

Imminent Return of Christ

by David Dunlap

The doctrine of the imminent return of Christ is a great comfort and motivation to the Christian, providing a hope for the future, a comfort in sorrow, and a steadfast purpose for today.

Scripture: Matthew 24:48, Luke 12:40, John 14:1, 1 Corinthians 1:7, Philippians 3:20, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 9:28, Revelation 22:7

Topics: "Eschatology", "Holy Living"

Description

David Dunlap preaches on the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ for His bride, the church, emphasizing its importance in the Old and New Testaments and its impact on holy living, missionary work, and comfort in times of sorrow. The doctrine of imminency is not only a source of comfort but also essential for interpreting Holy Scripture, unlocking hidden truths and guiding believers in understanding biblical prophecy. Despite historical misinterpretations, the New Testament extensively supports the belief in Christ's imminent return, urging Christians to be watchful, ready, and actively engaged in spreading the Gospel, especially in light of the nearness of His coming.

Transcript

"Behold, I come quickly..." Revelation 22:7

The soon coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for His bride, the church, occupies a large and important position in the word of God. The Old and New Testaments in type and teaching fully expound this doctrine of the imminent return of Christ. In the writings of the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation the Lord Himself and the Apostles affirm, exhort and instruct concerning it in exact detail. This doctrine has long stirred the church to separation from the world and holy living, and has been used to thrust out missionaries into the far corners of the globe. Yet the scope of this doctrine extends further than a powerful challenge to holy living and service; it is also a tender comfort to the soul amid the sorrows and anguish of life. Christ's words to His disciples have long been a balm for many in sorrow. "Let not your hearts be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; so that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-2). Seasoned saints in the twilight of life have often testified to the transforming power of the "Blessed Hope" and "Trump of God". In emphasizing the practical effect of this doctrine in the life of a believer, theologian Dr. Alva McClain writes,

"To the churches on earth Christ gives a thrice-repeated reminder of something which must never be forgotten; for it will give courage in the hour of battle, strength in our weakness, and hope in the hour of despair. Let us hear Him as He speaks: 'Behold I come quickly'(Rev. 22:7); 'Behold, I come quickly' (Rev. 22:12); 'Surely, I come quickly' (Rev. 22:21)." (1)

However, the doctrine of imminency is not merely a great comfort and motivation to the Christian, but it is essential in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. A true understanding of the offices of Christ, the nature of the Church, the divine purposes of the Great Tribulation, the Millennium and the eternal state hinge upon the careful interpretation of biblical prophecy. It is the very key which unlocks portions of the Bible that have long remained hidden by medieval theology. A one-time professor of Systematic Theology at Wheaton College, Dr. Henry Thiessen, writes passionately about the doctrines crucial importance to Bible interpretation,

"The recognition of the fundamental character of the doctrine of the Lord's return is the key to the Scriptures. Many Bible doctrines, ordinances, promises, and types cannot be fully understood except in the light of the doctrine of the Lord's return." (2)

Unfortunately, down through the centuries the importance of the imminent return of Christ for the church has eluded many Christians. Frequently, in theological works on the study of "Last Things", especially during the Middle Ages and Reformation period, the subject of the personal return of Christ for the church was completely omitted. It is only within the last 170 years that this truth has been clearly expounded. Bible teachers from among the so-called Plymouth Brethren have been recognized as leaders in recovering this important truth. Referring to this recovery of the truths of the Lord's return, respected Bible teacher Dr. Renald Showers writes,

"During the 19th century the Plymouth Brethren including one of their key leaders, John Nelson Darby, played a very significant role in developing, systematizing and spreading Dispensational Theology." (3)

However, respected teachers and preachers from Reformed and Baptist denominations have developed untenable teachings through a misinterpretation of the words of Christ. These interpretations have produced more heat than light, and thereby many sincere believers have been robbed of their joy and motivation for Christian service. Although the number of these prophetic interpretations has been many, some have been more widespread than others.

1. The Misinterpretation of the Coming--The Holy Spirit at Pentecost.,

It has been taught by some that the return of Christ is the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Early church fathers Hilary, Chrysostom, Euthymus and Theophylact taught that Matthew 16:28 pertained not to the coming of the Son of man in His Kingdom, but to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Bible teacher Albert Barnes, well-known author of "Barnes' Notes of the Bible", believes that this verse has a partial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost. However, did not the Lord Himself say, "A little while, and ye behold Me no more and again a little while, ye shall see Me" (John 16:16)?

2. The Misinterpretation of the Coming--The Death of a Believer

Well-known expositor Matthew Henry wrote that the phrase "ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Matt. 24:42) refers to the day of a believer's death. He writes, "We know not the day of our death, we cannot know how long we have to live nor how little time we have to live. Concerning both, we are kept in

uncertainty, that we may every day expect that which may come any day." (4) Was this our Lord's intended meaning when He uttered those words? A careful examination reveals that, biblically, the difference between death and the Lord's coming is great.

Death in the scriptures is referred to as an "enemy"; but the Lord's return is said to be a "Blessed Hope". At death we dig a grave; at the Lord's return we leave the grave behind. Thankfully, today most Bible students have set aside this ill-reasoned prophetic interpretation. Despite the fact that many have set forth unsound theories concerning the scriptural evidence for the Lord's return and that today quaint theories and wild speculations continue to assault us regularly through popular Christian radio and the printed page, the serious Christian need not despair.

The biblical proof in the New Testament for the Lord's return is extensive. The New Testament Christian lived in watchful expectancy of Jesus Christ's imminent return. The "twinkling eye", the "shout" and the "Father's house" have all served to stir the heart to joyful anticipation. The apostle Paul writes, "...from whence (heaven) we look for the Saviour" (Phil. 3:20); "Waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7); "Ye turned to God...to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1:9, 10); "Looking for...the glorious appearing of...our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:13); "unto them that look for him shall He appear" (Heb. 9:28).

Not only was the expectation of His imminent return clearly taught by Christ and His apostles, but it was also taught that to expect otherwise was characteristic of an unfaithful servant. "But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming..." (Matthew 24:48) "...be ye therefore ready also, for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not" Luke 12:40). Moreover, the belief in the imminent return of Christ constrains Christians and churches to develop a worldwide missionary vision of reaching the lost for Christ.

Our burden for the lost should be even greater, considering the nearness of the Lord's return. Since we have more reason to believe that Christ will come to receive us to Himself in our lifetime than in any other time in church history, with eagerness we ought to seek to reach the lost with the good news of Christ. Dr. Timothy Weber, a church historian at Yale University, has noted that the doctrine of imminency has been a great incentive in world missions since the rise of premillennial teaching in the 1840's.

He writes, "By the 1920's (dispensational) premillennialists were claiming that they made up 'an overwhelming majority' of the missions movement. Others estimated that believers in the imminent second coming made up from 75 to 80 percent of the missionary force world-wide...American premillennialists were better represented on the mission fields than in the home churches...Instead of cutting missionary involvement, premillennialism increased it." (5) Therefore, we suggest that the best cure for spiritual apathy and lethargy among Christians is an aggressive prophetic Bible teaching program in the local church stressing the imminent return of Christ.

The greatest incentive for holy living is for able ministers of the word to boldly assert that the glorified, holy Son of God may at any moment leave the glories of the Father's house and re-enter the closing days of world history to call the church, the body of Christ, to be with Him forever.

The imminent return of Christ should have a tremendous and profound effect upon the values, priorities and activities of every serious Christian. This doctrine provides every Christian with a great hope for the future, a comfort in sorrow and a steadfast purpose for today. Dear Christian, the Lord's coming is near--perhaps today? Are you ready to meet Him?

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