulation.⁴

The **third** piece of evidence is the claim that it is inconceivable that the church will go through the period of tribulation. The logic goes like this – the tribulation will be an outpouring of God's wrath and the church is certainly not destined for wrath, so the inference is that church must therefore be absent during the tribulation period. Passages such as Revelation 3:10 are brought to bear.

The **final** piece of evidence is the concern to protect the imminence of Christ's return. That is, the pre-tribulationist is concerned to protect the possibility that Christ could come at any second. He could even come before you finish reading this paper! This infers that there must be two comings of Christ in our future. It is clear from places like 2 Thess 2:3 that there is a coming of Christ that cannot happen until certain conditions have been met – such as the revealing of the 'man of lawlessness'. But if that is the only coming of Christ then we know it couldn't happen at any moment because the 'man of lawlessness' hasn't yet been revealed. But if there were *another* coming, a secret coming, then this could happen *prior* to the revealing of the 'man of lawlessness' and so could happen at any moment. Hence the logic of 'imminence' or 'any moment' return infers the need for a pre- tribulation return of Christ. This is then identified with 1 Thess 4 and the rapture event.

Emotionally this last issue is very important for pre-tribulationists because it protects what they perceive to be a very important motive for Christian living – knowing Christ might return at any moment. If I know this I will be far more careful in how I live so that I won't be caught out by his sudden and unexpected return.

How to proceed?

This paper considers the biblical evidence for each of the above evidences.

First suggested evidence

Should the differences between Jesus' coming 'for' his people and his coming 'with' his people demand two comings?

Not if the language of "meeting" the Lord in the air (in 1 Thess 4:17) is understood rightly. The word *apantesin* is used in two other places in the New Testament: Matthew 25:6 and Acts 28:15. In both places it refers to a meeting in which people go out to meet a dignitary and then accompany him in to the place from which they came out. One of these, Matthew 25:6, is even a parable of the second

³ See John MacArthur *The Second Coming*, p87 for this popular understanding.

⁴ There is third Greek word that is said to only refer to his 'revelation' at the end of the tribulation. It is the word "epiphany", or 'manifestation'. It is certainly helpful to have two different terms for each instalment of Christ's second coming – the parousia happening before the tribulation after which Christ returns publicly in his 'apocalypse' – the question must be asked however, does the Bible hold to this distinction?

coming and so a strong argument that this is the sense of the meeting in 1 Thess. 4:17".⁵ That is, we rise to meet the Lord in the air and then welcome him to earth as king. This easily accounts for the differences in language used in both passages and so removes the need to suggest two comings.

Second suggested evidence

Does the Bible's use of "parousia" (coming) and "apocalypse" (revealing) suggest the writers believed in two separate instalments in Jesus' second coming?

On face value (a plain reading) it is hard to discern any indication that the writers of Scripture intended any distinction in time between the words "*parousia*" and "apocalypse" (and "epiphany" for that matter). In fact, it looks very much like they thought of Christ's *parousia* as the same event as his revealing and manifestation.

The language seems to be used interchangeably.

- 1 Thess 4:14-17 is said to refer to the first instalment (because it refers to Jesus coming *for* his people). It is called the '*parousia*' of the lord.

"We who are alive, who are left until the '**parousia**' of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever."

But just a few verses before, a passage said to refer to the second instalment (because it refers to Jesus coming 'with' his saints) is also called the '*parousia*'.

"And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the '**parousia**' of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." 1 Thess 3:13

At first sight Paul seems to consider these two comings as the same event (coming *for* and coming 'with') since he calls them both the "*parousia*" of the Lord.

But further, 2 Thess 2:8 suggests the '*parousia*' will be the event at which the man of lawlessness will be destroyed. "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his '**parousia**'." On a plain reading this places the '*parousia*' at the end of the tribulation, not before (as dispensationalists suggest).

Dispensationalists have noted the difficulty presented by 2 Thess 2:8 and suggest that, at least in this verse, '*parousia*' means 'presence' rather than 'coming'. That is, it is the manifestation of his current 'presence' (that now exists because of his '*parousia*', or coming 7yrs previously) which leads to the annihilation of the man of lawlessness. It is true that '*parousia*' can also mean 'presence' but only where

⁵ A quote from John Piper's paper on post tribulation coming of Christ

the context demands it. In 2 Thessalonians there is nothing in the context that demands it be read as 'presence'. Since this is Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, it would be very odd that he would change the way he has used a word in his previous letter without giving any indication he was doing so. Someone at Thessalonica would be hard pressed to guess a word that has previously meant 'coming' now means 'presence'.

Since 'parousia' occurs in all the above references it would seem the most natural way of reading to see them all referring to the same event, an event that happens *after* the tribulation.

Added to this is the use of 'parousia' in Matthew 24. Throughout that chapter it clearly only refers to the *final* return of Christ which will be public and bring about final judgement (see 24:3, 27, 37, 39 which all use 'parousia' for coming. Chapter 25:31 uses a different word for 'coming' but it is clearly the final return of Christ to judge).⁶

One is hard pressed to see any context in which 'parousia' means anything other than the final public return of Christ to take his people to himself *and* judge those who have rejected him.

Another difficulty for this tight distinction between terms is the use of 'apocalypse' in 2 Thess 1:6, 7. It reads "For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict (gk *thlipsin* tribulation)⁷ you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed ('apocalypse') from heaven with his mighty angels."

The clear implication here is that the time at which the Thessalonians will find relief from the tribulation is at the 'apocalypse' of the Lord. However, if pre-tribulationists are right, Christians have been enjoying rest with the Lord for 7 years. According to pre-tribulationists the next event on the calendar for the first readers of 1 Thessalonians would be the secret rapture, not the apocalypse. That should be the event that would give them relief from their suffering. Why didn't Paul speak of that event as their hope?

It has been said in reply that this verse was written for future generations of Christians who would be converted during the tribulation period and so for them, this word would be uniquely relevant. But one must ask whether the apostle Paul would write to one generation of Christians something that *could never* be true for them thinking it would one day be true for another group! If this reply is right then effectively Paul told an untruth to the first readers with the thought that it would be true for later readers.

1 Thessalonians 2:3 is also odd on dispensational reading. If Paul were a pre-tribulationist why did he not simply say in that verse that the Christians don't need to worry about whether the day of the Lord is here by simply pointing out that all the Christians are still around? Instead he talks just the way you would expect someone to talk who believes Christ's second coming will occur after the tribulation. He

⁶ It is worth noting that even someone like John MacArthur (strongly pre-tribulation rapture) acknowledges that the secret rapture is never mentioned in Matthew 24 (pg 143). This impacts the popular interpretation of 24:40, 41. MacArthur rightly (in my opinion) points out that this isn't describing the secret rapture but rather the taking of one for judgement at the final coming of Christ. The context simply doesn't allow for the intrusion of a brand new idea – the secret rapture.

⁷ This is the same Greek word that is used in Matthew 24 – v9, 21, 29.

tells them that they should not think that the day of the Lord is here because the apostasy and the man of lawlessness have not yet appeared.

Two additional notes might be added.

1. When the scriptures talk of the Christian hope it is often said that our hope is the hope of the 'apocalypse' or 'epiphany' of the Lord. See 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 4:13; Titus 2:13, 14 (where 'reveal' translates 'apocalypse' and 'appearing' translates 'epiphany').

2. It is hard to see that the passages that are supposed to refer to a secret first coming actually are secret. For instance, it is very difficult to see in 1 Thess 4:15-17 any indication of a secret coming of Christ. His coming will be attended with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the heavenly trumpet. All these suggest anything but secrecy. It appears very clear that Jesus will be seen by all. Matthew 24:27 says the *parousia* of the Lord will be like lightening is seen from east and west and v31 says that it will also be with a loud trumpet. The point is surely that the *parousia* will be anything but secret!

Third Suggested evidence

Will Christians go through the tribulation?

The verse used often in this connection is Revelation 3:10 where the risen Christ promises to 'keep you from the hour of trial'. But two things need to be noted. Firstly, it was written to the church of Philadelphia. Are we right to assume that a promise to them applies to all Christians in a future period of seven-year tribulation? If so, shouldn't we also say 2:10 applies to them as well? If read consistently this would mean that Christians in the future tribulation period will literally be thrown into prison for ten days, die and then be given the crown of life.

But it is also important to note that the same language – 'keep from' is used in John 17:15. There Jesus promises his disciple that he will "keep them from" the evil one. This is the same language. But note it is in the context of also insisting that he won't 'take them out of the world'. The point here is that being kept from something doesn't not necessarily mean being taken out of the world. The better understanding from the Bible is that Christians will be enabled to endure through the tribulation rather than being taken out of it. They will be guarded from it so that they won't suffer it as the wrath of God upon them.

Many NT passages speak of the expectation that Christians *will* endure tribulation – John 16:33; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10; 2 Cor 1:4, 8, 10 and so on (in each place the Greek word tribulation has been translated by another English word – i.e. 'trouble', 'trials', 'hardships', etc). See some related ideas in 1 Peter 4:17; Hebrews 12:3-11.

Fourth Suggested evidence

The following will require careful thought since it runs counter to long held and cherished notions.

The sense that Christ's return is 'imminent' is often used to infer a secret rapture. But as one prominent commentator has noted (Don Carson), "The truth is that the biblical evidence nowhere unambiguously endorses the 'any second' view and frequently militates against it..."⁸

Note firstly the discussion of Jesus at the end of Matthew 24 and into 25. There are a series of parables that are often used to infer an 'any second' return of Christ. For instance, note 24:42 "Therefore keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." But... the context clearly demonstrates that this 'coming' we are to be ready for is the *final* return of Christ to judge the world, not a secret pre-tribulation rapture. As argued earlier, there is no hint of a secret rapture coming in this chapter. It simply isn't on view. Even pre-tribulation rapture writers agree on this point. In fact, the very last parable in chapter 25 – the sheep and goats – is again focused only on the final return of Christ to judge. Both these chapters therefore only relate to that final return.

This therefore means that the teaching through these chapters on the need to be ready for the return of Christ relates to being ready for the final coming – a coming that can't come without prior conditions being met!

So whatever it means to live in light of the 'imminent' return of Christ it doesn't necessarily mean that it will be an 'any second' return. But being aware that there are conditions to be met before it occurs in no way lessens the truth of Jesus' words in Matthew 24 and 25.

One writer (John Piper) argues persuasively that the commands to "watch" do not lose their meaning if the second coming is not an any-moment one.⁹ In Matt. 25:1-13 the Lord returns when all ten maidens are asleep. Yet the lesson at the end of the parable is, "Watch!" The point is that watching is not gazing up for an any-moment-return of the Lord. If it were, then none of the wise maidens would have ever taken time out to sleep. "Watch" is more about being morally vigilant and so ready at all times by doing your duty. The wise maidens fulfilled the command to be watchful by making sure their lanterns were full – even when they weren't keeping an eye out for an any-moment return.

The point of the numerous passages about the surprising and sudden nature of Christ's return is that it is only surprising (and therefore sudden) to those who aren't Christians. See Luke 12:46 where the point is that if a servant gets drunk thinking that his master is delayed and will not catch him-that very servant will be surprised and taken off guard. But as 1 Thess. 5:1-5 says, "You (believers) are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief." It won't be a surprise to us (or even necessarily sudden) because we have been let into God's plans and so can read the times and are ready.

This is again confirmed by Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24. Christ's return will take people by surprise in the same way the flood took people by surprise. But remember that the flood didn't happen suddenly. It was '40 days of rain' coming! Over that period there would have been many signs of its imminent arrival without it necessarily being an 'any second' arrival.

⁸ Carson, Matthew commentary, p490.

⁹ See John Piper, 'Desiring God Ministries' website. Look in 'search' for 'post tribulationism'.

The great concern of the call to 'watch' is that we might be morally and spiritually vigilant (the meaning of 'watchful' in most contexts) lest we be lulled asleep and fall prey to the deceits of the last days and so not read the signs and so be overtaken in the judgment.

It is worth adding that the reference discussed previously (2 Thess 2:3) must imply that at least some Christians – the Thessalonian Christians – lived aware that a number of events must still occur before Christ would return – the apostasy and the man of lawlessness had yet to be revealed.

The second coming does not lose its moral power if it happens after the tribulation. New Testament moral incentive is not that we should fear being caught doing evil, but that we should so love the appearing of the Lord that we want to be pure as the Lord is pure, for whom we hope, as 1 John 3:1-3 says.

More could be said, but there is enough to chew over!

Summary

For mine! The suggested evidence for a distinction in 'comings' falls very far short of being convincing. The simple fact is there is not one verse in the NT that teaches a secret rapture prior to a great tribulation. The theology of pre-tribulation rapture is based on inference rather than explicit straightforward references. This in itself doesn't mean it can't be true but it does therefore mean it is far less certain than has often been assumed to be the case.

But!

Although some believers differ over this point, the truths we hold in common are very precious. Christ will return. He will take those that are his to be with him and he will judge the living and the dead. As important as it is to think through theological issues, we must not let this issue distract us from core concerns – living for Christ and witnessing to Christ in these last days.

Andrew Heard 2010